

## **Greek Prose for Children: Modern Trends Relating to ‘Ecological’ Topics**

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### **Abstract**

*In this paper is referred i. A briefly report about the thematic and the ideology of literature books for children, published in Greece until 1990 and referred to environmental problems. ii. A detailed presentation of the thematic and ideology of books related to natural and human environment issued after the 1990 until today. The themes will be approached by the side of social and theoretical ecological views of Edgar Morin and Murray Bookchin.*

**Key words:** Greek Children’s Literature, Environment problems in Children’s literature, Ecology, Greening think, Ecocentrism, Sociological approaches in Children’s literature

### **1. Greek children’s literature and its ‘ecological’ concerns**

After briefly referring to the history of Greek children’s literature, and in particular to ‘ecological’ topics dealt with by that literature, this paper will take a look from a sociological perspective at the content of certain representative books (mainly novels or illustrated stories that address modern ecological problems).

Greek children’s literature, which today is an interesting, diverse sector, experienced a publishing boom and saw a vast increase in authorial output after the change in the political system in Greece in 1974. Two literary organisations, the Women’s Literary Association and the Greek Children’s Book Circle, announced various competitions giving a major boost to production in the specific sector. A range of new topics of all sorts began to be addressed (in the form of novels, illustrated stories, short stories, theatrical works and poems) with the most important being issues that placed children at the centre of modern problems of an individual, family and wider social nature (divorce, adoption, work, death, school, etc) and which addressed universal issues (ecology, peace, cross-culturalism, technology and so on). Moreover, a wide range of talented authors produced remarkable works in this field including Alkis Zeis, George Sarris, Manos Kontoleon, I. D. Ioannidis, Lotty Petrovich-Androutsoupoulou, Angeliki Varela, Galatia Grigoriadou-Sourelli, Maro Loizou, Zoe Valassi, Irini Marra, Evgenios Trivizas, Christos Boulotis and others in the field of prose and Michalis Stasinopoulos, Haris Sakellariou, Rena Kartheou, Dimitris Manthopoulos and others in the field of poetry. Quite a few authors of books in this category have been translated into other languages. One could say that Greek children’s literature is in a good state of affairs, although there are further margins for improvement especially in relation to the choice of more daring topics.

Ecological problems be found in Greek literature from the mid-1970s onwards. The first book referring to environmental problems was published in 1975. It was the novel by Galatia Grigoriadou-Sourelli *Emena me niazai (I Care)*, which, to a large extent, influenced later treatments of the same subject matter in Greek children’s literature. In the book, a teacher and his pupils raise awareness among the residents of an area polluted by factory waste. In general, books in this category pointed out man’s rash conduct in relation to the earth’s environment, and his efforts to eliminate the various negative repercussions of those activities to enable man to survive. This age also coincides with the global spread of ecological problems, with their clear repercussions on the natural and man-made environment<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Edgar Morin, after the 1960s when ecological awareness and the romantic view of nature met and intertwined, ecological awareness was presented as a ‘revelational’ prophecy which considered that the Industrial Revolution was leading

Having become aware of global ecological problems and the related Greek problems (destruction of forests, pollution of seas and air, extinction of species, etc.), Greek authors began to deal with the specific issues by penning multiple stories. Moreover, pollution and contamination of the Greek seas and the damage to forests due to summer fires and the consequent extinction of animal species were and remain powerful starting points for penning literary works.

## 2. Sociological aspects of the 1975-1990 period. A brief overview

Previously I referred to the first period when ecological topics began to be addressed (1975-1990). One could say that the ideological approach taken, especially in books whose central story line is associated with some sort of environmental problem (e.g. destruction of a forest ecosystem, or the natural or man-made environment in general, pollution, contamination, etc.) in some way reflected the current model of economic growth, which to a large extent has given rise to the ecological impasse. Such a finding / reality has subjective and objective aspects to it. It has subjective aspects because these factors are associated –as far as the author is concerned- with the degree to which he/she has understood the science and information, given the special nature of ecology, and not just the fact that he/she is an aware citizen, and it has objective aspects because in that specific time period, at least at the start, ecological thinking, and the social practices associated with it, were in an embryonic stage and the picture was still not a clear one.

Consequently, the logic of preserving nature by managing the environment, the logic of simple, misguided nature worship -in the sense of preserving the existing natural environment as it was-, utilitarianism, the logic of installing filters at factories, the idea of nature taking revenge on man, the idea of superficial changes in the environment without there being the necessary condition of a change in man's relationship with nature, the idea of a non-substantive connection between ecological and social problems, which are 'views' and ideas expressed in many books from this period are the main ideological milestones which require us to categorise almost all books produced in this period in the *technocentric* mould of the then current growth model (Papadatos 1993, 112). One frequently sees the image of a factory owner who installs filters or who moves the waste disposal pipe to another location after protests. Similar solutions, and the related solution of using pollution control chemicals or biological treatment plants, can be categorised as *technocentrism* to use the typology developed by O'Riordan (O'Riordan 3). In short, what was being proposed were solutions to address the problems in terms of their outcomes and results, rather than their causes. *Technocentrism*, the type of reasoning which dominates modern societies, the way in which power is exercised and the preservation of the status quo, recognises that there is environmental degradation but the solution proposed is to manage the problem, inspired by the Cartesian dogma of man's dominance over nature, rather than working in partnership with nature, in the sense that man in part of nature (Flogaiti 105). We are joint rulers – sharing the same path as nature, and we are obliged to respect nature, says Edgar Morin among other things (Morin 1990, 12-13).

One could say that there is a dualism at play here, at the level of ideology, to quote the views of Murray Bookchin, according to whom there is a segregation between nature and society (Bookchin 1992, 21). In fact, countless books express this idea of separation between the natural and man-made environment. One characteristic example is the illustrated story by Maria Vasileadou, *E Teratoupoli (Monsterville)* (1983) where a village transforms into a city. The people left their animals in the countryside, and in order to raise awareness and show the people that they had made a mistake, one day the animals visit them and bring them fresh food. The people see their mistake, regret what they have done to the animals and promise to take more care of them. It is noteworthy that in the illustrations, even though the people lived in the city, they still wore traditional costumes. After Greece returned to a democratic form of government, a wave of texts arose that feature an '*ecocentric*' understanding of nature.

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the world towards destruction. This clearly relied on the conclusions of the Meadows Report, which had been prepared for the Club of Rome (1972). Although the conclusions about the fate of the planet were utterly unsettling, the first attempt to weigh up the relationship between man and nature was done using the most rudimentary of methods. After the 1970s, people had become more aware of environmental issues to a certain degree with the result that measures began to be adopted to reduce the catastrophic nature of the 'prophecy', a prophecy which was confirmed by the later Chernobyl and Seveso accidents (Morin 1990, 4-5) and by the modern ecological problems with the sea, land and air (melting ice caps, desertification, extreme weather conditions, etc.).

The fictitious aspects of partnership between man and animals in order to regenerate the natural environment, partnership between teams at a basic level, the specific connection between ecological and social problems, all contain elements of such ecocentric reasoning. For example in Maro Loizou's illustrated story *To Potami Trechei na Synantisei ti Thalassa (The Sea Flows Down to Meet the Sea)* (1986), the author uses a poetic approach to present the basic ideas of the pre-Socratic philosophers in a clever way, especially the views of Heraclitus, and refers to the natural and man-made environment by referring to the ideal partnership between man and nature. Moreover, Yiannis Negrepointis' novel *E Katsarides Pote den Pethenoun (Cockroaches Never Die)* (1986) points out that man's lack of partnership and respect for the environment will lead to environmental destruction. Based on O'Riordan's typology referred to above, these books demonstrate that social relationships are inseparable from man-environment relationships and that the ecological crisis is at the same time a social crisis (Flogaiti 107). *Ecocentrism* (O'Riordan 11) compared to *technocentrism*, sees the solution to problems via changes in institutions. Humans must collaborate with nature and at the same time respect it. Of course, the books written at this time do not present such radical solutions as changes in institutions, ideas, or radical reversals in the lifestyles of individuals and society in general.

In other words, a reality that is sought after, which can be correlated to the viewpoint of Morin, about the *greening of thought*. That is to say, a deeper process relating to views and types of behaviour that can form the start of a deeper transformation in thought and action, which can begin right from childhood. The *greening of thought* proposes a complex paradigm, whereby the autonomy of the individual being, viewed as a self-eco-organised existence is inseparable from the dependencies that being is subject to (Morin 1990, 3)<sup>2</sup>. On the contrary, in the books of this period, environmental problems are addressed through management and through preserving the existing model of development and growth; as mentioned above, this is, in other words, a simple, passive approach rather than awareness raising. In any event, the dogma of 'man as master of nature', which has its roots in various theocratic and mystical views dating back to the Middle Ages, and the theoretical constructs of subsequent intellectuals coupled with the analogous Cartesian reasoning on which, we might say, the Industrial Revolution was based (Karasmanis 56-60, Louloudis 111-120), which led the model of growth we have used over recent centuries to the ecological impasse it is now at<sup>3</sup>, are all called into doubt by modern ecological thinking and such thinking has affected a wide range of organisations and political groupings at global level, which to a greater or lesser extent, have adopted an ecocentric approach, although one must say they have done so with many different shades of opinion, (Katsoulis 210-215, Doyle).

The most widely 'advanced' ecological theories do not propose the Cartesian dogma or Newtonian physics or even Darwinian theory, but a holistic type of approach to phenomenon and growth, which will also take into account the place where activities are going on. In this approach, man must necessarily adjust his relationship with nature, working in collaboration with it, espousing the evolutionary function of ecosystems and participating in the environment with knowledge and with utter respect. This is an approach where concepts such as cooperation, mutual understanding, interrelationships, autonomy via dependence, neutrality and competition reflect the sheer complexity of the system (Morin 1980, Korfiatis 72-80, Schmitz 7) and a range of values which, *mutatis mutandis*, when suitably processed, can be projected onto human society.

However, as far as literary output is concerned, I would say that the books from the 15-year period 1975-1990, were in terms of both content and format, a foundation stone which prepared the ground, critically speaking, and crystallised modern 'philosophy' to a large extent, which has now imbued more books than in the past, and which, to a large degree, is inherent in modern-day, ecocentric values and concerns. However, it is necessary to point out that books are still being written (and there are still specific topics within books, irrespective of their content) whose ecological approach or whose ecological references continue to reflect a technocentric approach to nature and the environment.

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<sup>2</sup> The term "La pensée écolisée" ('the greening of thought' or the ecologisation of thought or green thinking) was introduced by Edgar Morin (1989, 1990). A series of concepts related to this term are expounded on by Morin in his book *La Methode. 2. La Vie de la Vie* (1980).

<sup>3</sup> Quite a few conferences have been held over recent years about the ecological crisis, attended by governmental and non-governmental organisations. See the results of the conferences on the environment and sustainable development held in Stockholm (1972), Rio de Janeiro (1992), Kyoto (1997) and Johannesburg (2002). At the last conference several groups of countries expressed views based primarily on economic interests.

### 3. Sociological aspects of the 1991-2010 period

After the 1990s books began to be written which, to a large extent, can be classified from an ideological perspective as ecocentric. It appears that the intensifying rate of global destruction of the environment, the news stories reporting this and articles being written various interviews in magazines, certain theoretical and literary works that were translated, papers presented at conferences, and personal study of the subject matter affected numerous authors so that, to a larger extent, they wrote books whose reasoning was more grounded in an ecocentric approach to nature and the environment.

One category of ecological topics addressed in these books relates to the man-made environment and the problems it raises and the impact it has on the current model of growth and development.

The logic of filters –a frequent topic dealt with in the previous period- which, to a certain extent, signifies the ideology underlying the modern model of growth, is overturned in Haris Sakellariou's novel *O Thymos tou Poseidona (Poseidon's Anger)* (1991), which is also the first book in this period which promotes a new, more ecocentric 'philosophy'. This book, marked by an acute social critique from the teacher who is the main character, highlights ecological problems, but above all highlights the link between ecological and social problems through the conflict between the modern model of economic growth and traditional forms and viewpoints. It stresses the need to find another way of viewing the world, where man, with a greater degree of awareness, free from the ideology of consumerism, will come up with suitable, sustainable solutions. The author is shown to promote this view by not proposing anti-ecological solutions (e.g. transferring the factory far from residential areas, which was a normal solution 'proposed' in quite a few books in the period 1975-1990).

That is why a mythological character is employed *deus ex machine*, who in the form of Poseidon and other sea deities like the Furies, provide a 'solution'. It is a solution which will not come as a punishment –and here perhaps we can see signs of some sort of catharsis in a modern work of tragedy, being played out in the theatre of positivism- but in the form of symbolic demolition of the factory wall. This reflects the critical search for another type of reasoning, another model of development which will not give rise to ecological problems, and where everything will derive from a substantive collaboration between man and nature. The illustrated stories *To Mavro Synnefo (The Black Cloud)* (1998) by Despina Stika (where the clouds, plants and children all call out in a single agonising cry when smog blackens the natural environment, and their cries generate some real result) and the short stories *O Choros tis Vrochis (The Rain Dance)* (1997) by Babis Dermitzakis (where critical ecological issues are presented in an intensely realistic manner) can be said to be on the same ideological wavelength. Some of those critical ecological issues are the equilibrium of nature, the extinction of species and others –though these are not quite so common in children's literature- such as overpopulation, nuclear threats and cloning, as well as racism viewed through the idea of unity towards differentness which applies in nature (Bookchin 1992, 31-32).

In Maro Loizou's illustrated book *E Petalouda den Kratise thn Hyposchesi tis (The Butterfly didn't Keep its Word)* (2004), a butterfly which had promised a tree to talk to it about the true beauty of the world finds a plastic flower when it is searching desperately to find flowers for food! The butterfly dies and a child picks up the dead butterfly to add it to its collection. This is a harsh, yet tender tale about the world that is being lost and the true happiness that exists. In effect, this specific polysemic story is a narrative recounting of our culture, addressing the issue of death and the rebirth of life. The butterfly is the hero who takes up the fate of the group –here the entire human race- on its wings, a group which has mortgaged its fate to the bank of uncertain future.

Moreover, Jemmy Tassakou's illustrated story *E Monachiki Fokia ke to Palto tis Kyrias Proedrou (The Lonely Seal and the President's Wife's Coat)* (2002) highlights the destruction of the seas in relation to the current model of growth. The wife of the village president wants to have a fur coat made from the seal of a skin that helped preserve the marine chain in the area and asks her husband to kill the seal. Shortly thereafter, the entire village falls into decline and all the residents are forced to emigrate! This is a story packed with ecological and cultural messages, which also indirectly raise issues such as the need to preserve the ecological equilibrium, consumerism and above all the link between ecology and the economy, paralleling this with social problems.

The last two illustrated stories and the story by Maro Loizou *O Athanatos Gaidarakos (The Immortal Little Donkey)* (2002), which deals with the life cycle, and some of the stories mentioned below, were written more for educational purposes.

Although the knowledge is presented in a straightforward manner, the literary aspect predominates. It should be pointed out that in quite a few books dealing with ecological issues in both periods, irrespective of the central story line, the educational aspect frequently interrupts the flow of the story. To a large extent this phenomenon has reduced over recent years in most books that are being written, especially the novels.

One other category of books is the one referring to the *natural and forest ecosystem*, the creatures that live there, biocommunities, their relationships and the set of values which apply to them. Giorgos Sfikas' short stories *Anthropi ke Zoa (People and Animals)* (1992) taken as a whole, represent an interesting approach to animals and overturns stereotypical models and views about them. The incidents which occur in the stories starring animals from Greek nature and people, written in the context of preserving the characteristics of animals (such as wild animals compared to tame animals and not good versus bad animals) allow people to feel more human, on the one hand, by respecting the environment in which they are born, and on the other hand, from a symbolic perspective, allow people to accept the message that animals are always 'ready' for a deeper form of ecological partnership with man based on co-existence and inter-dependence. In any event, the stereotypical presentation of animals which has come down to us in myths and fairytales (e.g. the cunning fox, the wise owl, etc.) express an out-dated social reality (Meraklis 90) for man, a reality which was passed into the tales people told. On the contrary, the change in stereotypes in modern fairytales and the unexpected twists and turns in the story lines are normal and, in all probability, are a force for renewal, and have some indirect, hidden pedagogical worth. Such a viewpoint is also expressed in Giorgos Bontis' novel *Lambera Angathia (Wonderful Thorns)* (1996). In this work, a hedgehog, Porcupinos, seeks out partnerships with other forest animals, plants and people, free of the stereotypes that have been handed down to us, and manages to prevent destruction of the forest.

The author attaches a double, ideological dimension to the tale. On a level of reality, this tale reflects human culture and the 'rape' of the natural environment while on the level of fiction, it reflects the community of animals and their 'attempts' to develop contacts with man. The semantic ideological structure of the novel is the fine line drawn between these two levels, which is achieved in the form of a refreshingly new anthropomorphic reasoning, which while retaining the natural and biological characteristics of each species respects and accepts differentness and at the same time seeks out a global language, that of feelings and emotions. This is a language that is the result of the struggle, effort, inter-correlation, interdependence, the autonomy of the entities which can be found in the natural ecosystem. In other words this is a framework of ecological values which, projected onto the man-made environment, represent a new model of growth which will respect the environment and will support friendship, cooperation, undertaking and the peaceful co-existence of people.

In this specific novel, while people are destroying a forest to build a road through it, the animals join together to prevent this from happening. The wolf says to the rabbit, "Look out. We're working together now but I'll get hungry. So run. I'll be hunting you" (p. 67). On the one hand, the author uses the wolf and all the other animals for a purpose (collaboration to save the forest) while on the other hand points out their natural (wild) side. Bookchin mentions that nature knows no anthropocentric values, nor morals, nor is it a world of participation and interaction characterised by the morality of freedom, instead the idea of dominance plays a major role. The life forms to be found in ecosystems are defined not only by rivalry or competitive relations but also (perhaps primarily) by characteristics such as reciprocity and cooperation, interdependence and autonomy through dependence (Bookchin 1992, 26-27, Morin 1990, 9-10).

In Antonis Benekou's book *O Buck ke e Syntrofi tou (Buck and his Companions)* (1999) the animals 'retain' their true nature via their total cooperation with nature and with man. Love, dedication, collaboration, interdependence, and *sui generis* co-existence are just some of the key concepts which can be drawn from the incidents portrayed in the book. Readers decode these concepts in each case, correlating them with similar concepts in the man-made environment and use them to provide a profound critique of the modern world.

Along the same lines is Christos Boulotis' illustrated story *E Helona Kareta-Kareta ke to Paleo Volkswagen (The Sea Turtle Caretta Caretta and the Old Volkswagen)* (1999). Preserving life and nature, caring for and actively safeguarding nature, recycling and other ecological activities are, one could say, part of a framework of emotional realism which emerges indirectly from a deep understanding of ecological reality. Moreover, in Zacharias Sakkis' book *Ti Oreos pou einai o Kosmos (How Beautiful the World is)* (2004) a child—a modern-day Nils Holgersson-riding a bird under the guidance of an aged plane tree- explores nature, discovering through images the way in which plants and animals and man behave, and discovering the complexity of life.

Without downplaying the dismal images of the modern ecological impasse, the author is able to by-pass them in a positive manner. Using some aspects of this impasse in an indirect manner, he paints the picture of another successful world which may become lost too, but never in the mind and thoughts of the child. The specific child, working in partnership with anthropomorphic aspects of nature, builds a 'state' out of that reality and emotions, which can- because of knowledge and a clear way of viewing things- be a world of true beauty, a utopia, a real place for each of us.

A blend of the two opposite presentations of animals, real and symbolic, which are stereotype-free, is to be found in Petros Spentzis' novel *Eki pou Kunigane e Lyki (Where the Wolves Hunt)* (2004). Without distorting the nature and 'mission' of each animal, the book presents the acts and emotions which, when suitably processed by the reader, can be projected for socialisation and educational purposes on to the man-made environment. The author describes life in the ecosystem on two levels: One is realistic, life as it exists out there in nature, in other words animals as the main characters that retain their biological characteristics. The other level can be called the human relations level, which presents animals with human characteristics without them ever losing their own characteristics. This book presents the 'reasoning' of the forest ecosystem with its biocommunities in a critical manner, and not superficially or uncritically, given that in nature there is no morality nor hierarchy, but rather functions which ensure the evolution and transformation of nature. The idea that nature is hierarchical is the result of a human condition where hierarchy and subjugation are ends in themselves. Moreover, 'hierarchy in society is institutional and not a biological phenomenon' (Bookchin 1992, 41).

In a non-hierarchical society, Bookchin says, where there are is no rivalry, new communities on a human scale will adapt to the natural ecosystems and will ensure new forms of individuality and direct forms of democratic social organisation (Bookchin 1992, 55; 1990, 154). For that reason, I believe that literary books require suitable processing from authors in order to correlate the values of the natural and man-made environment. Mercurios Avtzi's book *To Tragoudi tou Kotsifa (The Song of the Blackbird)* (2000) is in the same ideological vein. When people did everything they could to destroy a forest, the animals working together moved away and created another functional ecosystem. Moreover, the story by Lotty Petrovich-Androutopoulou, *To Helidoni ke e Petalouda (The Nightingale and the Butterfly)* (2001) (a book where a butterfly helps a scared nightingale take its first flight) falls into the same context of collaboration and mutual assistance in nature, with a wink being made at the man-made environment as well.

Moreover, two characteristic examples which highlight the critical approach to man's treatment of nature are the illustrated story by Alexandra Mitsiali *E Nychta ton Pygolambidon (The Night of the Fireflies)* (2009) and the novel by Vasilis Papatheodorou *To Megalo Taxidi tis Kinezikis Papias (The Chinese Duck's Long Journey)*(2008). In the first book, children and animals work together, with respect and knowledge, seeing that the world is filling up with chimney stacks and the atmosphere is becoming polluted. They manage to raise awareness and bring people face-to-face with their responsibilities deriving from the current model of economic growth. The second book highlights the fact that the ecological crisis is primarily an economic crisis. A real duck with her ten ducklings become shipwrecked on the ocean amid thousands of plastic ducks. Unbelievable things happen to them. The duck becomes the cause of military skirmishes, saves whales, becomes an object of devotion, saves people; and all that because she knows how to emit the feeling of unconditional love. On the other hand, various people exploit the fact in order to increase their financial gain. The author creates a narrative tale where, in addition to the positive emotions relating to the trip undertaken by the duck and her plastic companions, he also manages to indirectly criticise the economic factors associated with sponsorship and advertising when talking about the modern ecological impasse.

Lastly, quite a few authors have successfully blended ancient Greek myths into their works, but viewed from a fresh perspective. The most characteristic example is the recent novel by Kostis Makris *O Pioz Name ke e Pente Gattes (Pioz Name and the Five Cats)* (Patakis Press, 2010), where ancient Greek myths of monsters and tree fairies are intermingled with the modern ecological impasse and indirect messages associated primarily with the need to change man's relationship with nature are presented. Here Ophiomedon, an imaginary mythological being created by the writer, is presented as the wrecker of terrible punishments on mankind; with mankind being considered to be fully responsible for the ecological disaster that is about to take place. However, the forces that have faith in mankind, represented in the book by mythological humanised manifestations of nature, restore the equilibrium by showing trust in mankind.

#### 4. Epilogue

Children's literature and the ideology it reflects can be presented either for a purely didactic purpose or for a hidden didactic purpose by authors. The ideology in the second category of books is suggested at, alluded to, invisible, and for that reason is powerful. In books in this category, the ideology appears to be more 'legitimate' where it gives the impression that the situations described are just like that (Stephens, 9). This is one key difference between the two periods described above, in the way in which ecological issues are presented in children's literature in Greece. In the first period, the ideology in quite a few books was, to a large extent, clear and the intention bordered to pure didactics. In addition, a study of those books showed that in the second period books dealing with these topics began to renew their subject matter, to include modern ideological ideas from the field of ecological thinking and in quite a few books these ideas were tied into social problems and the various relationships between man and nature began to be sought out. However, the study of Greek literature in both periods shows that it is not sufficient for authors simply to be aware of environmental issues, but they must have a deep understanding of these themes.

Edgar Morin mentioned that we do not have the keys for a better future. However, the complexity of nature has an ultimate sort of morality which is associated with the humanisation of mankind and the emergence of a mankind as the Earth moves towards an organised planetary community (Morin 2001, 95). It is certain that this specific subject matter, especially in the second period, can be both an enjoyable read and, to the extent that the works are worthy from a literary or artistic viewpoint, can assist in helping readers develop their thoughts on these matters.

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