

## **ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS OF J.G. BALLARD'S *THE DROWNED WORLD*: A STUDY OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' INSIGHTS**

Muhammad Eko Oktaviansyah

Environmental Agency, Government of Central Bengkulu Regency

[muhammadekotvy88@gmail.com](mailto:muhammadekotvy88@gmail.com)

Olvie Monika Safitri

Associate Degree of Environmental Health, Bengkulu State Health Polytechnic

[olviemonika21@gmail.com](mailto:olviemonika21@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

This study applies Greg Garrard's ecocritical theory to analyze J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* and explores twelfth-grade students' insights of its environmental themes at MAN 2 Rejang Lebong. Aiming to enhance students' environmental literacy, it uses an integrated approach combining literary analysis with qualitative and quantitative methods. Ecological themes in the novel are explored alongside an assessment of students' awareness and understanding of environmental issues. Data were collected through questionnaires completed by 40 students and semi-structured interviews with a subset of students post-reading. Findings indicate that *The Drowned World*—a portrayal of a post-apocalyptic world shaped by global warming—contains key ecocritical components such as wilderness, apocalypse, animals, dwelling, and the Earth. However, the mixed-methods analysis exhibits 80% of students faced challenges in understanding themes connecting to the components, due to language barriers, limited interest, and insufficient classroom discussion. Only 20% demonstrated an understanding of critical issues like climate change. These findings suggest that the novel alone may not effectively enhance environmental awareness. The study recommends contextual teaching and guided discussions to aid students in grasping ecological themes. Its contribution lies in integrating mixed methods and ecocritical approaches. Both strategies are very essential for promoting environmental literacy and advancing sustainability education.

*Keywords: ecocriticism, environmental literacy, MAN 2 Rejang Lebong, the Drowned World.*

### **Introduction**

Excessive human activity is a primary driver of the global warming crisis. Reliance on fossil fuels for transportation, industry, and energy production generates significant carbon dioxide emissions, accelerating the greenhouse effect (Dunstone et al., 2024). Additionally, widespread deforestation reduces the Earth's capacity to absorb these emissions, exacerbating climate conditions. Furthermore, intensive livestock farming and inefficient waste management further contribute to greenhouse gas accumulation (Irma, 2024). As a result, global temperatures continue to rise, intensifying the climate crisis.

According to Irma (2024), increased emissions of greenhouse gases—such as carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide—trap more heat in the atmosphere. It hastens global warming. Forster et al. (2024) report that human activities have raised global temperatures by 1.19°C, with a record increase of 1.31°C observed in 2023. This alarming trend underscores the urgent need for immediate action to prevent worsening impacts. Consequently, raising public awareness about climate change is crucial, and mitigation efforts must be strengthened to protect the environment (Irma, 2024).

One effective way to foster environmental awareness among younger generations is through literature (Khasanah, et al., 2024). This study examines J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*, a novel depicting a post-apocalyptic world submerged by global warming. The protagonist, Robert Kerans, experiences an identity crisis amidst ecological collapse. Ballard, a leading science fiction author, draws on his wartime experiences to explore themes of environmental degradation (Matek, 2024). As a pioneer of "climate fiction," Ballard critiques anthropocentrism, urging humanity to confront its ethical responsibilities (Matharoo, 2018).

This novel remains relevant as a warning against the ecological consequences of human actions (Clement, 2018). In this study, Greg Garrard's ecocritical framework, which emphasizes key themes like wilderness and apocalypse, is used to deepen students' engagement with environmental crises

(Jamilah & Ayiz, 2024). This approach encourages readers to critically assess the environmental values at stake (Juanda & Afandi, 2024).

This study addresses a gap in previous research, which often overlooks reader responses or fails to incorporate student perspectives. The study by Islamiah and Saryono (2023), for instance, analyzed similar themes but did not consider students' responses. Likewise, research by Jamilah and Ayiz (2024) focused on environmental issues without engaging young readers' insights. This study bridges that gap by assessing students' understanding of environmental issues through questionnaires and interviews, as well as evaluating the novel's effectiveness in raising environmental awareness.

These findings are especially relevant as State Islamic High School, or *Madrasah Aliyah Negeri 2 Rejang Lebong* seeks to expand literacy by enriching its library collection (Lebih dari sekedar tempat baca, 2024). Ultimately, this study highlights the importance of literature like *The Drowned World* in raising global awareness of climate change, fostering critical discourse on ecological issues (Garrard, 2012; Matharoo, 2018). The contributions of this research to environmental literacy align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2023). It empowers students to engage actively in climate change solutions (Irma, 2024). The mixed-methods approach used here provides unique insights into students' literary engagement, reinforcing the role of literature in climate education.

## **Method**

### **Participants/Subjects/Population and Sample**

This study involved 40 students from *MAN 2 Rejang Lebong*, Bengkulu Province, over 2.5 months (July 15 to September 30, 2024), centering on J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* through Greg Garrard's ecocritical framework. This introduces essential concepts—wilderness, pastoral, apocalypse, animals, dwelling, and Earth—to highlight environmental components in literature (Garrard, 2012; Bartosch, 2012). Following reading assignments, purposive sampling was used to select 15 students, or 40% of participants, for interviews. These were

divided into two groups: students who understood the novel's themes and those who struggled with comprehension. This approach enabled a detailed examination of students' perspectives on the novel's environmental themes. They facilitate a targeted analysis of their ecological insights.

### **Instruments**

Data were collected through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data were gathered using questionnaires administered to the 40 students after they had read the novel. The questionnaires were distributed following the completion of their reading assignments, and the students were given one week, from July 22 to July 29, 2024, to finish the novel. For the qualitative aspect, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students. This method was chosen for its flexibility in gathering comprehensive information (Moleong, 2021). Structured instruments served as guides during the interviews to maintain focus and consistency (Sugiyono, 2019).

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

The analysis was conducted in three distinct phases. First, *The Drowned World* by J.G. Ballard was explored using Greg Garrard's ecocritical framework, emphasizing key environmental concepts, including wilderness, apocalypse, animals, dwelling, and the Earth (Garrard, 2012; Bartosch, 2012). Quantitative data from questionnaires were analyzed and represented through bar charts for clearer interpretation. Subsequently, thematic analysis of qualitative data from observations and semi-structured interviews identified recurring themes, organized into two tables based on students' comprehension levels (Sugiyono, 2022). Ultimately, ethical considerations were strictly upheld, ensuring respondent privacy and confidentiality through anonymization.

### **Findings**

This study analyzes *The Drowned World* by J.G. Ballard through the ecocritique and explores students' insights of its environmental issues via questioners and semi-structured interviews post-reading.

### **Representation of Garrard's ecocritical concept on *the Drowned World***

## **Wilderness**

In *The Drowned World*, wilderness is depicted as a formidable force that reclaims sunken cities, compelling humans to adapt or retreat (Antal, 2020). The narrative exemplifies this with the sudden appearance of thermal storms: “Kerans watched one of the countless thermal storms rip through... Then, as abruptly, the storm vanished...” (pp. 7-8). This highlights humanity's loss of control over nature, challenging anthropocentric hierarchies by portraying humans as reactive rather than proactive (Matek, 2024).

The presence of wild creatures, such as giant bats, signifies a return to a primitive state, emphasizing nature's dominance over civilization: “Huge flies spun by... and giant bats raced across the heating water” (p. 12). This theme of nature's reclamation is further explored through the interactions of human characters and their environments (Adrian, 2014). As Ballard illustrates, nature emerges as an active threat: “The sun was hidden behind the vegetation... but the mounting heat was bringing the huge vicious insects out of their lairs” (p. 11). This perspective aligns with Knowles (2018), who notes the tension between the natural world and human psychology.

Additionally, ancient gymnosperms and mangroves symbolize nature's incursion into urban spaces: “The roots of the mangrove forests crept farther inland, filling every street” (p. 19). This indicates a blurring of lines between human constructs and wild ecosystems. Ballard presents nature as a dynamic force that transcends human temporal logic, as seen in the passage: “The great interlocking worlds... seemed momentarily broken when a giant water spider cleft the oily surface” (p. 10). Ingwersen (2019) echoes this sentiment, discussing how Ballard's works illustrate environmental transformations that challenge established boundaries.

## **Apocalypse.**

The apocalyptic component emerges through extreme climate changes that reshape geographical and social orders. The quote, “The massive deltas formed at river mouths... damming up the oceans” (p. 23), reflects ecological collapse,

resonating with Jameela and Edith (2024), who describe a society confronting such crises. These transformations highlight nature's ability to reshape the land beyond human anticipation (Matek, 2024).

The narrative connects global warming to civilization's decline, emphasizing that "Temperatures at the Equator are up to one hundred and eighty degrees now" (p. 14). This scenario leads to forced migration as even once-safe regions become inhospitable: "Cities on higher ground had been abandoned" (p. 23). The shrinking human population underscores a crisis in species continuity: "The pole-ward migration of populations continued... the birth of a child had become a comparative rarity" (p. 23).

### **Animals**

Animals in the narrative symbolize nature's return to a primitive state, dominating spaces previously occupied by humans. For example, iguanas are described as: "The iguanas launched themselves into the wake of the cutter..." (p. 19).

Ballard emphasizes the resurgence of prehistoric creatures, signaling nature's dominance: "The reptiles had taken over the city... once again they were the dominant form of life" (p. 19). This suggests that the new world is better suited for wild animals than humans, reflecting a broader commentary on ecological balance (Juanda & Afandi, 2024).

### **Dwelling**

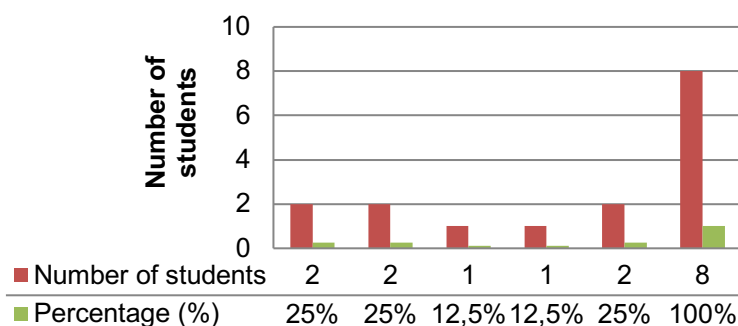
In this hostile environment, the concept of dwelling reflects characters' struggles for comfort. Kerans's choice to occupy the Ritz symbolizes a fragile desire for security: "He had commandeered the Ritz... eager to exchange his cramped cabin" (p. 9). However, this quest for comfort is marked by isolation, as seen in Beatrice Dahl's darkened apartment (p. 162).

Kerans's realization that the lagoon is now a "garbage-filled swamp" (p. 12) underscores the environment's threat. His attempts to exert control, even in futility, reveal humanity's struggle to maintain existence amid ecological disaster (Antal,

2020). Adrian (2014) supports this notion, illustrating how the novel portrays nature as an undeniable force against which humans must contend.

### **The students' insights of environmental issues on *the Drowned World***

This analysis initiates with the presentation of data obtained from a questionnaire distributed to 40 twelfth-grade students at MAN 2 Rejang Lebong. The findings are illustrated in a bar chart that encapsulates the students' interpretations of the novel *The Drowned World* they have studied. Below are the detailed results of the questionnaire.



**Figure 1. Student erspectives on environmental issues in *The Drowned World***

The analysis presented in Figure 1 reveals a concerning statistic: only 20%—or 8 out of 40—12th-grade students at MAN 2 Rejang Lebong understood the environmental themes in J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*. Despite this low percentage, those who comprehended the narrative demonstrated a profound understanding of critical environmental issues.

It fells into five main themes: climate change, human-nature relationships, migration and adaptation, environmental crises, and ecological values. These directly address pressing concerns such as pollution, wilderness, apocalypse, habitat loss, and wildlife preservation, aligning with Garrard's ecocriticism theory (Jamilah & Ayiz, 2024). Among the students, two (25% of those who understood) grasped the theme of climate change. They recognize that rising global temperatures lead to significant ecosystem alterations, including species extinction and habitat shifts (Ingwersen, 2019). One student stated during an interview:

**Data 1:**



“I understand that the increasing temperature of the Earth causes many changes. Many species go extinct, and their habitats are destroyed. This is a significant issue we must face today” (Interview with S-2, August 7, 2024). The novel portrays Earth as increasingly inhospitable. It necessitates that humanity adapt to extreme conditions, a perspective echoed by students who identified climate change as a current global crisis (Jameela & Judith, 2024).

Another two students, also 25%, understood the theme of human-nature relationships. They noted how human interactions often negatively impact the environment while highlighting our dependence on ecosystems. One student remarked:

**Data 2:**

“The relationship between humans and nature is complex. We often harm the environment, yet we also rely heavily on it. This novel teaches the importance of balancing exploitation and conservation” (Interview with S-8, August 8, 2024).

This understanding aligns with the notion that nature is not merely a resource, but an integral part of human existence that requires responsible preservation (Ton, Adon, & Riyanto, 2024).

Only one student (12.5%) recognized the theme of migration and adaptation, acknowledging that characters in the novel are compelled to migrate due to drastic environmental changes. The student explained:

**Data 3:**

“The characters in the novel have to adapt to extreme environments. They have to relocate because conditions are unsafe. This shows how important it is for us to adapt to our daily lives” (Interview with S-1, August 7, 2024).

This reflection emphasizes that environmental changes necessitate adaptation for survival (Indriatmoko & Purwanta, 2017). Additionally, another student (12.5%) identified the theme of environmental crisis, recognizing that the novel illustrates severe environmental destruction and a broader crisis. The student stated:

**Data 4:**



“The novel portrays a severe environmental crisis. Pollution, loss of biodiversity, and the impacts of climate change are real” (Interview with S-6, August 7, 2024).

This perspective reflects an understanding of complex environmental issues that resonate with current global challenges (Jameela & Judith, 2024). Lastly, two students (25%) acknowledged the theme of ecological values, emphasizing the importance of ecological balance through the characters' actions. One student asserted:

**Data 5:**

“We have a responsibility to care for nature. This novel teaches that environmental conservation is essential. Every small action we take can significantly impact the ecosystem and our future life” (Interview with S-5, August 8, 2024).

This awareness reflects the novel's moral message regarding environmental stewardship. Additionally, a study by Sari, Malik, & Mulyadi (2023) connected students' ecological awareness to the 'Healthy School' program. It has yet to be fully implemented, limiting students' ecological understanding.

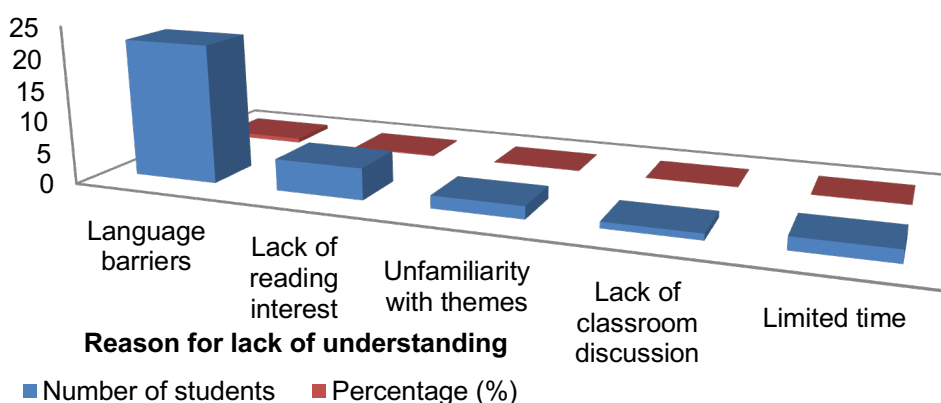
Furthermore, the thematic analysis presented is based on interviews with eight students. It is summarized in the accompanying table.

**Table 1. Thematic analysis results from interview data**

Theme	Interviews excerpts	
<b>Climate change</b>	“Rising temperatures are causing many species to go extinct, and their habitats are changing.”	“Climate change is a major issue we face today.”
<b>Human-nature relationship</b>	“We often harm nature, yet we also depend on it for survival.”	“This novel prompts us to consider the importance of protecting nature.”
<b>Migration and adaptation</b>	“The characters here must relocate because their environment is no longer safe.”	“Adaptation is crucial for our survival.”
<b>Environmental crisis</b>	“This crisis exists not only in the novel but is also real in our lives.”	“Pollution and species loss are genuine problems.”
<b>Ecological values</b>	“We must take responsibility for our actions towards nature.”	“Environmental conservation should be a priority for us.”

(Source: Analysis, 2024)

Overall, only 8 out of 40 students—20%—demonstrated sufficient comprehension of the novel. This situation highlights that most students continue to struggle with reading and analyzing English literature. Factors such as limited English proficiency and a lack of experience with complex literary works pose significant barriers to comprehension. This phenomenon is illustrated in the following figure.



**Figure 2. Factors inhibiting student comprehension of *The Drowned World***

The findings reveal that 32 out of 40 students (80%) at MAN 2 Rejang Lebong struggled with comprehending J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*. The primary challenge identified was limited English proficiency, with 22 students (69%) reporting difficulties with unfamiliar vocabulary and complex sentence structures. As one student noted,

**Data 6:**

“I often find it hard to understand the words in this novel...the complex sentence structures make me tired quickly while reading” (Interview with S-11, August 12, 2024).

This highlights how language barriers contribute to reader fatigue, impacting engagement with literature (Baiti & Sofa, 2023). Additionally, a lack of interest in reading English novels emerged as a significant obstacle. Five students (16%) expressed disinterest in such literature, stating it felt disconnected from their personal interests. One remarked,

**Data 7:**

“If the books aligned more closely with my interests, I’d probably be more inclined to understand them” (Interview with S-15, August 12, 2024).

This indicates that motivation is closely tied to the relevance of reading material (Aprilia, Lustyantje, & Rafli, 2020). In this case, familiarity with the novel's themes, particularly climate change and ecological crises, also hindered comprehension. Only 2 students (6%) felt acquainted with these complex themes, which were distant from their daily lives. One explained, “Themes like climate change feel distant from my daily life...the message isn’t immediately clear” (Interview with S-21, August 12, 2024).

The absence of classroom discussions further exacerbated comprehension difficulties. One student (3%) noted that peer discussions could enhance understanding.

**Data 8:**

“Listening to classmates’ perspectives could help me gain new insights” (Interview with S-18, August 12, 2024)

Finally, time constraints hindered deep engagement, with two students (6%) citing heavy workloads as a barrier to thorough reading. As described by a student,

**Data 9:**

“With so many school assignments, I don’t have enough time to focus on this novel” (Interview with S-34, August 13, 2024).

Based on the statement, the respondent has a substantial amount of schoolwork. This workload restricts the time he can devote to reading the novel.

Additionally, these insights necessitate a thematic analysis of the interview data. The information is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 2. Thematic analysis results from interview data**

Theme	Interview excerpts	
<b>Language barriers</b>	“It’s difficult to understand the words and sentences in English.”	“Unfamiliar vocabulary confuses me.”
<b>Lack of reading interest</b>	“I’m not interested in reading this kind of novel.”	“I rarely read books, so I’m not used to it.”
<b>Unfamiliarity with themes</b>	“The theme of climate change feels hard to grasp.”	“The story’s context doesn’t relate to everyday life.”
<b>Lack of classroom</b>	“If there were discussions, I might understand better.”	“I need to hear others’ opinions to understand more.”

Theme	Interviews excerpts	
<b>discussion</b>		
<b>Limited time</b>	"The time for reading is very limited."	"A busy schedule makes it hard to focus."
(Source: Analysis, 2024)		

Table 2 presents the thematic analysis of interviews with students struggling to comprehend J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*. Essentially, these findings support the prior quantitative analysis and identify several obstacles affecting students' understanding of the novel.

### Discussion

This study explores students' understanding of environmental themes in J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*, analyzed through Garrard's ecocritical lens. Within Ballard's narrative, wilderness is depicted as an uncontrollable force reclaiming human spaces.

This imagery represents nature's dominance over human structures. It challenges anthropocentric norms by portraying humanity as reactive rather than proactive (Matek, 2024). Wild creatures such as bats and insects signify a return to a more primitive state, erasing remnants of civilization, which aligns with Adrian's (2014) findings on humanity's vulnerability in extreme environments.

The novel's apocalyptic vision emphasizes the impacts of climate change, which reshapes both the physical and social order of the world. Rising sea levels and extreme temperatures symbolize ecological collapse. This warning echoes Jameela and Edith's (2024) work on the urgency of addressing ecological crises. Additionally, the dramatic habitat changes force human migration, reflecting the existential need for adaptation (Matek, 2024). In *The Drowned World*, the animal life, such as iguanas and bats, reclaims urban spaces, challenging human dominance. This interplay of wildlife and human structures emphasizes nature as an active narrative force, representing the repercussions of environmental neglect (Tan, 2021).

Kerans' attempt to inhabit the Ritz Hotel underscores the component of dwelling amidst chaos. It symbolizes a tenuous grasp on stability. Yet, as the environment becomes increasingly uninhabitable, the futility of such efforts is apparent (Antal, 2020). Ultimately, Ballard's portrayal of Earth as a constantly evolving entity challenges traditional ontological boundaries, suggesting that ecological transformations reflect an existential crisis of human identity and survival (Kowsalyaa & Arul, 2024). Through these components, *The Drowned World* invites readers to examine humanity's complex relationship with nature critically.

In terms of students' understanding, survey data from 40 twelfth-graders at MAN 2 Rejang Lebong showed only 20% of respondents grasped the novel's environmental themes. The data indicates a substantial comprehension gap. Complex texts like Ballard's, particularly with intricate ecological themes, may thus present challenges for students. Among the few students who comprehended the themes, some displayed a nuanced awareness of pressing issues such as climate change, human-nature relations, adaptation, and ecological values.

Interviews revealed that students recognized climate change as an urgent threat causing biodiversity loss and ecological imbalance, resonating with Ingwersen's (2019) and Jameela & Judith's (2024) emphasis on the need for environmental awareness. Their insights mirror the ecocritical stance on the human responsibility for environmental stewardship (Ton, Adon, & Riyanto, 2024).

However, several obstacles impeded student comprehension. Limited English proficiency hindered many students from understanding complex vocabulary and syntax, consistent with findings by Ork et al. (2024) and Baiti & Sofa (2023) on language barriers in literature engagement. Additionally, unfamiliar environmental themes disconnected students from the text, as the themes were often removed from their daily experiences (Alimin, Khabibillah, & Wardani, 2023). The absence of classroom discussions further hindered comprehension. Research shows that collaborative learning environments enhance literary understanding

(Mafarja et al., 2023). Furthermore, academic workloads restricted students' engagement, leading to a superficial grasp of the content.

The study's limitations include a mixed-methods approach that only partially reflects students' experiences, particularly their emotional reactions to the novel. Semi-structured interviews may have introduced bias, as more motivated or environmentally conscious students were more likely to participate. Additionally, the small sample size and absence of comparisons across different schools in Bengkulu Province limit generalizability. For this reason, future studies could benefit from more diverse samples and literacy support to foster a deeper engagement with environmental themes.

In summary, addressing language challenges, facilitating collaborative discussions, and incorporating environmental literacy into curricula may improve students' comprehension of ecologically themed literature. By considering these factors, future research could deepen insights into literature's role in fostering environmental awareness in education.

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