



From Ancient Myth to Modern Message: The Timeless Relevance of Gaia in Imogen Greenberg's *Gaia: Goddess of Earth*

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Abstract

In the present age, where humanity is facing global ecological crises the Greek myth of Gaia is especially resonant and emerges as a poignant reminder of the necessity to maintain the delicate balance of nature. This research paper aims to explore the mythical and ecological narratives on the contemporary environmental crises through a critique of the seminal children's graphic novel *Gaia: Goddess of Earth* (2022) authored and illustrated by Imogen Greenberg and Isabel Greenberg respectively- as literature has long served both as a reflection and a catalyst for exploring and dissecting these global crises. The objective of this research paper is to conduct an ecocritical examination of the depiction of Gaia, the Earth deity in Greek mythology, focusing on narrative techniques, graphic visuals, motifs, and literary devices that illustrate her transformation from a primordial Earth goddess to a powerful force mirroring the shifting relationship of humanity with the environment. This study also demonstrates literature as a platform for effectively engaging, educating, and inspiring young readers to respect and preserve the natural world, while also accenting the cultural significance of nature across different mythologies.

Keywords: Literature, Mythology, Gaia, Children's Fiction, Environment, Global Crisis.

Introduction

In the modern-day period, mythology holds significant relevance in reflecting contemporary ecological issues as both myth and environmental literature "...narrate environmental crisis and offer solutions through the employment of ecological scenarios where human advancement converges with nonhuman preservation" (Sánchez-Pardo & María Porras, 2023, p.6). Literature has historically served as both a reflection and a catalyst for societal and ecological changes by offering timeless narratives emphasizing the interconnectedness of nature and humanity. Within this context, Graphic fiction for children has emerged as a highly effective

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medium for fostering ecological literacy, combining visual storytelling with narratives that engage young readers in meaningful ways as:

It is felt that environmental education should begin early in life...though there are prescribed textbooks for inculcating these values of ecopedagogy, it is an undeniable fact that light reading in the form of fiction creates indelible impressions on the young mind. So, it is of important that awareness about problems facing the environment, eco-friendly behaviour and also the love of nature should become part of the child's general reading. (Ramaswamy, 2019, p.4)

The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines graphic fiction as “A book-length narrative in comic-strip form. The genre has been known by other names such as ‘picture novel’ and ‘comic-strip novel’, but graphic novel, a term first found in the 1960s, has more often been adopted since the 1980s” (Baldick, 2015, p.155). Moreover, graphic fiction which often draws on mythological elements, reframes ancient stories similar to that of Gaia, the Earth goddess, to reflect contemporary environmental issues as “myth is a universal cultural phenomenon originating in a plurality of motives and involving all mental faculties” (Bidney, 1955, p.391). Gaia, in Greek mythology, is revered as the primordial goddess of the Earth, responsible for the creation of the universe and all its inhabitants. William Smith's *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology* defines Gaia:

Gaea or GE (Γαῖα or Γῆ), the personification of the earth. She appears in the character of a divine being as early as the Homeric poems...the surnames and epithets given to Ge have more or less reference to her character as the all-producing and all-nourishing mother... her worship appears to have been universal among the Greeks, and She had temples or altars at Athens, Sparta, Delphi, Olympia, Bura, Tegea, Phlyus, and other places. (Smith, 1873, p. gaea-bio-1)

This study explores the evolution of Gaia, from the primordial Earth goddess to a powerful symbol of humanity's relationship with nature, through the children's graphic novel *Gaia: Goddess of Earth* (2022), authored by Imogen Greenberg and illustrated by Isabel Greenberg. The plot of the novel interweaves the ancient Greek myth of Gaia with contemporary ecological concerns. Narrated by the three Fate Goddesses- Lachesis, Clotho, and Atropos- who set a lively tone, the story follows Gaia, the primordial Earth goddess, as she creates a world in harmony, nurturing both nature and mortals. However, as generations of her descendants- Ouranos, Cronus, and Zeus- succumb to the lure of power, the harmony she envisioned is repeatedly disrupted. Gaia's journey from a nurturing creator to a warrior and ultimately a guide mirrors humanity's contemporary and continuous struggle with ecological balance and “by reading this stunning graphic novel...readers get to experience a beautifully illustrated and thought-provoking story, weaving together themes of environmentalism, mythology, and personal identity in a way that is both interesting and profound.” (John, 2024, Para 3)

Imogen Greenberg and Isabel Greenberg, the author and illustrator of *Gaia: Goddess of Earth* (2022), are celebrated creators known for their compelling storytelling and distinct artistic styles and in this work “through their unique narrative style, they bring to life the myth of Gaia, the ancient Greek goddess of the earth, in a contemporary context that resonates deeply with modern readers. The result is a work that is both a celebration of the natural world and a cautionary tale” (John, 2024, Para 4). Imogen Greenberg is a UK-based writer known for her work in history and mythology for children having an extensive career in arts and theatre administration. Isabel Greenberg is a British graphic novelist and illustrator, who has earned international acclaim for her distinctive artistic style and innovative storytelling and has contributed illustrations and comics to prestigious publications such as *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, and *The New York Times*. Their writing and illustration style together is characterised by their keen ability to simplify complex historical and mythological concepts, making them

accessible and engaging for children.

To conduct a thorough textual analysis, this paper employs a multidisciplinary research methodology utilising Roland Barthes's concept from his seminal work *Mythologies* (1957) to examine how the novel reframes Gaia's myth to convey ecological values and also draws on Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism, a literary approach that analyses recurring patterns, symbols, and narrative structures in literature, known as archetypes to interpret Gaia as an archetype of Mother Earth. Additionally, the study incorporates Joseph Campbell's monomyth theory, which posits that many myths share a common structure- a journey taken by a hero, which reflects universal human experiences. Campbell introduced this theory in his seminal work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) where he argued: "The Standard Path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation- initiation- return: which might be named the nuclear unit of monomyth." (Campbell, 2008, p.23)

Furthermore, the analysis incorporates insights from prominent American cartoonists and comics theorists Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1994) and Will Eisner's *Comics & Sequential Art* (2001), which highlight the interplay between text and imagery in graphic narratives. McCloud's exploration of visual communication and Eisner's emphasis on the synthesis of visual and verbal storytelling illuminate how the graphic visuals in *Gaia: Goddess of Earth* (2022) enhance its narrative. Eisner's notion that sequential art requires readers to interpret both aesthetic and textual elements simultaneously is particularly relevant: "The reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit" (Eisner, 2001, p.7). By employing dynamic panel layouts and symbolic imagery, Isabel Greenberg's illustrations work in harmony with the text, not only amplifying the story's themes but also engaging readers in deeper ecocritical discussions. This combined framework provides valuable insights into the narrative structure, exploring how Gaia's journey aligns with universal mythic patterns that resonate with contemporary ecological awareness.

Reimagining Gaia in Literature: An Analysis

In *Gaia: Goddess of Earth* (2022), the story is introduced with an engaging narration by the three Fate Goddesses- as Lachesis begins with, "Hello! My name is Lachesis and these are my sisters...together, we are the Fates! Sounds cool, right?... A bit like goddesses" (Greenberg, 2022, p.3). Imogen Greenberg uses their invitation to "look out for us, we'll be in the story later on" (p.3) as a narrative technique to add an interactive element, encouraging readers to stay engaged and look for connections as the Fates occasionally reappear.

The Fates introduce Gaia with reverence, presenting her as the ultimate creator: "It was Gaia who created the Earth and the universe and the infinite space beyond it. She closed her eyes and the turning Earth came into existence. The salty sea met the rich land and the sky stretched overhead" (p.4). In this depiction, Gaia's journey across the land, moulding it to perfection, mirrors the archetypal 'creation phase' found in many mythic narratives. She crafts a balanced world, bringing forth diverse forms of life - trees, waterfalls, tides, animals, and ultimately "created the mortals. She watched as they took the land she had given them, cultivating it, cherishing it and making it their own. They built homes markets and temples. She became quite fond of them" (p.7). Here she embodies the role of an archetypal Mother Earth figure, nurturing and providing for her creations. Gaia's relationship with mortals, whom she observes and grows fond of, echoes themes from Campbell's monomyth theory, where the hero or divine creator often serves as a guide or protector, watching over and caring for the beings within their realm.

Gaia's creative journey can also be seen as a 'call to action' or 'gift-giving' stage, where

a powerful figure bestows a life-sustaining legacy upon humanity. However, the nostalgic remark of the Fates on mortals: “They used to be so sweet back then” (p.7) serves as a foreshadowing of the coming tension, hinting at a shift from the harmonious balance Gaia established to a future disruption - an element central to the hero’s journey and positions her as a figure of ecological balance - a reminder of the interdependence of all beings and the importance of living in harmony with the Earth.

The narrative characterizes Gaia as a nurturing creator as well as an educator for her descendants as she “taught her children and grandchildren to love her creation, and the whole family offered to help look after it” (p.8) aligns well with Roland Barthes’ concept of myth as a form of communication as he perceives: “...what must be firmly established at the start is that myth is a system of communication, that it is a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form” (Barthes, 1957, p.107) that imparts cultural values and ideologies. In this generational role, her descendants take on specific duties within the cosmic order as Gaia’s granddaughter Selene and grandson Helios each contribute to the cycles of day and night, symbolising the continuity of life and the rhythm of nature. Selene’s journey with the Moon, her chariot drawn by two milk-white horses, imbues the night with a gentle, mystical presence. In contrast, Helios with his four-horse chariot exudes strength and power, casting a ‘huge shadow’ as he commands the Sun’s path across the sky. This concept of generational stewardship aligns closely with modern ecological principles, highlighting the importance of teaching children and adults to respect nature to sustain life across ages.

However, as the mother of Earth, Gaia starts with a vision of harmony, yet time and again, her children and grandchildren disrupt this peace in pursuit of their own power. Her successive conflicts with Ouranos, Cronus, and eventually Zeus depict a tragic pattern: each generation, motivated by dominance, forsakes the harmony Gaia cherishes and sees “it grows with goodness and with love” (p.12). In each conflict, Gaia’s response transforms. Initially, she is a passive creator, nurturing her creations and watching as her husband, Ouranos, seeks control over her world. As his tyranny grows unbearable, Gaia allies with her youngest son, Cronus, in a dramatic act of rebellion. Yet, the overthrow of Ouranos does not bring the peace she envisions; instead, it perpetuates the cycle, as Cronus himself falls into tyranny and paranoia. Gaia’s attempt to influence her descendants to rule with justice and humility falters as Zeus, whom she hoped would be different, continues the same path of self-serving control as “Power had made Zeus and the other gods cruel and merciless. This was still not the world Gaia had imagined.” (p.36)

These repetitive conflicts and the desire to command embody opposing worldviews regarding power, and control reflect a utilitarian and authoritarian worldview, valuing control over the natural world rather than respect or preservation. This image of Gaia being bound by her creations echoes Campbell’s framework where mythic heroes often encounter a moment of crisis or opposition where they face a powerful antagonist or an imposing force. Furthermore, this conflict mirrors the contemporary understanding of ecological crises, where humanity’s exploitation of nature’s resources often turns against it and Gaia’s helplessness and tyranny of her descendants parallel the environmental degradation caused by an overbearing, exploitative approach to the planet.

Gaia’s shift from nurturer to warrior illustrates the complexity of her character as she steps into a more active, almost vengeful role after watching “first Ouranos and then Cronus succumb to the lure of power. She had raised Zeus herself, fed and nursed him, and still she hadn’t been able to stop the chaos” (p.36). Gaia’s mounting frustration and anger at her descendants’ destructive rule and misuse of power marks a powerful moment in the narrative

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“Enough! You want war? I’ll give you war!” (p.37). This moment can be seen as a transformation in Gaia’s journey- mirroring Campbell’s ‘refusal of the return’ where she refuses to accept the destructive consequences of her earlier choices.

Moreover, Gaia’s anger signals a moment of reckoning as she chooses not to withdraw passively but to reclaim power in a new, defiant way. Her wrath and decision to “build an army of her own” (p.38) exemplify Northrop Frye’s archetype of the ‘Terrible Mother’ or ‘Vengeful Earth Mother’ from formative work *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957), a figure Frye describes as “...normally a ruthless figure strongly contrasted with some kind of delicate virtue, generally a helpless victim in his power” (Northrop Frye, 1957, p.39). Her anger is not merely personal; it is archetypal, symbolizing Earth’s wrath in response to exploitation and imbalance. In this layered transformation, Gaia’s fury becomes symbolic of a universal truth: Earth itself possesses the power to retaliate when its generosity is taken for granted.

Hitherto, Gaia reflects on the broader cycles of destruction initiated by Ouranos, Cronus, and Zeus, she realizes that punishment alone may not be enough to steer mortals away from corruption. This thought leads to the creation of the Fates, who provide a more subtle influence: “When the mortals unpicked what was right and just when they strayed towards darkness, the Fates set them back on track and offered a path for them to follow” (p.60). While the Furies bring immediate justice, the Fates provide a gentler intervention and guide mortals toward balance rather than punishment. Through this, Gaia shifts away from cosmic battles and embraces a ‘green war’ philosophy advocating compassion and respect for the natural world.

Gaia’s evolution from cosmic creator to Earthbound healer reflects her transformation from a distant mythic deity into a nurturing force deeply committed to the survival of the mortal world. By “walking the Earth on two feet” (p.62), Gaia becomes more personal in her approach, actively tending to the Earth’s needs. The Fates even observe that “as the power of the gods faded, the power of the mortals grew. They imitated the gods and treated the Earth as a playground, regardless of the consequences. Until the world was ravaged all over and the Earth began to tremble and wilt under the pressure” (p.64). This image of Earth ‘trembling and wilting’ under human actions emphasizes the looming ecological crisis, while the “drumbeat of chaos, echoing through the world” (p.64) suggests an unbroken cycle of destruction and neglect.

Her journey ends in a plea to mortals, whom she sees as holding the potential for lasting peace if they learn to treat Earth with kindness: “We must learn to live together with kindness. We must learn to treat the natural world with goodness” (p.62) directly appeals to humanity, aligns with Campbell’s ‘Return with the elixir’, the final stage in his monomyth, where the hero brings back a lesson or gift for the betterment of society. Her appeal signals her transition from a cosmic creator to a guide and nurturer, advocating a sustainable, cooperative existence. Through Gaia’s character, the narrative calls readers to embody principles of sustainability, empathy, and responsibility.

The Graphic Aesthetics of Gaia

Moreover, the graphic visuals in *Gaia: Goddess of Earth* (2022) by Isabel Greenberg are “strikingly beautiful, with intricate details and vibrant colours that transport readers to a world both familiar and fantastical” (John, 2024, Para 4). These illustrations complement Imogen Greenberg’s textual motifs thus bringing the narrative to life by vividly portraying characters, settings, and emotions. For instance, when Gaia reacts to the destruction caused by her descendants, the visuals use sharp lines and fiery tones to reflect her rage and frustration highlighting the power of simplification in visual storytelling, where iconic imagery allows

readers to identify with characters and connect emotionally as emphasized by McCloud “...but simple elements can combine in complex ways, as atoms become molecules and molecules become life” (McCloud, 1994, p.45) as Isabel Greenberg’s depictions of Gaia, the Gods, and the Fates are not hyper-realistic but stylized enough to resonate across age groups, enabling readers to project their emotions and interpretations onto the characters.

The Colours also play a significant role in strengthening the narrative as dark and brooding colours are used in scenes of destruction and chaos, these colours represent the consequences of greed and imbalance, visually aligning with the narrative’s ecological themes. The interplay of warm and cool colours mirrors Gaia’s dual role as both a nurturing force and an avenger, embodying McCloud’s thought that “Colour can be a formidable ally for artists in any visual medium” (McCloud, 1994, p.185)

Isabell Greenberg’s artistic style is a fusion of ancient and contemporary elements amplifying a balance between engaging younger readers and providing depth for adults. For the younger reader the visuals are colourful, dynamic, and easy to follow, making the mythology engaging and relatable for adults. The layered symbolism invites deeper reflection, enriching the narrative’s exploration of environmental themes. This is similar to Eisner’s emphasis on the importance of the interplay between text and images in sequential art, where each panel contributes to the story’s rhythm and flow as he rightly observes:

The format of the comic book presents a montage of both words and images, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regimens of art (eg. perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regimens of literature (eg. grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other. (Eisner, 2001, p.7)

Imogen Greenberg’s reflection in the blog post interview “Author Q&A Isabel and Imogen Greenberg on Gaia: Goddess of Earth” (2022) underscores the narrative’s dual purpose of inspiring creative engagement with Greek mythology while fostering deeper reflections on its themes. When asked what she hopes readers will take away from Gaia’s story, Greenberg responds:

I hope readers who’ve never read the myths before will get excited and keep engaging with classics in other forms. I love that there are so many interpretations and versions of these stories...because kids begin to use these stories as a springboard for their own imaginations...then history and classics become a really creative world, rather than something very old and unmoving. (Costa, 2022, para 5)

This perspective directly relates to both the narrative motifs and graphic visuals in the narrative and this reimagining of myth in literature allows the “creators to integrate complex critical analysis with visual storytelling to investigate key ecocritical debates around environmentalism and environmental ethics in contemporary societies.” (Thanya & Suganthan, 2023, p.60)

Conclusion

In conclusion, Imogen Greenberg in *Gaia: Goddess of Earth* (2022) effectively reimagines and revitalizes the myth of Gaia through her engaging narrative, while Isabel Greenberg’s illustrations and striking visuals deepen the engagement through layered symbolism, thus serving as a powerful reminder of the urgent need to address global ecological crises inviting readers to connect with these timeless myths in meaningful ways. This integration of visual and textual storytelling exemplifies the ability of literature in general and graphic fiction, in particular, to blend aesthetics and intellectual pursuit, offering a unique platform for addressing the urgent ecological challenges of our time. The narrative resembles Barthes’ view of myth as a symbol of environmental consciousness, apparent in Gaia’s portrayal as a timeless truth

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woven into the fabric of life, inviting humanity to take responsibility for the Earth's well-being "...because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness... pictures, to be sure, are more imperative than writing, they impose meaning at one stroke, without analysing or diluting it." (Barthe, 1957, p.108)

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Bio-notes

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