



Yearning for a Greener Tomorrow: An Analysis of the Role of Select Songs in Preserving Nature

Dr. Soubhagya S.P.

Assistant Professor, Department of English (SF), Mar Ivanios College, Triandrum

Abstract:

Environment and its preservation is a top priority and an overarching problem that has to be sorted by any means. The present paper explores the theme of nature preservation through the analysis of three songs “Earth Song” by Michael Jackson, “What a Wonderful World” by Louis Armstrong and “Mercy, Mercy Me” by Marvin Gaye. Music is a powerful tool that serves as a medium for societal and ecological change. The study with the help of these songs analyse the importance of music in preserving nature and highlights how the lyrics and tone of the song contributed to the message portrayed in it. It emphasized the role of an artist in arousing collective responsibility and creating public consciousness. The study urges man to understand his responsibility in preserving nature and to provide a kind of stewardship towards the Earth. Like the songs analysed in this paper, the study is also a call for action making man understand that healing planet requires swift response because it is time for people to think that there is no planet B.

Keywords: Environment, Preservation, Responsibility, Stewardship.

Safeguarding environment is one of the most pressing concerns of the twenty-first century. Human beings are destroying nature at an alarming rate and this serves as a major threat to the entire humanity. Inappropriate human behaviour is accelerating immense pressure on nature and it often inexplicably affects marginalised communities. Ecology and music are exceedingly allied since music is capable of portraying the pangs and positives of nature. In a world of political and ecological chaos, it is important to create awareness among the society about the significance of preserving Mother Nature. Protecting the environment is not a one man show; it requires effort from various firms at various levels. The paper tries to uncover how twenty-first century pop songs play a major role in raising awareness among humankind and contribute to ecological discourse. “Earth Song” by Michael Jackson, “What a Wonderful World” by Louis Armstrong and “Mercy, Mercy Me” by Marvin Gaye are the songs used for analysis.

Article History: Received: 04 June 2025. Revised: 25 June 2024. Accepted: 25 June 2025. First published: 1st August, 2025.

Copyright: © 2025 by the author/s.

License: Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Published by: Adrija Press, India

Citation: S.P. Soubhagya. (2025). Yearning for a Greener Tomorrow: An Analysis of the Role of Select Songs in Preserving Nature. *New Literaria: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*. 6:2. <https://dx.doi.org/10.48189/nl.2025.v06i2.003>

These songs force humanity to think about nature protection and to be a planetary conscious man. These songs echo Benedict Taylor's remark that "nature in music is not merely represented; it is often reimagined through sound, evoking emotional and ethical responses" (Taylor, 2011).

Michael Jackson, the starlit singer debuted from the group called Jackson 5 became famous within a short span of time. He has carved a niche for himself with his innumerable contribution to the artistic world. "Beat It", "Earth Song" and "Dangerous" are his famous songs that contributed to the rise of his artistic career. "Earth Song" can be considered as an anthem about the doomsday of earth and questions the destructive nature of mankind. It is an eye-opener to the metaphorically blind world that destroys the planet for its own conveniences. He enlightens the world with the issues and also raises awareness. The song is an awareness to major threats that nature faces like global warming and pollution. It also reflects public attitude to ecology and the promises they made. "Earth Song" is not only about environmental degradation but also a wakeup call to the entire humanity. The song criticises horrible human greed that corrodes environment and is both a spiritual and political outcry pleading the listeners to think about the loss that they themselves have created. He mourns over the lost beauty of the nature and questions, "What about sunrise? What about rain?" (1) and the question seems appropriate even in the modern scenario. The song which is divided into three stages begins by questioning and at the same time mourning over the lost privileges that nature provided us. Being the most enigmatic piece, "Earth Song" is a call for action, requesting man to stop his atrocities. The lines "What about all the things that you said we were to gain/ What about killing fields, is there a time?" (2-3) is a query to all the political and social promises of progress. Again, it emphasises that all the advancements man gained today has come at the cost of nature.

The song argues how war is capable of shattering and dismantling both human beings as well as nature. The term 'Killing Fields' used in the poem seriously question the heinous deeds that man commit and his share in ruining the ecological balance. The listeners are prompted to give answer to all the questions raised in the song and it is a quest to the collective human consciousness to rise against their own wrong-doings. You and Me are the referring and reference point in the song which underscores the amalgamation of the entire human community in sharing collective responsibility. The shared ownership of the earth that was once promised is getting deteriorated and the owners themselves are the reason behind it. At the same time, the speaker also laments over the loss of innocent human lives on earth who unknowingly become the victims of man-made conflicts. The speaker personifies earth and purposefully shifts the focus of Homo-Sapiens by asking them whether they notice "the crying Earth, the weeping shores?" (6). This line tends to create sympathy in the listeners making them feel that earth is their own sibling and will make a non-literal internal bleeding inside the listeners. Verse one of the song typically touches upon the major ignorance of man and the urgency of safeguarding land and marine biodiversity.

Chorus plays a crucial component in revealing the confounded state of the speaker and his strong urge in building a world that prioritizes nature over self gain. "Aaaaaaaaah, ooooooooooh" (7) can be considered as a wailing cry of the speaker which express his anguish and helplessness. Without any hesitation, the speaker boldly accuses mankind for causing such a catastrophic condition and insists on taking necessary steps. Earthling who are supposed to be the Zeus of earth, abuses, exploits, disintegrates and overuse it in the name of advancements. "Look what have you done" (9) is a strong commentary and advices man to confront the visible damage that they have inflicted on the earth. The speaker is a universal figure who criticised it as a collective responsibility rather than abusing a particular group for the same.

There is a sudden shift of tone in verse two of the song, where the narrator deliberately denounces human nature for ignoring the consequences of their action. The speaker infact can be considered as one among those who mourns over the plight of the milieu. The song encourages the listeners to reflect on the history of war and its impact on earth. Rachel Carson

in *Silent Spring* opines that, “Man is part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself” (Carson 1962) and these words echo the speaker's thoughts of considering environmental destruction to self-destruction. “What about us?” is a prominent question asked by the speaker throughout the song and it intensifies the role of man in conserving his habitat. It touches upon both land and marine habitat by showcasing the ill-doings of man and asks, “What about animals?/ What about elephants?/ Have we lost their trust/ What about crying whales?/ We're ravaging the seas/ What about forest trails?/ Burnt despite our pleas”(40-47). Through these lines it is palpable that human greed and greed are the major factors that obliterate the poor beings like elephant, whales and tress of the planet.

The tone of the song is one of mourning filled with grief and utter hopelessness. The phrases used evoke images of habitat destruction, war, ecological degradation, pollution and suffering. The entire song is built in a way it reinforces the exigency to act or to call for reintrospection. It is a plea to the entire children of the earth to open their eyes, repent, accept the blame and act accordingly.

“Mercy, Mercy Me” (The Ecology) by Marvin Gaye is one of the most high-flying songs released during the period. Marvin, an American singer and songwriter is branded for his exceptional album “What's Going On” which deals with issues of war, police brutality and ecological destruction. He is noted for his audacious treatment of addressing pressing social and global issues. “Mercy, Mercy Me” can be called as a protest song raising its voice against the atrocities committed against nature. Both Michael Jackson and Marvin Gaye through the lines “What about all the things” (3) and “Oh, things ain't what they used to be (2)” grieve over the lost glory of precious earth who nurtured man. Clean air and blue skies are the prominent imageries used by the narrator to showcase the past degradation of natural resources. “Poison is the wind that blows/ From the north, and south, and east” (4-5). The speaker calls for rapid intervention from the part of the listeners against the release of toxic elements which is also a result of industrialization. In order to universalise this imagery, the speaker uses all the directions as his reference point. Marine pollution due to human intervention is also criticized in the poem and is evident in the lines: Oil wasted on the ocean and upon our seas/ Fish full of mercury” (6-7). These lines resonate the words of prominent scholar Stacy Alaimo which says:

Rather than imagining the environment as something ‘over there,’ separate from the human, the material turn in environmental theory insists that humans are immersed within networks of biological, chemical, social, and environmental exchange. Bodies are not sealed off from the world but are instead porous and permeable—what flows through the sea, flows through us. (Alaimo, 2010)

The song align with Alaimo's theory of trans-corporeality which indicates that by damaging the environment people are trying to harm themselves since human body and environment are interrelated. The image of mercury filled fish can be viewed as a best example for trans-corporeality since the fish consumed by human beings can affect their health condition. Gaye makes the listeners probe deep into the issue of nature abuse and he condemns man for creating underground radiation which is caused perhaps by the testing of weapons. This may indicate the unforeseen threats triggered by technological breakthrough. The narrator critiques issues of overpopulation and urban expansion thereby opening a new arena for the listeners to think about the anthropocentric violence.

Gaye wrote “Mercy, Mercy Me” from an environmental standpoint and depicts devastating portrayal of man's unconstructive impact on the earth through his imagery. The imagery used in “Mercy, Mercy Me” makes man ponder on how Gaye attempts to convince listeners to take more philosophical approach to life rather than emphasising on the other aspects of earth. He demonstrates the contagion of oceans and the murder of marine life as a result of man's negligence. “Mercy, Mercy Me” is a sorrowful requiem to a planet in disarray and on the verge of environmental destruction. Upon its release, it was a top hit. It found new audience again in the early '90s. This song centers on how the balance of nature is being upset by the activities of mankind. Through the song it is evident that the ill doings of man will adversely affect all kinds of flora and fauna on earth.

This song laments the deterioration of the environment and at the same time gives warning to the fellow beings about the impending doom. Mankind, the most intelligent being on the planet stands as a central figure leading to the collapse of biodiversity with his selfishness and greedy nature. The following lines show how the narrator pleads desperately for a harmonious existence and need for sustainable development.

Woah, ah, mercy, mercy, me
 Ah, things ain't what they used to be
 Where did all the blue skies go?
 Poison is the wind that blows
 From the north and south and east (1-5)

These lines reveal the pathetic loss of those memorable days where one could see clear blue skies but are now corrupted due to industrial emissions. Man's negative interference with nature is one of the reasons for the loss of a friendly environment. Gaye compares the contemporary world with the past glory where everything around nature is beautiful and charming. Pollution or 'poison' in the skies had badly influenced the climate which is something that has become a topic of discussion in recent years. According to Ban Ki-moon, a South Korean diplomat, "Climate change does not respect border; it does not respect who you are—rich and poor, small and big. This is what we call global challenges, which requires global solidarity" (Ban), shows the importance of human solidarity in defending environment.

The narrator expresses his distress concerning how human race continue to degrade its environment at an exponential rate. Gaye speaks about the wind and its characteristics after being manipulated by men and how it's being polluted. The song is in the form of an elegy to make people aware of their cruelty towards the earth. "Radiation underground and in the sky/ Animals and birds who live nearby are dying." (11-12) refers to the ecological damage caused by the chemical agents and how it destroys the forest areas which resulted in soil infertility. "What about this overcrowded land/ How much more abuse from the man can she stand?" (16-17) exposes that over the years, birth rates have increased and mortality rates have dropped. This is not enough in itself to deem the planet overpopulated but given how swiftly non renewable energy sources are being exhausted pooled with irretrievable damage to the atmosphere, the point at which the earth can no longer endorse human life is approaching faster.

The poignant question asked at the end of the song personifies the planet as a living being reaching its breaking point because of human hostility. Gaye uses it as a symbol to portray the edge of doom of the earth. He preaches to do well and good for nature in the coming years. It is in this context, the interference of eco criticism is a must. Both the songs echo Rachel Carson's words on impending doom which goes thus:

We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been travelling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road—the one less travelled by— offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth. (Carson, 1962).

Louis Armstrong aka Satchmo is one of the highest-ranking artist of Jazz history. Armstrong gained reputation in 1920s and he is branded for his exceptional vocals and trumpet style. He recorded a number of songs throughout his career and is celebrated for songs like "Star Dust", "La Vie En Rose" and "What a Wonderful World". Unlike the other two songs which talks only about the harmful aspects of man's monstrous deeds, "What a Wonderful World" emerges as a beacon of hope to the common public. The song can be considered as an invitation to protect earth and its beauty. It is often perceived as a reminder to mankind prompting them to find optimism and hope from natural habitat. Louis Armstrong in the very beginning of the song "What a Wonderful World" describes the bliss that nature bestows on man. He praises the green trees, red roses, blue skies, bright days and solemn nights. The song itself gives happiness along with hope to the catastrophic earth. In a world of despair and destruction, Armstrong focuses on the positive elements that remain on the earth which shows

the last hope of man. War has destructed the whole of the world whereas people are in search of an anchor to sail the remaining part of their lives. Armstrong through his song envisions a world that is filled with optimism. While listening to the song, listeners are escalated to a condition where they relish a sort of comfort. Hope acts as a subtle blessing to wipe away the tears of man who bemoan the looming dread. The song is written in the form of an appreciation where Armstrong considered nature as the nurturer of man.

The lines "I see trees of green, red roses too/ I see them bloom for me and you/and I think to myself "What a wonderful world." (1-3) manifest Armstrong's nature of finding happiness even in the tiny marvels of earth. Armstrong appreciates the colours of the rainbow in nature. He visualizes the colours on the faces of the people and thinks that people are so positive about life that they appear quite vibrant like the colours of the rainbow. On the other hand, the lines may also signify the harmonious cohesion of people without any discrimination. Armstrong chooses to see good in people who are around him. The speaker considers social dynamics as an act of love and peaceful sustenance. Armstrong tries to give a contrast between day and night which can be interpreted as both positive and negative dimensions of earthlings. "The bright blessed day, the dark sacred night."(5) shows the positivity of daytime and the dark shades of night. People who are kind and good enjoy the good sides of nature whereas people with dark shades of life will be eager to shatter nature.

The colors of the rainbow so pretty in the sky
Are also on the faces of people going by
I see friends shaking hands saying how do you do
They're really saying I love you" (7-10)

There are manifold meanings in these lines which may signify that the narrator is praising the virtuousness of the world or else it can also be said that the narrator may be mourning the loss of all the innocence and glory from the world which is ironically referred to here.

"I hear baby's cry, and I watched them grow/ They'll learn much more than I'll ever know/ And I think to myself what a wonderful world" (11-13). These lines denote how the future generation hopes to get more advanced ways of life. Armstrong visualizes a world in which his younger generation can make paramount use of all the facilities which is beyond his imagination. Elements of his personal life carves place in the song and is apparent through the portrayal of his neighbourhood. He had also suffered for decades as a black man during segregation and the civil rights struggle. He gives the overall message that despite the starvation, poverty, genocide and general desolation of the world and the awful things that happened in it, the world is a glorious place full of beauty and human beings should invest their time to appreciate it. The title of the song is ironic because it describes a Utopian planet.

The song "What a Wonderful World" creates a long imprinting mark in the society. Its melody and lyrics instruct human beings that even if all seem to be misplaced the ultimate aim of man is to achieve happiness. The song moved many human beings of numerous ethnicities and religions. The song gives confidence that irrespective of all the odds, man must strive to succeed. The narrator praises his environment and the way he is contented with the advantages of nature. The speaker appreciates all the matters of gift and positivity that nature provides. The song also has a hopeful, optimistic tone with regard to the future, with reference to babies being born into the world and hoping to enjoy every aspect of nature. He opines that happiness is located inside humans. In a nutshell the song, "What a Wonderful World" by Louis Armstrong gives an awareness that one needs to admire things that existence offers man.

After a careful scrutiny of selected songs, it is flagrant that it is high time to protect nature and to help it regain its original and authentic temperament. Music not only has soothing power but through the study it is proved that music has the power to inspire and stimulate action urging people to lend their hands in protecting nature.

References

- Alaimo, S. (2010). *Bodily natures: Science, environment, and the material self*. Indiana University Press.
- Armstrong, L. (1967). *What a wonderful world* [Song]. On *What a wonderful world*. ABC Records. <https://open.spotify.com/track/0NwYfE44eXRso9bM9DWbQf>
- Carson, R. L. (1962). *Silent spring*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Gayne, M. (1971). *Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)* [Song]. On *What's going on*. Motown Records. <https://open.spotify.com/track/5LDTnh9Bnpghb1si4b2BI>
- Jackson, M. (1995). *Earth song* [Song]. On *HIStory: Past, Present and Future, Book 1*. Epic Records. <https://open.spotify.com/track/5o0XoC1vQjNz9oJ3WrW7Ae>
- Taylor, B. (2015). *The melody of time: Music and temporality in the romantic era*. Oxford University Press.

Bio-note

Dr. Soubhagya S.P. is an Assistant Professor, Department of English (Self-Financing), Mar Ivanios College, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.

Email Id: soubhagya.sp@mic.ac.in

