

## Does Climate Change Change Us?— Emotional Intelligence and Character Responses to Climate Crisis in *Back to the Garden* by Clara Hume

Liuna Wei, Ida Baizura Bahar\*, and Zainor Izat Zainal

Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

### ABSTRACT

Extreme weather and natural disasters occur frequently, posing great challenges to human survival and development; therefore, the mitigation of and adaptation to climate change are urgently needed. *Back to the Garden* (2012) by the contemporary American novelist, Clara Hume, depicts the experiences of a group of survivors who help each other and overcome obstacles on their journey to find their families in the wake of climate change. This paper focuses on the human connections depicted in the novel and the emotions of the main characters as they struggle for survival. The objective of the study is to examine the human emotions and relationships during the climate crisis and investigate the important role of positive emotions in adapting to climate change. This study applies the theory of emotional intelligence by the American philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, to analyse the relationships and emotions of the main characters in the novel. The result of this study demonstrates that works of literature highlight human reflections on adapting to the new environment and paying more attention to human future destiny by describing human efforts. As the world is experiencing dramatic climate change, the survival and development of human beings will always be a major concern, and the emotional connection between people and the positive mental state of individuals will help us better cope with and adapt to climate change.

**Keywords:** Clara Hume, climate change, emotional intelligence, humanity, Martha Nussbaum

---

#### ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*

Received: 29 January 2025

Accepted: 17 July 2025

Published: 02 December 2025

---

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.33.6.06>

*E-mail addresses:*

gs61548@student.upm.edu.my (Liuna Wei)  
idabb@upm.edu.my (Ida Baizura Bahar)  
zainor@upm.edu.my (Zainor Izat Zainal)

\* Corresponding author

---

### INTRODUCTION

Climate change is rapidly intensifying globally, and extreme weather events and natural disasters have brought significant harm and challenges to human survival and daily life. Humanity is facing a “shared catastrophe” (Chakrabarty, 2009). Mitigating and adapting to the climate crisis

is an urgent issue and has become a major topic of discussion today. Many literary writers have focussed their works on the climate crisis and the future development of humankind. As Dimock (2017) notes in the review of the novel *Borne* (2017) in *The New York Times*, “eco-fiction has come of age as well, wilder, more reckless, and more breathtaking than previously thought” (para. 8). Contemporary American author, Mary Sans Woodbury, writes under the pen name Clara Hume and *Back to the Garden* (2012) is her first published novel. The novel tells the story of a group of survivors who help each other overcome obstacles on their journey to find their families in the wake of climate change. Set in the not-too-distant future, the novel emphasises the dire consequences of human indifference to the environment and the urgent need for sustainable living. It showcases the ingenuity, bravery, and resilience in a devastated world by connecting people with different experiences through a path of renewal and hope. Different from other climate fictions, *Back to the Garden* not only pays attention to the harm caused by climate change but also focuses on people’s emotions and collective activities. It shows people coming together to face difficulties because of emotions, such as love, compassion and sadness. It also emphasises the positive role that emotions play in alleviating collective anxiety and coping with extreme weather.

As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, scholars have increasingly paid attention to the complex relationship between emotions and

the climate crisis; “This topic is sometimes called the affective dimension of climate change: broadly, it includes many kinds of affective phenomena which are called by different words in various disciplines, including feelings, emotions, affects, and moods” (Hamilton, 2020; Smith & Leiserowitz, 2014, as cited in Pihkala, 2022). It is undeniable that climate change elicits a range of emotional responses in people, including fear of the future, helplessness about the problem, and anger about doing nothing, as well as collective anxiety and climate trauma. On the one hand, the emotional responses to climate change negatively impact people’s physical and mental health; on the other hand, some people “experienced affect and emotion as drivers of climate change perception and action” (Brosch, 2021). However, current academic research has focussed more on the impacts of the climate crisis on human emotions, but the roles of emotional responses on human behaviour in response to the climate crisis need more attention and research.

Based on these insights, we argue that *Back to the Garden* demonstrates the importance of emotional intelligence in the characters’ behaviour in response to the climate crisis. This aspect provides a new direction for climate fiction research, which combines emotional agency and the ecological crisis to explore the impact of emotional intelligence on coping with the climate crisis. To realise this argument, our study focusses on how Hume connects the ecological crisis to human bonds and

emotions, thereby exploring how individual emotions play a key role in facilitating collective action and personal growth in the turbulent environment of climate change.

In order to achieve this goal, our study draws on the theory of emotional intelligence by the American philosopher, Martha Nussbaum (b. 1947). This theory is utilised to examine the difficult encounters of the novel's main characters on their journeys, as well as their efforts to cope with the conflicts between nature and humans, and among human beings. Nussbaum's theory of emotional intelligence emphasises the importance of emotions in ethical reasoning and human flourishing, and that emotions have great impacts on moral decision-makings and collective actions. Human survival and progress depend not only on scientific and technological advances but also on the enrichment and development of emotional capacities. Especially in the context of the climate crisis, people's emotional responses to environmental dilemmas are capable of fostering interactions between people, stimulating individual and collective actions, and provide the potential for climate change mitigation and adaptation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the publication of *Back to the Garden*, some scholars and critics have examined the novel from different perspectives, but the research results have yet to address the critical issue of emotional intelligence for the present. Clode and Stasiak (2014) argue that *Back to the Garden* retreats into

the common trope of fantasy and utopian science fiction, which is the depiction of "an idealised age of agriculture in the face of environmental challenges" (p. 26). In addition, McFarland (2021) focuses on the symbolism of the fertility and pregnancy episodes, which she argues are common symbols of hope for the survival of the species and the rebirth of society, but it "suggests that concern for the future qua the planet can only emerge, or emerges most effectively, from white, heterosexual, familial reproductive" (p. 13).

Tuhus-Dubrow (2013) examines the experiences and encounters of the main characters described as being "in a journey that's part standard post-apocalyptic narrative and part *Wizard of Oz*" (p. 59) as it demonstrates the dilemma of a barren existence on one hand and personal self-redemption and growth on the other. Also, Hume's warnings about the climate crisis are delivered through experience and emotion rather than charts and scientific jargon. While Bunzl (2014) proposes that *Back to the Garden* is an "emotional infection" (p. 175), he also argues that emotions, when viewed as a strategy for coping with the climate crisis, are psychologically limited. Hence, this study attempts to examine the conflict between nature and humanity, and the main characters' internal struggles, revealing the stimulus and impact of emotional responses to the climate crisis on moral decision-makings and collective actions. However, our analysis focuses on the emotional responses and emotional intelligence of the main characters and

examines their impacts on the search for hope and renewal in the climate crisis.

From a different perspective, Schneider-Mayerson (2018) observes the impact of *Back to the Garden* on readers, leading them to consider the impact of climate change on their personal lives and relationships with friends and family. He posits the view that explicitly linking familiar experiences to climate change can give readers “a vivid sense of the granular and quotidian impacts of unimaginably large-scale changes” (2018). Schneider-Mayerson examines Hume’s writing on climate change and personal emotions from a reader-receptive perspective. While his emphasis lies on aspects of the climate change’s impact on human relationships and emotions, our study offers an alternative research trajectory by focussing on the impact of personal emotional intelligence on aspects of ethical decision-makings and action-behaviours rather than limiting it to only the manifestation of emotions.

Using the framework of Nussbaum’s emotional intelligence, this study explores the issues of conflict and harmony in human nature by examining the main characters’ emotional responses to climate dilemmas. It also examines the role of emotional intelligence as a driver of individual behaviours and collective actions. The intricate relationship between ecological awareness and emotional attitudes is explored within the framework of emotional intelligence. The role of human emotions in self-healing-and in motivating collective actions in order to cope with the climate

challenge is also examined. It is hypothesised in this study that Hume’s portrayals of her main characters’ psychological journeys and emotional attitudes provide a micro-perspective on the climate crisis, where emotional intelligence can help humans better cope with the conflicts and challenges brought about by climate crisis.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Previous utilitarian theory of justice as propagated by Bentham has focussed on the amount of value gained by the individual and has ignored the deeper emotions of the individual (Nussbaum, 2004). There is less focus on the emotional state of the other person and the issues are fundamentally discussed in terms of interests and rationality. Some scholars view emotion as a thoughtless social force and deny the rational undertones of emotion (Jasper, 1998). In response to these criticisms, Nussbaum (2001) suggests instead that “the attainment of social justice requires both the normativity of reason and the guidance of emotion; reason and emotion are not contradictory concepts; the guidance of emotion is a necessary element of public reason and a necessary way of thinking for the wise bystander” (p. 306).

More importantly, emotions are “intelligent responses to the perception of value” (Nussbaum, 2001). Nussbaum argues that emotions should be a part of social rationality because the philosophical tradition’s accepted definition of emotions encompasses both feelings and beliefs. Indeed, emotions have not only sensual

and intuitive aspects but also an objective rationality within them: “their different responses are closely related to beliefs about how things are and what is important” (Nussbaum, 2001). In her opinion, this is another explanation for how literature can influence public life. Many human emotions serve as a reliable guide for moral behaviour and an accurate assessment of values.

Nussbaum (2004) also suggests that an emotion “is identical with the acceptance of a proposition that is both evaluative and eudemonistic” (p. 193). Emotions, such as love, compassion and grief, are not mere passive experiences but active processes that shape our perceptions, decisions and actions. Nussbaum argues that these emotional responses are essential for ethical reasoning and human flourishing as they enable individuals to respond empathetically and responsibly to the needs of others and environment. Most significantly, Nussbaum’s theory posits that emotions have a cognitive component—they are evaluative judgements that reflect our beliefs about what is important and valuable.

## METHODOLOGY

This study examines the issues of climate crisis and emotional intelligence in Hume’s novel *Back to the Garden*. More specifically, the emotional responses of the main characters in the climate crisis are used as the textual basis, and Nussbaum’s theory of emotional intelligence serves as the theoretical framework. From this theoretical framework, a close textual

reading and analysis of *Back to the Garden* is undertaken. In addition, the purpose of this study is to explore the conflict and harmony between the main characters and their environment, and to examine the positive role played by emotional responses. As posited by Schneider et al. (2021), “[a] global-scale social dilemma, … requires unprecedented levels of cooperation and coordination”. This study will focus on analysing love, compassion and grief in the emotions of the characters within climate crisis. Love is primarily for family and friends and extends to strangers and all living things. The emotion of empathy fills everyone who is experiencing misfortune due to climate change. Also, “[g]rief is a complex emotional response to the loss of a loved one” (Nussbaum, 2001). There follows a discussion of the values reflected in these three emotions and how they affect the moral decisions of the characters, highlighting the importance and value of emotional intelligence in collective action. Thus, it will hopefully demonstrate that emotional intelligence in difficult environments has a positive impact on coping with climate change, adhering to the goodness of human nature, and serving as guardianship for a better future.

## Text

*Back to the Garden* is narrated from the perspective of a group of survivors, presenting a terrifying and tragic possibility for our future. Fran and her friends live on a mountain in Idaho as survivors of a climate crisis. As climate change leads to extreme

weather, species extinction, viruses and resource scarcity, Fran and her friends rely on foraging for food to make ends meet. Worried about their parents, Fran and Elena decide to set off in search of their mothers and fathers. The journey to find their family is full of unknowns and challenges but also implies the hope of survival and the pursuit of a better life.

While depicting the tragic world, Hume does not neglect the relationship between nature and mankind, and the connections between people. She returns to the richness and beauty of the simple life and reveals the goodness and beauty of humanity amidst the tragedy. When Fran and Elena decide to set out in search of their families, they bring along their friends. During their journey, they encounter various trials and tribulations, but they work together to overcome them. They accept people into their group, travel with them and call them their friends. The group grows and they face all the difficulties of the journey, including mob attacks, bad weather, lack of water and attacks by wild dogs. The people in the group suffer many losses, some lose their arms, some lose their possessions and some lose their lives. However, they also gain the most precious sincerity and friendship between people, as well as hope for life.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Conflicts and Challenges in the Climate Crisis

According to Nussbaum (2003), emotions are “elements of our common animality with considerable adaptive significance:

so, their biological basis is likely to be common to all” (p. 141). She emphasises that different societies and cultures play different roles in shaping emotions. Although animals have the same abilities to perceive emotions as humans, humans have a richer range of emotions and subtle experiences. This is mainly because human beings are influenced by social environment and cultural awareness as suggested by Plumb (2014), “variations in the physical environment can variously expose people to risk, thus affecting their experience of vulnerability” (p. 157). When the social environment changes drastically, people’s understanding of danger, life and family may change, thus affecting the process of emotional generations and perceptions.

There is no doubt that ecological destruction and environmental collapse are important themes in *Back to the Garden*. This novel depicts the deterioration of the environment, such as climate change, depletion of resources and the spread of diseases. As proposed by Froese and Schilling (2019), “[c]limate change and resource scarcity are increasingly perceived as multipliers of risks” (p. 24). These challenges of the external environment put enormous pressure on the characters’ survival, forcing them to adapt and fight, which is the main reason for the conflicts and challenges that human beings face to survive and live; “Particularly over the last few decades, climate change has brought about a marked increase in extreme weather events, habitat and biodiversity loss, and associated economic, health, and wellbeing impacts” (Edwards et al., 2025).

In addition, climate change has exacerbated conflicts between humans and animals. With the loss of habitat and the scarcity of resources, wild animals and humans compete fiercely for limited living space. As argued by Abrahms (2021), “[t]hese clashes largely stem from the co-occurrence of humans and wildlife seeking limited resources in shared landscapes and often have unforeseen consequences” (p. 484). In the novel, with extreme scarcity of resources, both animals and humans compete for limited resources for survival, which is a direct response to the disruption of ecological balance: “One night, while they were camping, a pack of wild dogs attacked their campsite, drawn by the smell of their food. The group had to fend off the dogs with makeshift weapons and fire” (Hume, 2012). As a result of habitat loss and resource scarcity due to climate change, wildlife is forced to move into human living areas in search of food and water, while extreme weather and environmental degradation make wildlife behaviour more unpredictable and dangerous. As one study shows (Guarnieri et al., 2024), the increase in farmland density and population density, and the emergence of climatic extremes have become important factors contributing to human-elephant conflict in Africa and Asia.

In their study, Barnett and Adger (2007) state that “climate change may undermine human security and may, in conjunction with an array of non-climate specific factors, increase the risk of violent conflict” (pp. 643-644). For example, a study by McGuirk and

Nunn (2025) has shown that reduced rainfall in the territories of transhumant pastoralists in the African region can lead to conflict in neighbouring areas. This is because pastoralists need to rely on migration to obtain enough vegetation to sustain their livestock, where competition for the strained resources of water and pasture can lead to violent conflict. Likewise, the resource tension and existential pressure triggered by climate change have led to intense conflict between the characters in the novel. *Back to the Garden* reveals the multiple conflicts between characters in the context of climate change through meticulous plot descriptions. These conflicts not only reflect the far-reaching effects of resource scarcity and survival pressure on human society but also demonstrate the complexity of human emotions and relationships in extreme environments. In this context, Adger (2010) suggests that “climate change will not only intensify competition for resources but will also create more conflicts between collective decision-making and individual will” (p. 335). Fran’s community, for example, must work together to sustain their livelihoods but the needs of the individual and the needs of the collective are often in conflict: “The world had always had resource wars” (Hume, 2012). This is because the management of these resources requires both collective support and the challenge of individual interests. Individual wishes are often ignored or suppressed in collective decision-making processes. In the face of existential pressures, the collective has to make difficult decisions that may contradict

individual wishes. Such conflicts are often more pronounced, especially in difficult circumstances. As Wierzbicka (2003) puts it, “[i]n most other societies, however, dangers, disasters, and the general vulnerability of the human condition appear to be much more in focus” (p. 598). Thus, it is precisely in these conflicts and challenges that people’s emotions become more prominent, when emotional intelligence becomes particularly important in resolving collective anxieties and making ethical choices.

### **The Emotional Intelligence of the Main Characters**

Emotional intelligence, to put it simply, is the capacity to comprehend and regulate one’s own as well as others’ emotions. The emotional states of characters are closely associated with their natural surroundings, and the tranquillity or turmoil of that environment directly influences their mental well-being. Nussbaum states that emotions are our rational responses to external things and can profoundly influence our moral judgements and actions. They are described as “forms of evaluative judgment that ascribe to certain things and persons outside a person’s own control great importance for the person’s own flourishing. Emotions are thus, in effect, acknowledgments of neediness and lack of self-sufficiency” (Nussbaum, 2001).

This study focuses on love, compassion and grief shown by the main characters in the novel as we hypothesise that these three emotions not only shape the inner world of the characters but also drive the plot

in the context of the climate crisis. More significantly, they are the main motivators for making moral decisions and actions. Here, Oberman (2024) agrees with Nussbaum’s understanding of emotion as a discursive resource that informs moral consciousness, exploring emotional responses to climate change as manifesting in ongoing analytical judgements. Emotional experiences do indeed encompass moral responses to climate change.

In *Back to the Garden*, the themes of emotive acumen and the relationship between humans and nature are intricately intertwined, highlighting the complexity of human survival and adaptation in the context of the climate crisis. The complex emotional responses of the characters are demonstrated through subtle emotional depictions, which include fear, anxiety, sadness, remorse, hope, resilience, anger, helplessness, guilt and responsibility. Significantly, according to Clayton et al. (2017), psychological stresses triggered by climate change include anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These psychological reactions not only affect the daily lives of individuals but also have impacts on the social fabric of communities. In addition, Gifford (2011) suggests that uncertainty and catastrophic events brought about by climate change often led to feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, which can trigger a wide range of social and psychological problems. However, Nussbaum argues that these emotions contain perceptions of value and morality that are important for people in order to make moral decisions. As Boss

(2024) argues, Nussbaum's perspective, which goes beyond narrow material needs to make moral needs explicit in difficult dilemmas, has "been widely influential amongst the cofacilitation approaches to the climate crisis" (p. 9).

In *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (2001), Nussbaum argues that love is a strong emotion that involves a strong attachment to and high regard for an object. The importance of emotional experiences stems from their connection to the feelings and understandings we already have. She proposes that love is profound because it is often linked to our love for our parents and our need for comfort and security; "[i]t is when it is brought into relation with that which we already understand- with our intense love of a parent, our passionate need for comfort and security- does such a thing start to matter deeply" (Nussbaum, 2001). More importantly, comfort and security are the most basic human needs. When we feel love, it is usually accompanied by a sense of security and being taken care of as well. These are precisely the "ways of registering [or fully acknowledging] how things are with respect to the external (i.e., uncontrolled) items that we view as salient for our well-being" (Nussbaum, 2001). In view of this, love in the novel is mainly expressed as Fran and Elena's love for their family. When Fran's mother and Elena's father leave them, they always inevitably think of their parents in many scenes and get caught up in worrying and missing them: "He never left his obligations, only his love of life. And I missed him

terribly" (Hume, 2012). Indeed, this is a clear indication of the need for security and comfort. Since Fran and Elena's parents are not around, they lack security from their parents, especially in the harsh environment after climate change.

As Nussbaum argues, love is typically malleable and nations without love go wrong because of this narrowness; lacking love, we are indifferent to the suffering of others. Love is not just a private emotion but an essential component of social justice. Through the teachings of stoicism, we learn to love a particular individual while focussing on the well-being and justice of society. In this way, we can express our love for a particular individual without losing our universal respect for all human life. Here, Nussbaum is of the opinion that this helps us to avoid being too emotionally biased in favour of one person at the expense of caring for and respecting others. In the novel, as Fran and her friends set out to find their parents, they extend their love for their family to the people they meet on the road and even to the animals. They worry about the safety and survival of all living things, which considers love for the creatures of the earth. Varghese and Humphreys (2024) argue that this involves considering human and non-human interests equally. At this point, we can deduce that love is not only a personal emotional experience but a complex emotion with cognitive and ethical values that helps us to better understand ourselves, others and the world.

Regarding compassion, it is simply the direct perception of another person's suffering and the desire to alleviate it.

Nussbaum (2003) proposes that “[c]ompassion is an emotion directed at another person’s suffering or lack of well-being. It requires the thought that the other person is in a bad way, and a pretty seriously bad way” (p. 14). Here, compassion involves recognising the humanity and dignity of others, regardless of their circumstances. According to Nussbaum, compassion requires us to look beyond our self-interests and prejudices, and empathise with the pain and needs of others. It is important to emphasise that empathy is an empathetic recognition of the suffering inflicted on another being, and the hope that it will help to alleviate that suffering. However, the purpose of empathy is not to eliminate suffering directly but rather to enable another person to bear the suffering, seeing this as a way of mitigating and alleviating feelings of pain.

The final issue to be discussed in this study is grief, which is a profound sense of loss and mourning that includes both emotional and cognitive aspects. Firstly, grief is a reflection on the meaning of loss. According to Nussbaum (2001), grief is a natural response to loss, whether it is the death of a loved one or any other major change or transition. Grief often involves a strong emotional experience, which is usually painful and reflects the deep emotional connection that humans have to what they have lost. It has been described as “[a] specific episode of grief combines a background judgment of value with a noting of the way the world is with what one values” (Nussbaum, 2001). Beran (2024) argues that:

Nussbaum’s account shows that the experience of grief does not differ significantly whether we grieve spontaneously and immediately or not. At least some cases of grief do not involve being directly hit with the facts of a situation but rather spontaneously responding emotionally to something one (implicitly) recognises as important. Feeling grief is connected to this recognition (p. 8).

In *Back to the Garden*, grief is an important emotional theme that runs through the main characters’ experiences and emotional responses. Through subtle emotional depictions, Hume portrays the characters’ feelings of grief in the face of climate crisis and personal loss: “The cold day’s lamentation reflected that lost and frightening feeling” (Hume, 2012). When Cameron loses his life due to the sudden appearance of a wild bear, Daniel is devastated and angry as he watches his child die: “Daniel laid out Cameron on the kitchen table and Elena, horrified, sunk to the floor moaning and wailing. I had never seen a human so torn apart. Daniel was too but chose to be silent” (Hume, 2012). As Nussbaum (2001) puts it, “[w]hat inspires grief is the death of someone beloved, someone who has been an important part of one’s own life”. This is a clear yet heart-breaking example of a father’s passionate love for his son, as well as his infinite regret and great sorrow for his loss.

Significantly, Nussbaum (2001) acknowledges the cultural and social dimensions of grief, recognising that the

ways in which individuals experience and express grief are influenced by social norms and practices. She suggests that “grief, like all other human emotions, is culturally mediated” (Nussbaum, 2001). In the context of climate change, the importance of a common human destiny and interdependence is deeply understood through emotional responses to loss. Grief is not only an emotional response to loss, but also a cognitive and ethical reflection. It leads to a deeper understanding of the value of life and the common destiny of humanity in the face of adversity.

### **Ethical Decision-making and Collective Action**

As discussed earlier, in her book *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, Nussbaum debates in detail regarding the role and significance of emotions, such as love, empathy and grief. Love, for example, plays a key role in interpersonal relationships and is an important motivator of ethical behaviour. Through love, people are able to build deep social bonds and promote social cooperation and mutual assistance. Compassion, on the other hand, prompts us to be attentive to the rights and needs of others and to consider the well-being of others in ethical decision-making. This emotion is an important part of the moral aspect of life and helps us to build a more just and caring society. Grief, in contrast, reminds people to value the important things in life, to develop a deeper empathy and understanding of the suffering of others, and to reflect on

their own behaviour and values. Thus, this contributes to their own growth and moral progress. In sum, emotional intelligence plays an important guiding role in moral decision-makings, enabling people to recognise and understand the emotional states of others. That is essential for fair and just moral decision-makings. Moreover, emotional intelligence enables individuals to build closer social bonds, promote teamwork and mutual assistance, as well as communicate and coordinate effectively. This is conducive to the achievement of collective goals and the promotion of social progress.

In *Back to the Garden*, influenced by emotional intelligence, the main characters make appropriate moral choices and work together in solidarity to face the challenges. Ultimately, they work together to find hope for survival and a better future. A notable example of this is Daniel's behaviour after the death of his son due to an attack of a wild bear in the novel. Despite the loss of his beloved son and experiencing deep pain and struggle, Daniel resists the urge to shoot the wild bear. For such a tragedy:

An interpretation of the learning procedure that can be initiated by the confrontation with tragedy that is more suitable to tragic experiences in real life has been developed by Martha Nussbaum. Tragedy confronts us with an experience of the fragility of goodness. It can lead us to a radical questioning of current ethical standards and of merely rational approaches to understanding the ethical life and, like radical hope, it can

enable us to generate new conceptions or a deeper understanding of the good life (Bauer, 2025).

Overwhelmed with considerations for the ecosystem, human life and future generations, love for family and friends, grief for the loss of their homes, and sympathy for all living creatures, Daniel decides to abandon his personal hatred, coexist with the wild bear and continue to move forward to find hope with everyone.

As posited by Schneider et al. (2021), “[a] global-scale social dilemma, … requires unprecedented levels of cooperation and coordination”. With regards to this perspective, academic research has shown that emotional intelligence is critical in managing the human-nature relationship. According to Goleman (1995), emotional intelligence includes self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills, all of which are necessary for effective environmental protection and conflict resolution. Cherniss (2000) further suggests that people with high emotional intelligence are more likely to engage in environmentally friendly behaviours because they can empathise with the wider impacts on the ecosystems.

*Back to the Garden* can be seen as a journey in pursuit of a better world and a normal life. It depicts the natural and social changes brought by climate change and highlights the conflict and harmony between human beings and nature as well as between human beings and each other. Critically, the “garden” of the novel symbolises a beautiful

hope and new life, while returning to the garden emphasises a search after loss, a difficult process of regaining what has been lost and what is normal. We argue that the depictions express Hume’s concern and reflection on the destruction of the human world by climate change. It highlights her cherishing of harmony during all kinds of conflicts, her belief in the goodness and beauty of human nature, and her yearning and hope for a better future.

### **Adaptation and Mitigation of the Climate Crisis**

Environmental changes are forcing humans to adapt their way of life to meet the increasingly severe challenges of nature. Fran’s mother warns her that: “If you stay here, you’ll wither up like this godforsaken land and die young” (Hume, 2012). As seen here, climate change has brought great challenges to human survival and life; the deteriorating natural environment, and fewer and fewer natural resources can no longer meet the basic needs of human survival, forcing people to change their lifestyles to adapt to climate change: “Such as constructing seawalls to protect against sea-level rise, developing drought-resistant crops to ensure food security, and implementing early warning systems for natural disasters.” (Heath, 2024). Driven by love and hope, Fran and her friends decide to move forward in search of more resources for survival. They change their diet and behaviour on the journey, adapting to the difficult environment with resilience. It has been posited that:

Emotions are important drivers of behaviour, as they guide attention, shape cognitions, and create impulses and motivations to act. In the same vein, emotions of both positive and negative valence experienced in relation to the climate crisis have repeatedly been demonstrated to be among the most significant determinants of pro-environmental decision-making and behaviours (Kovács et al., 2024).

Each of the characters in Hume's book is empathetic. They feel the pain of others, even though they have not known each other for a long time; they feel the pain of the other person and try to find a way to help them. For instance, when Fran first meets Kane, she quickly lets down her defences: "My impression after I put the rifle down was that he was not dangerous" (Hume, 2012). Since she knows deeply how difficult it is to survive alone in a harsh natural environment, she can understand Kane's self-protective behaviour at the beginning and feels the desire of a person to survive. Therefore, such scenes are repeated throughout their journey as Fran and Elena accept everyone they meet on the road. Despite their different identities and encounters, she chooses to believe in and help them, calling all of them friends and taking them along for the ride. As proposed in a study on Nussbaum:

It will be highly unlikely that the people of the future will not have feelings of love or compassion, flee from death, and enjoy sensory experiences and

a landscape rich in opportunities to live flourishing lives, to use Martha Nussbaum's terms (Gómez-Franco, 2024).

The characters in the novel extend compassion and love to others and animals, and engage in collective action to find natural resources and protect wildlife in order to maintain ecological balance, which goes some way to alleviating the climate crisis.

According to Goleman (1995), emotional intelligence includes self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills, all of which are necessary for effective environmental protection and conflict resolution. Cherniss (2000) further suggests that people with high emotional intelligence are more likely to engage in environmentally friendly behaviours because they can empathise with the wider impacts on the ecosystems. Consequently, emotional intelligence plays an important role in ethical decision-making and collective action, and can help us better adapt to and mitigate the climate crisis.

## CONCLUSION

As a climate novel, *Back to the Garden* by Hume shows the connections and bonds between human beings, and the kindness and morality of characters trapped in the climate crisis. Our analysis has demonstrated that applying the conceptual framework of emotional intelligence has been beneficial in revealing the driving force for making appropriate moral decisions

and collective actions for the characters trapped in the climate crisis. Indeed, it plays an important role in promoting individual moral growth and enhancing collective cohesion. Although the characters in the novel unite to find a new hope for their lives yet, in the end, they return to the mountain and do not find a better life. This outcome indicates that, while human emotions and actions are important, the characters still need to explore more effective strategies to better cope with and alleviate the climate crisis.-

In this study, Nussbaum's theory of emotional intelligence has been used as a lens to explore the issues of climate crisis and emotional ambivalence in the novel. The main theoretical contribution of this study is the importance of the emotional dimension in climate cognitions and actions. By examining the ambivalence in *Back to the Garden*, this study highlights emotional intelligence as a crucial body of knowledge bridging the issues of climate change, ethical responsibility, and practical action. Furthermore, the findings of this study provide viable insights into the possibilities and limitations of the conceptual nexus of emotional intelligence in climate fiction, thereby promoting the adaptation and evolution of the emotional intelligence theory for the Anthropocene. Due to the global, intergenerational, and comprehensive complexity of the climate crisis, there is a greater need to develop emotional intelligence adapted to the Anthropocene. As such, this study contributes a significant emotional dimension to a more

comprehensive and humanistic approach to climate fiction research, highlighting the important role of emotional intelligence and the challenges that it faces.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work was supported by Universiti Putra Malaysia. The authors would also like to thank the reviewers for their constructive and insightful comments.

## REFERENCES

Abrahms, B. (2021). Human-wildlife conflict under climate change. *Science*, 373(6554), 484-485. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abj4216>

Adger, W. N. (2010). Social capital, collective action, and adaptation to climate change. In M. Voss (Ed.), *Der Klimawandel*. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-92258-4\\_19](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-92258-4_19)

Barnett, J., & Adger, W. N. (2007). Climate change, human security and violent conflict. *Political Geography*, 26(6), 639-655. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2007.03.003>

Bauer, K. (2025). Will the corona crisis make us better? Activating (fragile) hope for justice. *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, 21(1), 40-56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1743872120979996>

Beran, O. (2024). Ecological grief observed from a distance. *Philosophies*, 9(2), 37. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies9020037>

Boss, G. (2024, October 10). Needs, politics, and the climate crisis. *Ethics, Policy & Environment*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21550085.2024.2413834>

Brosch, T. (2021). Affect and emotions as drivers of climate change perception and action: A review. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 42, 15-21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2021.02.001>

Bunzl, M. (2014). *Uncertainty and the philosophy of climate change*. Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315760735>

Chakrabarty, D. (2009). The climate of history: Four theses. *Critical Inquiry*, 35(2), 197-222. <https://doi.org/10.1086/596640>

Cherniss, C. (2000). *Emotional intelligence: What it is and why it matters*. Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organisations.

Clayton, S., et al. (2017). *Mental health and our changing climate: Impacts, implications, and guidance*. American Psychological Association and ecoAmerica.

Clode, D., & Stasiak, A. (2014). Fantasy and utopian science fiction: The idealised age of agriculture in *Back to the Garden*. *Journal of Environmental Studies*, 12(3), 45-67.

Dimock, W. C. (2017, May 5). Review of *Borne*, by J. VanderMeer. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/05/books/review/borne-jeff-vandermeer.html>

Edwards, R. C., Perry, J., & Walshe, N. (2025). Socioeconomic variation in emotional, cognitive, and behavioural engagement with the climate crisis in England: Perspectives for education. *Behavioral Sciences*, 15(4), Article 407. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15040407>

Froese, R., & Schilling, J. (2019). The nexus of climate change, land use, and conflicts. *Current Climate Change Reports*, 5, 24-35. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40641-019-00122-1>

Gifford, R. (2011). The dragons of inaction: Psychological barriers that limit climate change mitigation and adaptation. *American Psychologist*, 66(4), 290-302. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023566>

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. Bantam Books.

Gómez-Franco, I. (2024). Amplified solidarity with future generations. *Philosophies*, 9(1), Article 17. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies9010017>

Guarnieri, M., et al. (2024). Effects of climate, land use, and human population change on human-elephant conflict risk in Africa and Asia. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 121(6). <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2312569121>

Hamilton, C. (2020). *Climate change, emotions, and the transformation of our world*. MIT Press.

Heath, S. C. (2024). Navigating psychosocial dimensions: Understanding the intersections of adaptation strategies and well-being outcomes in the context of climate change. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 72, Article 101493. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2024.101493>

Hume, C. (2012). *Back to the garden*. Moon Willow Press.

Jasper, J. M. (1998). The emotions of protest: affective and reactive emotions in and around social movements. *Sociological Forum*, 13, 397-424. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022175308081>

Kovács, L. N., et al. (2024). Acting as we feel: Which emotional responses to the climate crisis motivate climate action. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 96, Article 102327. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2024.102327>

McFarland, S. E. (2021). *Ecocollapse fiction and cultures of human extinction*. Bloomsbury Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350177673>

McGuirk, E., & Nunn, N. (2025). Transhumant pastoralism, climate change, and conflict in Africa. *The Review of Economic Studies*, 92(1), 404-441. <https://doi.org/10.1093/restud/rdae027>

Nussbaum, M. C. (2001). *Upheavals of thought: The intelligence of emotions*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511840715>

Nussbaum, M. C. (2003). Compassion & terror. *Daedalus*, 132(1), 10-26. <https://doi.org/10.1162/001152603771338751>

Nussbaum, M. C. (2004). *Poetic justice: The literary imagination and public life*. Beacon Press.

Oberman, R. (2024). What are topic emotions? A comparison of children's emotional responses to climate change, climate change learning and climate change picturebooks. *British Educational Research Journal*, 50(4), 1741-1764. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3995>

Pihkala, P. (2022, January 14). Toward a taxonomy of climate emotions. *Frontiers in Climate*, 3(3). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fclim.2021.738154>

Plumb, D. (2014). Emotions and human concern: Adult education and the philosophical thought of Martha Nussbaum. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 46(2), 145-162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2014.11661663>

Schneider, C. R., et al. (2021). Positive emotions and climate change. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 42, 114-120. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2021.04.009>

Schneider-Mayerson, M. (2018). The influence of climate fiction: An empirical survey of readers. *Environmental Humanities*, 10(2), 473-500. <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-7156848>

Smith, N., & Leiserowitz, A. (2014). The role of emotion in global warming policy support and opposition. *Risk Analysis*, 34(5), 937-948. <https://doi.org/10.1111/risa.12140>

Tuhus-Dubrow, R. (2013). Cli-fi: Birth of a genre. *Dissent*, 60(3), 58-61. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dss.2013.0069>

Varghese, N., & Humphreys, R. (2024). "The trio-model": a new, transformative framework for an old, broken system. *Jahr - European Journal of Bioethics*, 15(1), 65-85. <https://doi.org/10.21860/j.15.1.3>

Wierzbicka, A. (2003). Emotion and culture: Arguing with Martha Nussbaum. *Ethos*, 31(4), 577-600. <https://doi.org/10.1525/eth.2003.31.4.577>