

Predicting Future Events in Poetry

Alanoud Abdulaziz Alghanem

Department of English Literature at the College of Languages, Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, Saudi Arabia.

aaalghanim@pnu.edu.sa

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Abstract

Few research studies on poetical works unintentionally revealed prophetic qualities, in contrast to many novels that have foreseen future events. The goal of this study, therefore, is to investigate two poems as representative examples of prophetic poetry: predictive aspects can be traced in the poem "My Last Duchess" by the Victorian poet Robert Browning, which parallels the story of Diana, Princess of Wales. Similar connections can also be seen between "September 1, 1939" by the modern British-American poet W. H. Auden and the events of the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001. Through textual and contextual analysis, the study utilizes Martin Heidegger's phenomenological theory of temporality as a means of studying these exemplary poems to demonstrate their resemblance to later events that happened after their publication. The study's significance lies in its approach of interpreting these poems as predictive works, thereby generating fresh interpretations that question the dominant perspective. The study's findings will emphasize how poetry can sometimes predict the future, reflecting the recurring nature of historical events and renewing the long relationship between poetry and prophecy.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between poetry and prediction or prophecy is ever-present in Western culture. It was strong in both ancient Greece and, to a lesser degree, in the bible. In his 1821 essay "A Defence of Poetry", Percy Bysshe Shelley argued that prophecy is a characteristic of poetry. According to Shelley, poets have the ability to foresee the future in the present, and their thoughts and ideas are seeds that bloom in the future (2003). The intensity of the connection between poetry and prophecy in Western culture has fluctuated over time, resulting in many analyses of this connection (Banks, 2011). Numerous studies have examined this long-lasting connection between poetry and prophecy where they deduced that prophetic poetry involves some sort of inspiration, revelation, prediction, anticipation, and future fulfillment that may happen consciously or unconsciously. Kramer (1968) in *The Prophetic Tradition in American Poetry* stated that abolitionist poets "do consciously wear the mantle of prophecy" since they try to use certain events to fuel their warnings (p. 94). Kugel (1990) traced this long relationship between poetry and prophecy over a number of literatures and cultures, emphasizing that poets are "endowed with prophetic gifts" and "inspired speech" (p.1). Crumey (2011) elaborated that there are "several types of prophecy" in literary texts and among these types are: "the conscious,

deliberate prediction", the "unconscious anticipation of the future", the "prophetic tone", and the "prophetic distance" where an idea that does not fit with its time and place may bloom in another place and era (p. 7). He concluded by stating that artists "have sometimes predicted the future with extraordinary accuracy, such predictions are really no more than a by-product of the more fundamental, prophetic, universal quality of art" (p. 11). Li (2017) argued that although poetic prophecy falls under the poetry genre, it is considered a "deviation" of poetry due to its distinct type of "prophecy" which is different from conventional poems (p. 360). He mentioned that prophetic poetry is "a prediction that something will happen in the future. It is often known as fate or providence" (p. 365). In a recent study, Burrows et al. (2020) explored the prophetic characteristics of poetry that lead to a renewal and change of the world where some realities unfold after the literary texts are written which reflects the predictive nature of poetry. Thus, the notion of prophetic poetry as an "unconscious anticipation" of the future complies with the main trajectory of this paper which will be explored in the analysis of the selected poems.

The present study seeks to explore the notion of time as a lived subjective experience from the reader's/researcher's perspective to generate a predictive interpretation of poetic texts. Time is seen as a dynamic force that has a significant impact on the researcher's experience. In this way, literature can be seen as a "peculiarly sensitive timepiece of its own, both reflecting and responding to the complex and varied history of shared time" (Martin, 2016). From this perspective, the present study aims to employ Martin Heidegger's phenomenological theory of time, namely temporality, as a tool for analysing two renowned poems—Robert Browning's Victorian poem "My Last Duchess" (1842) and W. H. Auden's modern poem "September 1, 1939" (1939)—as case studies in an attempt to establish connections between these poems and events that occurred after their publication which prove that poetry is sometimes prophetic. The two poems are selected as exemplary because of their resemblance to modern international events that have left profound legacies on the world which still resonate today. The study's significance lies in this new way of analysing these two iconic poems as prophetic, hence finding new interpretations that challenge the prevailing understanding. This approach renews not only the analysis of poetical texts but also the connection of poetry to prophecy and the notion of prediction, suggesting that poetry can be read as a form of foretelling the future through a collaboration between the researcher's temporality and creative expression.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Throughout the course of history, numerous fictional texts have precisely predicted future events, as the following iconic representative examples demonstrate. Literary scholars have frequently characterized Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) as the foremost work of science fiction (Butler, 2009). Shelley possessed a keen interest and a comprehensive understanding of significant scientific discussions throughout her era, specifically about electricity and the genesis of life. *Frankenstein* was an early example of science fiction that predicted the improvements that would be made in bioelectronics and organ transplantation.

Another prophetic example is Jules Verne's fictional works, which foresaw various technological advancements of the twentieth century, including the presence of helicopters in the sky, submarines exploring the depths of the sea, and the concept of space travel beyond the confines of the planet. In his novel *From the Earth to the Moon*, published in 1868, he predates the first Apollo mission to the Moon by 100 years. In *The Begum's Fortune* (1879), Verne

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accurately foresaw the development of toxic gases and rocket-propelled missiles. Morgan Robertson's novel *The Wreck of the Titan* (1898) is considered to be the most prophetic tale that accurately predicted the sinking of the great ship Titanic. Herbert George Wells contributed to the development of the things he anticipated in his fictional works which allowed him to be the pioneer of science fiction. *The World Set Free* (1914) for example, is his prediction of the destructive weapon of atomic bomb. Wells was "able to predict future inventions, lifestyles, and above all, their consequences" which are based on his "scientific studies, and the understanding of human nature" (Pacholik, 2020, p. 38). A final prophetic example is Dean Koontz's novel *The Eyes of Darkness* (1981), which predicted the recent coronavirus outbreak of 2020.

In contrast to the numerous examples of fictional texts that tend to be prophetic, in the field of poetry, few representative examples of poems were analysed from the perspective of predictive studies. Winckles (2009) examined Shelley's poetry and prose, confirming that Shelley's texts were able to "foretell the end results of unjust economic and religious systems" which exist in the present time (p.106). William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, for example, is a notable prophetic work that showcases Blake's exceptional ability to prophesy. Shen et al. (2014) stated that "Blake predicts the destruction of empire and Jerusalem's reconstruction through the prophetic methods of contradiction, vision and imagination" (p. 1724). Another poetic example can be found in Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "The Princess" (1847), which anticipated the establishment of the first female university. Thus, there are few poetical texts that unintentionally revealed prophetic qualities, in contrast to the numerous novels that have foreseen future events. By employing temporality as a tool of analysis, the present study will bridge the gap by discussing two exemplary poetical works that foresaw future events, namely Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" and W. H. Auden's "September 1, 1939", which may hopefully contribute to the growing body of literature, open the door for further investigation of other prophetic poems, and hence lead to new readings and interpretations.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study will employ Martin Heidegger's phenomenological concept of temporality in the textual and contextual analysis of the selected texts. Heidegger argued that all aspects of human experiences have a time dimension, and the concept of temporality is essential to subjectivity. He claimed that our existence as individuals is interwoven with time and that time is the horizon that shapes us and gives our existence meaning. He stated that:

Time must be brought to light and genuinely conceived as the horizon of all understanding of being and every interpretation of being. ... we require an originary explication of time as the horizon of the understanding of being in terms of temporality as the being of Dasein, who understands being. (1979, p. 17)

According to Heidegger, temporality is a process that involves the influence of time on a person's consciousness and interpretation. Thus, through Heidegger's lens, the present approach enables a subtle analysis of how time, as a dynamic force, interacts with the reading experience and shapes the reader's/researcher's temporal engagement with the text, which results in constructing a new interpretation of the selected poems that challenges the conventional readings. The following analysis will delve deep into these two poems, bringing to the surface parts of them that may be construed as forecasting or predicting forthcoming

events and examining their impact on the reader's/researcher's interpretation of the selected poems.

4. ROBERT BROWNING'S POEM "MY LAST DUCHESS"

Robert Browning's dramatic monologue "My Last Duchess" can be read as a prophetic poem of a modern event for the many resemblances it has to the story of Diana, Princess of Wales, a member of the British royal family, and her husband, Prince Charles. This poem opens by presenting a 16th-century Duke who offers a visitor a painting of his deceased wife. The poem depicts a strong sense of power and authority within the historical context of the Renaissance period in Italy. The Duke's words centre around the Duchess's previous actions, wherein he exposes his power to gain control over her current reputation and the perception of her image. Throughout the poem, the Duke employs language that demonstrates his attempt to manipulate time and shape previous events according to his own desires. The inclusion of words such as "passion" and "glance" in line 8 suggests that his emphasis lies more on his verbal expression rather than his real emotions. The substitution of "its" instead of "her" in line 8 suggests that the speaker has a stronger emotional connection with the picture than with his deceased wife. According to Watson, "The fact that no one else is allowed to draw the curtain is evidence of the imperious nature of the duke, and so is the fact that those who are shown the picture do not dare to enquire about the look on the duchess's face" (1973, p. 71). Like the Duchess, who is subjected to the Duke's scrutiny, Princess Diana's life has been thoroughly associated with the media's observation, starting from her magnificent wedding and her role as a member of the royal family. Her life was extensively documented and presented in the media around the clock, reflecting her public scrutiny.

The poem's opening lines establish a resemblance between the Duchess and Diana, illustrating Browning's portrayal of a fictional character and his anticipation of the manipulation of a future royal figure, where the demands of the Duke, for the former figure, or the media, for the latter, control and dominate their personal views. The following passage indicates the profound and intense nature of the Duchess's image, as past observers have been curious about the cause of the Duchess's captivating gaze:

The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. (1842, ll. 8–13)

This quote exemplifies the Duke's possessive nature and his strong desire to exert control over her. He asserts his dominance by stating, "(Since none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)" (1842, ll. 9–10). Similarly, although the tabloids usually held a positive view of Princess Diana—since promoting her was advantageous for their business—if Diana defied them or behaved improperly according to their standards, the critics would punish and criticize her. They insultingly commended her when she obediently complied: "Slowly she is adjusting," stated an experienced tabloid journalist in a typical article towards the end of 1983, noting that she appeared to be "less fixated on maintaining absolute privacy in her personal life" (Whitaker, 1983). Thus, both female figures were subjected to supervision and control at all times.

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From lines 22 to 34 in Browning's poem, the Duke initiates an extensive list of complaints about the Duchess. According to him, she was naive, but also easily satisfied and influenced: "She had / A heart—how shall I say? — too soon made glad, / Too easily impressed" (1842, ll. 21–23). He holds her responsible for failing to distinguish between the role of being the wife of a "nine-hundred-year-old name" and the ability to appreciate a sunset or receive flowers from someone of lower standing than the Duke. Although he believes that it is acceptable to be polite—"She thanked men—good!" (1842, l. 31)—according to him, she always showed men the kind of respect often reserved for a person of high social status and distinction. The Duke resentfully states that "she liked whate'er / She looked on, and her looks went everywhere" (1842, ll. 23–24). All his speech implies his suspicions that she was unfaithful to him and had affairs with other men. Such details can be linked to Princess Diana, who was profoundly moved by the bond between her sons and Emad El-Din Mohamed Abdel Moneim Fayed, better known as Dodi Al-Fayed, the son of the Egyptian billionaire Mohamed Al-Fayed (Verdier & Philippe, 1998, pp. 132–133). Princess Diana had a number of romantic relationships during her life. Many of them began during her marriage to Charles after she discovered that he was in a relationship with Camilla Parker and experienced feelings of isolation. Diana was quoted as saying, "I want to find somebody who would requite my affection" (Hrom, 1997, p. 12). Like the Duke, Prince Charles had many doubts about Diana having an affair. In an interview, an insider stated that, at that point, Charles and Diana had barely had any significant interactions. Diana subsequently asserted that she and Charles had only encountered each other on 13 occasions before their engagement: "And most of that time they'd not spent alone together," and "they really didn't know one another at all" (History Extra, n.d.).

As the Duchess's relationships with other people were objectionable to the Duke, the relationship between Diana and Dodi Al-Fayed was undesirable and controversial. *The Death of Princess* mentions an article in the tabloid *News of the World* which discusses her elder son William's strong dislike for this Egyptian multimillionaire, whom he saw as a playboy and an unsuitable partner for his mother. William wanted to have a conversation with his mother about this matter immediately after her return from Paris. Coincidentally, this article was published on Sunday, 31 August, after the deaths of both Diana and Dodi (Dobrovolný, 1997, pp. 108–109).

Ironically, in spite of the Duke's underestimation of the Duchess's traits in Browning's poem, the contrast appears in the favour of the Duchess, who seems to be appreciative and lively, while the Duke is presented as jealous and controlling. Similarly, Prince Charles had to come to terms with Diana's immense popularity, which unintentionally overshadowed him (Bradford, 2007, pp. 138–145). In *Diana: Her True Story in Her Own Words*, Morton showed how Diana attempted to deal with the journalists by highlighting her traits of modesty and simplicity (Morton, 2017), which is exactly like the Duchess. It is worth mentioning, however, that according to Smith (1983), the Diana narrative took a dangerous twist when Andrew Morton, a former tabloid reporter, published *Diana: Her True Story*. The royal marriage ultimately unfolded as a tragic narrative of adultery, psychological disorder, treachery, and suspicion. Diana's recorded interviews provided the fundamental theme of the book. Although presented as a "true story", the book was, in fact, her emotional interpretations of events, which were influenced by her psychotherapy, her astrological readings, and her alternative therapists who supported her attempts to attribute blame. This report reflected the story from her subjective perspective and contained discrepancies that resembled Diana's tendencies to

overstate things and contradict herself. But, with time, the public started accepting the book as an accurate representation of reality. Thus, Diana's circumstances bear a resemblance to those of the Duchess in Browning's poem, as both appear to lack a strong connection to their husbands and exhibit disparities in their interests. According to Bradford, "Charles was too old for his age, and Diana in her youth extremely immature" (2007, p. 112).

In Browning's poem, the Duchess met her death at the hands of the Duke, as evidenced by the line: "This grew; I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together" (1842, ll. 45–46). The Duke ordered the Duchess's execution due to his inability to tolerate her behaviour. His command permanently destroyed her joyful attitude and thereafter transformed into a means of manipulating her public image by displaying her painting and dictating the opinions others should have of her. Similarly, Princess Diana's death in a car accident in Paris on 13 August 1997 signified the sorrowful conclusion of an individual whose public image was manipulated by the media. Thus, the Duchess's fate and the theories about the Duke's role in her killing re-exist in Diana's situation. The letter that Princess Diana wrote in which she accused Charles of trying to murder her has been the basis for a great deal of speculation about conspiracies. Diana wrote it several weeks before she passed away, and based on this information, Mohamed Al-Fayed, Dodi's father, was confident that his son and Princess Diana were murdered under the direction of Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, who was Diana's former father-in-law. Mohamed Al-Fayed asserted that Diana was murdered while she was pregnant, and he cited this as the key reason for her death. He claimed that the royal family could not accept the possibility of a Muslim being the stepbrother or stepsister of the future king (Podroužková & Ebringerová, 2008).

Both the Duchess and Princess Diana demonstrate similarities in being replaced by other women after their deaths. After carefully plotting the death of the Duchess, the Duke begins arranging a new marriage that would showcase his dominant behaviour: "The company below, then. I repeat" (1842, l. 48). Prince Charles also married Camilla Parker following Diana's passing. Besides, both the Duchess and Diana have achieved immortality through their portrayal. The former is immortalized in poetry, whereas Princess Diana is kept alive in the public's collective memory. They symbolize a temporal theme as their legacy continues to evolve and have an impact.

Based on the analysis above, it can be inferred that the concept of the reader's/researcher's temporality can be used to investigate any past event in poetical works and find its correspondence in real life, hence interpreting it as a prediction of future events. This enables the present study to compare the portrayals of the Duchess and Princess Diana, so giving rise to new interpretations that challenge the conventional viewpoint.

5. W. H. AUDEN'S POEM "SEPTEMBER 1, 1939"

Auden's "September 1, 1939" experienced significant acclaim following the events of 9/11, primarily due to the audience's ability to relate the event to the poet's perspective. Auden's "September 1, 1939" appears to anticipate the future event of the 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centres in New York City and has a striking resemblance in terms of title, timing, place, and the prevailing sense of despair following both incidents. The poem's title is derived from the Second World War, which commenced on September 1, 1939, when Germany launched an attack on Poland. Auden's poem has frequently been cited in relation to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack because of these parallels in wording and content. This

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poem was recited in many of the memorials in the United States in response to the terrorist attack and was reprinted in a variety of newspapers across the country. This poem was published in several major American newspapers shortly after the September 11 attacks, including *The New York Post*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Boston Globe*, and *The Baltimore Sun*. Dana Gioia, Paul Muldoon, and Adrienne Rich, all famous poets, recited it at various memorials during that month (Luger, 2010, p. 34).

Both events, the Second World War and the terrorist attack on September 11, explore feelings of disillusionment, fear, and the human condition amid a global crisis, and they were significant turning points in human history, causing widespread dread and long-lasting consequences. Luger stated that “Auden scholar Nicholas Jenkins described the poem as functioning, temporarily, as elegy” (2010, p. 36). Auden's “September 1, 1939” played a significant role in the peaceful resolution of the early stages of the Second World War during the autumn of 1939. Likewise, in 2001, Auden's poem resonated with the American public, since it was relatable and served as an inspiration for unity. Auden’s poetry effectively assisted Americans in managing their sorrow and provided wisdom on navigating a time of ambiguity, as O’Leary (2005) observed. The opening lines of Auden’s poem, “I sit in one of the dives, / On Fifty-second Street” (1939, ll. 1–2), evoke a feeling of social and personal discomfort, depicting the anxiety and confusion that resurfaced following the 9/11 attacks. Both incidents highlight the unpredictable nature of violence and warfare. In the initial verse, the speaker portrays a sense of uncertainty and fear, as his clever aspirations fade away. Additionally, the unpleasant scent of death disturbs the September night. The sentences in this poem have a sad tone, and the use of simple language lends a sense of regretful reluctance. The speaker appears to be overwhelmed by the realization that he is powerless and all “hopes expire”. Interpreting the final two lines of the first stanza within the framework of the events of September 11 is deeply unsettling. If the readers were in New York City on the evening of 9/11, it would be impossible for them not to remember the distinct smell that pervaded the city that night (O’Leary, 2005). Thus, the whole tragic atmosphere of the first stanza of Auden’s poem re-exists on September 11, when people were obsessed with “The unmentionable odour of death” which “offends” that “September night” (1939, ll. 10–11).

Regarding the setting, Auden references “skyscrapers”, the “dense commuters” who come to this city, and the “buildings” that “grope the sky” of the “State”, which all parallel the city of New York and its World Trade Centre Towers. These towers were tragically demolished by the events of 9/11, like many buildings that were destroyed in the Second World War. The words “grope the sky” in a manner are reminiscent of the Twin Towers, while the people remain in a state of stupor “Defenseless under the night” (1939, stanza 9, l. 1) just as people felt in the United States on the first days after the terrorist attack. Luger stated that Auden’s insights on the state of war-ravaged Europe in 1939 “seemed almost prophetic of the later trauma in the U.S.” (2010, p. 58). The term “blind” in the second line of the fourth stanza symbolizes the absence of awareness and forethought regarding acts of terror.

Another parallel that can be drawn between this poem and 9/11 is obvious in the second stanza, where Auden says:

From Luther until now
That has driven a culture mad,
Find what occurred at Linz,
What huge imago made

A psychopathic god (1939, ll. 3–7).

These lines illustrate the historical and religious connections between the two events, as well as the ways in which these connections can be traced back to the reasons for acts of violence, beginning with Martin Luther's forced conversion of Jews and ending with Hitler's invasion of Poland. On September 11, 2001, terrorists commanded by Osama bin Laden attacked the World Trade Centre. The association between religious doctrine and acts of violence had a comparable impact on the events that happened that day. At one point, bin Laden delivered both a pledge and a warning:

As for the United States, I tell it and its people these few words: I swear by Almighty God who raised the heavens without pillars that neither the United States nor he who lives in the United States will enjoy security before we can see it as a reality in Palestine and before all the infidel armies leave the land of Mohammed, may God's peace and blessing be upon him. (BBC News, 2001)

Thus, like Hitler's description as "a psychopathic god" (1939, stanza 2, l. 7), bin Laden's speech implies his psychopathic tendencies. Besides, the terrorists who were involved in this brutal act are substitutes for Hitler, while the victims of the 9/11 attacks represent the numerous victims of the Second World War and the victims of the Nazi genocide. Both events are examples of the deep impact that religion may have on motivating serious acts of terror, which can result in societal upheaval and fear and leave an unforgettable mark on history.

In stanza 7 of Auden's poem, the poet raises three rhetorical questions: "Who can release them now, / Who can reach the deaf, / Who can speak for the dumb?" (1939, ll. 9–11). These lines can be likened to the dilemma of the terrorists implicated in the World Trade Centre attack, who, despite their radical activities, ultimately found themselves "helpless" within the larger context of events. Likewise, politicians, despite their apparent influence, are eventually evaluated based on the results of their actions. They cannot undo the consequences of their choices and establish connections with others who have been silenced as a result of such brutal acts. Auden's remarks capture the tragic irony in which both soldiers and commanders become trapped by uncontrollable consequences, highlighting the profound hopelessness that often accompanies such events. Both events are examples of how ideological convictions can lead to catastrophic events that drastically alter the geography of the world.

Finally, the poem's structure consists of nine stanzas of 11 lines each, corresponding to the date and month of the terrorist attack. Both events led to chaos and violence, as described in the poem with words such as "anger", "fear", "death", "hunger", and "despair", which all are the outcome of the "lie of Authority" and their "compulsory game". The above comparison signifies the concept of temporality, in which Auden's poem is interpreted as a prophecy of the events of the 11th of September six decades later, reflecting the recurring nature of historical events and the predictive aspect of poetry. It emphasizes that poems sometimes "can begin in one place and time and arrive at other places and times, where they retain ... their coherence and effect" (Burt, 2002, p. 25).

6. CONCLUSION

This study emphasizes the significance of the temporality of the reader's or researcher's perspective in generating new interpretations of the selected poems, which in turn challenge the perspectives that are now prevalent. The study demonstrates that its new interpretation

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cannot be attained if future events have not taken place after the poems have been published. Hence, Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" and W. H. Auden's "September 1, 1939" are analysed as prime representative examples of prophetic poetry since they both foresee events that occurred after these poems were published, reflecting the recurring nature of historical events. The study concludes by showing that Browning's poem is a prediction of the 20th-century story of Diana, Princess of Wales, whereas Auden's poem is a prophecy of the 11th of September Terrorist Attack on New York City in 2001. The study hopes, through its new interpretation, to contribute to the growing body of literature that is globally interested in the story of Princess Diana as an international celebrity and the 11th of September as one of the most tragic days in American history. The study's findings demonstrate that poems sometimes may unconsciously and unintentionally be able to anticipate forthcoming events, which expands the perspective on the role of poetry in the unfolding of history and future realities, renewing its long relationship to prophecy and the notion of prediction. The study hopefully contributes to filling this gap in reading poetry as a prediction of future events and promotes a reassessment of other poetical works by acknowledging the prophetic aspects in poetry, raising questions such as: Does W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming" (1919) predict Irish independence? Or can T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922) be read as a prophetic depiction of the cultural and spiritual decline that anticipated the changes of the 21st century?

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Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this research as no data were generated or analysed.

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This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by the author.

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