

500 years of Tropical Rain Forests in Literature & Poetry

TEXT 1: *Utopia*, Thomas Moore (1516)

“Sir Thomas More (1477-1535) was the first person to write of a ‘utopia’, a word used to describe a perfect imaginary world. More’s book imagines a complex, self-contained community set on an island, in which people share a common culture and way of life... It is unclear as to whether the book is a serious projection of a better way of life, or a satire that gave More a platform from which to discuss the chaos of European politics.” (source: [The British Library](#))

Under the equator, and as far on both sides of it as the sun moves, there lay vast deserts that were parched with the perpetual heat of the sun; the soil was withered, all things looked dismally, and all places were either quite uninhabited, or abounded with wild beasts and serpents, and some few men, that were neither less wild nor less cruel than the beasts themselves. But, as they went farther, a new scene opened, all things grew milder, the air less burning, the soil more verdant, and even the beasts were less wild: and, at last, there were nations, towns, and cities, that had not only mutual commerce among themselves and with their neighbours, but traded, both by sea and land, to very remote countries.

TEXT 2: *Paradise Lost*, John Milton (1667)

“Milton intended to ‘justify the ways of God to men’ (1.26). He begins with Satan, who has been banished to Hell after his revolt against God, and goes on to explore God’s creation of humankind, the temptation of Adam and Eve in Eden, and the concept of sin.” (source: [The British Library](#))

So on he fares, and to the border comes
Of Eden, where delicious Paradise,
Now nearer, crowns with her enclosure green,
As with a rural mound, the champaign head
Of a steep wilderness, whose hairy sides
With thicket overgrown, grotesque and wild,
Access denied; and overhead upgrew
Insuperable height of loftiest shade,
Cedar, and pine, and fir, and branching palm,
A sylvan scene, and, as the ranks ascend,
Shade above shade, a woody theatre
Of stateliest view. Yet higher than their tops
The verdurous wall of Paradise upsprung;
Which to our general sire gave prospect large
Into his nether empire neighbouring round.
And higher than that wall a circling row
Of goodliest trees, loaden with fairest fruit,
Blossoms and fruits at once of golden hue,
Appeared

TEXT 3: *Jungle Book*, Rudyard Kipling (1894)

Kipling (1865–1936) was an English novelist, author of short stories, poet, and journalist. In 1907, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. He was the first English-language writer to receive this prize and its youngest recipient to date (he was 41 yrs old). [The Jungle Book](#) is a collection of fables in which he uses anthropomorphic animals to teach moral lessons.

“Listen, man-cub,” said the bear, and his voice rumbled like thunder on a hot night. “I have taught thee all the Law of the Jungle for all the Peoples of the Jungle—except the Monkey Folk who live in the trees. They have no Law. They are outcasts. They have no speech of their own, but use the stolen words which they overhear when they listen and peep and wait up above in the branches. Their way is not our way. They are without leaders. They have no remembrance. They boast and chatter and pretend that they are a great people about to do great affairs in the jungle, but the falling of a nut turns their minds to laughter, and all is forgotten. We of the jungle have no dealings with them. We do not drink where the monkeys drink; we do not go where the monkeys go; we do not hunt where they hunt; we do not die where they die.”

Text 4: *The White Man’s Burden*, Rudyard Kipling (1899)

In this poem Kipling makes clear his perspective on the looming Philippine–American War (1899–1902). This is only the first stanza; you can read the rest of the poem and about the political background [here](#).

Take up the White Man’s burden
Send forth the best ye breed
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives’ need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child

TEXT 5: *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad (1899)

*Conrad (born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, 1857–1924) is regarded as one of the greatest novelists to write in the English language. His writings depict trials of the human spirit in the midst of what he saw as an impassive, inscrutable universe. In 1890 he spent time in what was then the known as the [Congo Free State](#) (which was actually a privately owned colony of Leopold II of Belgium). The things he saw and experienced there would inspire his novella *Heart of Darkness*.*

It was just two months from the day we left the creek when we came to the bank below Kurtz’s station. Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings

of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances... The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, and butted all day long against shoals, trying to find the channel, till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known once somewhere far away — in another existence perhaps. There were moments when one's past came back to one, as it will sometimes when you have not a moment to spare for yourself; but it came in the shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants, and water, and silence. And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect...

...I tried to break the spell—the heavy, mute spell of the wilderness that seemed to draw him to its pitiless breast by the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, by the memory of gratified and monstrous passions.

TEXT 6: *Cabbages and Kings*, O. Henry (1905)

O. Henry was the pen name of William Sydney Porter (1862–1910), an American writer known primarily for his short stories (e.g., “The Gift of the Magi”). The novel Cabbages and Kings is comprises interlinked short stories set in the fictional Central American country of “The Republic of Anchuria”. It was inspired by O. Henry’s experiences in Honduras in the late 1890s.

Well, then, in three days we sailed alongside that Guatemala... We landed at a town on the coast, where a train of cars was waitin' for us on a dinky little railroad.... We run some forty miles in seven hours, and the train stopped. There was no more railroad. 'Twas a sort of camp in a damp gorge full of wildness and melancholies. They was gradin' and choppin' out the forests ahead to continue the road. 'Here,' says I to myself, 'is the romantic haunt of the revolutionists. Here will Clancy, by the virtue that is in a superior race and the inculcation of Fenian tactics, strike a tremendous blow for liberty. The trees was all sky-scrapers; the underbrush was full of needles and pins; there was monkeys jumpin' around and crocodiles and pink-tailed mockin'-birds, and ye stood knee-deep in the rotten water and grabbed roots for the liberation of Guatemala. Of nights we would build smudges in camp to discourage the mosquitoes, and sit in the smoke, with the guards pacin' all around us.

One old man named Halloran — a man of Hibernian entitlements and discretions, explained it to me. He had been workin' on the road a year. Most of them died in less than six months. He was dried up to gristle and bone, and shook with chills every third night. “Ye’re surrounded by a ragin’ forest full of disreputable beasts—lions and baboons and anacondas—waitin’ to devour ye. The sun strikes ye hard, and

melts the marrow in your bones... The fault's wid these tropics. They rejuices a man's system. 'Tis a land, as the poet says, 'Where it always seems to be after dinner'."

TEXT 7: *Beyond the Chagres River*, James S Gilbert (1905)

The Chagres River is in central Panama. It is the largest river in the Panama Canal's watershed and is dammed twice. The resulting reservoirs — Gatun Lake and Lake Alajuela — form an integral part of the Panama Canal and its water system.

Beyond the Chagres River,
'Tis said (the story's old),
Are paths that lead to mountains
Of purest virgin gold;
But 'tis my firm conviction
Whate'er the tales they tell
Beyond the Chagres River
All paths lead straight to Hell.

TEXT 8: *Tarzan of the Apes*, Edgar Rice Burroughs (1912)

Burroughs (1875–1950) was an American author of adventure, science fiction, and fantasy stories; his most well-known characters are Tarzan and John Carter. Tarzan (aka John Clayton II, Viscount Greystoke) was a 'feral child raised in the African jungle by the Mangani great apes; he later experiences civilization, only to reject it and return to the wild as a heroic adventurer' (source: [Wikipedia](#))

Their work done the sailors returned to the small boat, and pulled off rapidly toward the Arrow. Tarzan, an interested spectator of all that had taken place, sat speculating on the strange actions of these peculiar creatures. Men were indeed more foolish and more cruel than the beasts of the jungle! How fortunate was he who lived in the peace and security of the great forest!

TEXT 9: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García Márquez (1967)

This novel by Colombian author and Nobel Laureate Gabriel García Márquez tells the story of multiple generations of the Buendía family, whose patriarch founded the fictitious town of Macondo.

Then, for more than ten days, they did not see the sun again. The ground became soft and damp, like volcanic ash, and the vegetation was thicker and thicker, and the cries of the birds and the uproar of the monkeys became more and more remote, and the world became eternally sad. The men on the expedition felt overwhelmed by their most ancient memories in that paradise of dampness and silence, going back to before original sin, as their boots sank into pools of steaming oil and their machetes destroyed bloody lilies and golden salamanders.

TEXT 10: *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia*, Elizabeth Gilbert (2006)

This memoir by American Elizabeth Gilbert chronicles her trip around the world following her divorce and the resulting personal discoveries. It was an international best-seller (e.g., 187 weeks on the NYTimes list).

So I take a taxi to the town of Ubud, which seems like a good place to start my journey. I check into a small and pretty hotel there on the fabulously named Monkey Forest Road. The hotel has a sweet swimming pool and a garden crammed with tropical flowers with blossoms bigger than volleyballs (tended to by a highly organized team of hummingbirds and butterflies). The staff is Balinese, which means they automatically start adoring you and complimenting you on your beauty as soon as you walk in. The room has a view of the tropical treetops and there's a breakfast included every morning with piles of fresh tropical fruit. In short, it's one of the nicest places I've ever stayed and it's costing me less than ten dollars a day. It's good to be back.

The sound universe is also spectacular around here. In the evenings there's a cricket orchestra with frogs providing the bass line. In the dead of night the dogs howl about how misunderstood they are. Before dawn the roosters for miles around announce how freaking cool it is to be roosters. ("We are ROOSTERS!" they holler. "We are the only ones who get to be ROOSTERS!") Every morning around sunrise there is a tropical birdsong competition, and it's always a ten-way tie for the championship. When the sun comes out the place quiets down and the butterflies get to work. The whole house is covered with vines; I feel like any day it will disappear into the foliage completely and I will disappear with it and become a jungle flower myself. The rent is less than what I used to pay in New York City for taxi fare every month.

I rode my bicycle back home, pushing my happy body up the hills toward my house in the late afternoon sun. On my way through the forest, a big male monkey dropped out of a tree right in front of me and bared his fangs at me. I didn't even flinch. I said, "Back off, Jack—I got four brothers protecting my ass," and I just rode right on by him¹.

¹Two primate species are found on Bali: the *Crab-Eating Macaque*, *Macaca fascicularis* and the *Javan Langur*, *Trachypithecus auratus*. This was almost certainly a Macaque, which is known for stealing cameras, sunglasses, and other items from tourists and refusing to give them back until they are given some food.