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Special Issue Reprint

Eco-Rebels with a Cause

Representations and Explorations of Politics and Activism in Children's and YA Literature

Edited by
Nina Goga and Lykke Guanio-Uluru

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Guest Editors

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About the Editors

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Nina Goga is professor of Children's Literature at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences. Her main research field is children's literature, ecocritical literacy, material ecocriticism, and post-qualitative research. She has published monographies on ants and maps and edited volumes on topics related to children's literature such as *Ecocritical Perspectives on Children's Texts and Cultures: Nordic Dialogues* (2018, co-edited with Lykke Guanio-Uluru, Bjørg Oddrun Hallås, and Aslaug Nyrnes), *Verbal and Visual Strategies in Nonfiction Picturebooks: Theoretical and Analytical Approaches* (2021, co-edited with Sarah Hoem Iversen and Anne-Stefi Teigland), and *The Green Dialogues. Ecocritical Pathways to Children's Literature in Education* (forthcoming 2025, with Marnie Campagnaro, Lea Ferrari, Mariona Graell, Maria Pujol-Valls, Elin Stengrundet, and Gro Ulland).

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Preface

This Reprint of original research articles highlights the topic of environmental protest and rebellion as expressed in literature for children and young adults. Its aim is to contribute to sustaining a focus on environmental and ecocritical thinking and practices.

The present volume comprises contributions from scholars in Ukraine, Finland, Norway, Italy, the UK, Sweden, Belgium, Germany, and Ireland, who all share their unique analyses of literary eco-rebellion written for children and young adults. Each of the articles position themselves in relation to current discussions in the scholarly field of environmental research on children's and YA literatures and it is our hope that this collection of original articles will encourage environmental thinking and educational practices and—by focusing on dialogue, protest, and collaboration—contribute to resisting the dismantling of democratic and academic freedoms that are currently under pressure in many countries.

Nina Goga and Lykke Guanio-Uluru
Guest Editors

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Editorial

Eco-Rebels with a Cause: Introduction to a *Humanities* Special Issue

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In a time when global environmental initiatives might lose traction in the face of armed conflicts and war, it is important to maintain focus on the long-term measures required to protect natural habitats, prevent species loss, and champion environmental justice. By highlighting the topic of environmental protest and rebellion as expressed in literature for children and young adults, this Special Issue seeks to contribute to sustaining such long-term thinking, while also hoping to be, in a modest way, a counterweight to the dismantling of democratic and academic freedoms that are currently under pressure in many countries. The right to dissent of opinion and peaceful protest is the foundation both of healthy democracies and of scientific inquiry. However, while there is strong scientific consensus that human overexploitation of natural resources is a significant factor triggering global warming and climate change (UNESCO n.d.), the implementation of climate change measures is highly politicized. For instance, while the US "played a crucial leadership role in bringing countries together around a specific vision of the [Paris] agreement", the US commitment to the agreement has shifted with the political views of each administration: While rapidly accepted by President Obama, President Trump has withdrawn the US from the agreement while rolling back a number of environmental protections (Wagner and Allan 2020).

In his recent book on ecology and economy in the time of capitalism, human geographer Ståle Holgersen (2024) claims that the climate crisis should be analyzed as a political crisis, since ecology is far too important to be left only to people who love nature. Despite the agreement enshrined in the COP28 declaration to phase out fossil fuel emissions (UN 2023), the continued political acceptance of the capitalist exploitation of human and natural resources remains an obstacle to be overcome. Arguably, the comprehensive action required to mitigate and end the global ecological crisis is still generally lacking. Nevertheless, among children and adolescents globally, and reflected in recent environmentally oriented children's and YA literature, we see a growing commitment to rebellion and protest. This focus is combined with attention to how children and young adults may be heard in ecological, social, ethical, and economic matters that concern them (Nairn 2019; Wahlström et al. 2020; Haugseth and Smeplass 2023).

A literary point of departure for this Special Issue is John Stephen's argument in *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (1992) that no children's book is ideologically neutral:

> On the one hand, the significance deduced from a text—its theme, moral, insight into behaviour, and so on—is never without an ideological dimension or connotation. On the other hand, and less overtly, ideology is implicit in the way the story an audience derives from a text exists as an isomorph of events in the actual

> world: even if the story's events are wholly or partly impossible in actuality, narrative sequences and character interrelationships will be shaped according to recognizable forms, and that shaping can in itself express ideology in so far as it implies assumptions about the forms of human existence (Stephens 1992, p. 2).

As Stephens' analyses demonstrate, language, narrative structure, and character portrayal may all, more or less subtly, take part in communicating (or challenging) cultural and political ideologies. Another scholar who has emphasized and discussed the role of politics in children's literature is Kimberly Reynolds, who in *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (2007) reminds us of the importance of studying "the way that children's literature contributes to the social and aesthetic transformation of culture by, for instance, encouraging readers to approach ideas, issues, and objects from new perspectives and so prepare the way for change" (Reynolds 2007, p. 1).

As some of the contributions to this Special Issue suggest, it may require "rebel readings" or an eco-pedagogical methodology to open such ideological content for young readers and to invite them into dialogue. One current trend in environmentally themed children's literature, particularly for younger readers, seems to be that environmental texts seek to point their young readers towards environmental *action*—prodding them, more or less explicitly, to seek solutions and act on behalf of the environment, thus aiming to incite various forms of eco-rebellion.

In young adult literature, genres such as utopian and dystopian writing that are inherently political have enjoyed sustained popularity in the past few decades, problematizing current political responses to issues like the climate crises, species extinction, and biotechnology while promoting various types of "eco-rebels" and differing forms of eco-rebellion (see for instance Hintz and Ostry 2003; Bradford et al. 2008; Basu et al. 2013; Curry 2013; Day et al. 2014). Notable examples of such problematizing works for young adults are the *Uglies*-series (Westerfield 2005–2007), *The Carbon Diaries* (Lloyd 2008, 2009), and *The Marrow Thieves* (Dimaline 2017). The more recent genre of solar punk fiction draws on science fictional and dystopian roots while explicitly seeking to envision environmentally and socially just futures, in collections such as *Sun Vault; Stories of Solarpunk and Eco-Speculation* (Wagner and Wieland 2017), *Solar Punk: Ecological and Fantastical Stories in a Sustainable World* (Lodi-Ribeiro 2018), and *Ecolution*: *Solar Punk Narratives to Transform Reality* (Verso 2024). An emerging genre, solar punk is a form of collective and generative activism that seeks to actively harness the power of narrative to further sustainable futures—a form of rebellion that aims to provide cultural templates for alternative social and environmental solutions.

We also see representations and explorations of (rebellious) activism in other types of texts addressing children and young adults (June and Abadía 2022; Dåsnes 2022; Hopkinson and So 2020; Amoore 2020). While not all of these directly address environmental topics, postcolonial, feminist, and racial themes are often related to the same power mechanisms that sustain the environmental crisis (McDonough and Wagner 2014; Deszcz-Tryhubczak 2023). In addition to fiction (picturebooks as well as novels), a growing number of biographies depicting activist life, in particular the life of Greta Thunberg, have recently been published and studied (Malpezzi 2024; Moriarty 2021; Martínez García 2020).

In light of these current trends, this Special Issue of *Humanities* understands children's and YA literature as an aesthetic and ethical laboratory and thus as a cultural form of expression where different readers can meet and explore representations of climate and environmental politics and activism. Not necessarily for them to be directed towards a specific ideology, response, or action, but rather to enable them to gain the experience of being taken seriously as critical, reflective, and political beings.

In line with tendencies in current children's and YA literature, where representations and explorations of politics and activism abound, the CfP for this Special Issue, *Eco-rebels with a cause*, was motivated by the right of children and young adults to express and organize themselves and be heard in issues concerning them (see Unicef 1989), and by children's and young adults' environmental involvement on different levels. Inspired by such youthful activism, the aim of the Special Issue is to explore, ethically and aesthetically, new literary ways of foregrounding connections between environmental and political justice that reaches across ideological, species, and scalar boundaries.

The Call for Papers opened for responses along various lines, including, but not limited to, analysis of eco-rebel biographies, eco-rebels in dystopian or utopian YA literature, visual and or interactive representations of eco-rebels in various media, contributions discussing climate and/or social justice, theoretical and methodological reflections on how children's and YA literature may enable critical and collaborative thinking and activism, and on "activist reading" as a method for analyzing political and environmental aspects of children's and YA literature in both classic and contemporary literary texts. The Call for Papers received a number of varied and interesting responses, comprising contributions from scholars in Ukraine, Finland, Norway, Italy, the UK, Sweden, Belgium, Germany, and Ireland, all sharing their unique analyses of literary eco-rebellion written for children and young adults. As will become evident in the presentation of the contributions below, each of these responses position themselves in relation to current discussions in the scholarly field of environmental research on children's and YA literatures in their own ways.

Two of the articles in the Special Issue responded to the call for contributions discussing eco-rebels in dystopian or utopian YA literature by investigating, in different ways, the figure of eco-rebellion in fantastical fiction for young adults. In her article "'You Two Are the Bad Guys!' Intergenerational Equity, Ecophobia, and Ecocentric Card Games in Disney's *Strange World* (2022)", Roberta Grandi focusses on Disney's animation *Strange World* (2022) and argues that it explores the themes of the "energy unconscious", "intergenerational equity", and "ecophobia", in relation to intergenerational justice. Grandi notes how the film centers on three generations of men, each representing different attitudes towards nature, ranging from the colonialist values of the grandfather, Jaeger Clade, who views nature as a hostile force to be conquered, via his son, Searcher, an intensive farmer, who regards nature as a battleground between useful beings and pests, and Ethan, Searcher's teenage son, who adopts an ecocentric perspective. Highlighting these character portraits, Grandi classes *Strange World* as a cli-fi allegory that urges humanity to choose between being parasitic destroyers or symbiotic contributors to ecological recovery, while concluding that the film ultimately presents young viewers with a transformative, ecotopian message.

In "Vegetal Modes of Resistance: Arboreal Eco-Rebellion in *The Lord of the Rings*", Lykke Guanio-Uluru posits that a fictional eco-rebel might be not just a human (child or young adult), but also a plant, revolting against the destruction of its dwelling place. Building on perspectives from critical plant studies that frames plants as active and intentional beings, Guanio-Uluru argues, by way of a literary analysis of three instances of arboreal hostility and rebellion in *The Lord of the Rings*, that Tolkien created a novel kind of eco-rebel, founded on his deep feeling for plants and his acknowledgement of plant agency. This figure of arboreal rebellion, while now over 70 years old, still holds radical and rebellious potential.

Time, not least slow environmental violence, is the starting point for the literary ana-lyses in two other contributions in this Special Issue. In "Slow Violence and Precarious Progress: Picturebooks About Wangari Maathai" Sinéad Moriarty is motivated by Rob Nixon's pursuant to the writing of Kenyan environmentalist and politician Wangari

Maathai as work which captures the notion of slow violence. Moriarty interrogates the extent to which seven illustrated biographies of Maathai capture what Nixon describes as "slow violence"; that is, violence that occurs slowly, over time, and which is often overlooked. The article also introduces the term "precarious progress" to describe the fragile nature of the change initiated after slow violence. Finally, drawing on Val Plumwood's writing on place attachment and "shadow places", Moriarty explores how the Kenyan landscape is depicted as not a mere object but as a subject in these texts, highlighting the way in which they work to foster a consciousness of place in their child readers.

As pointed out by Elizabeth Ritsema in her contribution "Loveable Lack: The Reimagined Wild of 'Real' Bears", the lone polar bear is a popular visual device for expressing the slow violence of climate change. Given the widespread adoption of the polar bear as an emblem of climate change, Ritsema's article addresses how polar bear imagery is translated into modern children's literature as it often draws on cute aesthetics. Cuteness then calls into question how "real" bears have been reimagined into fictional settings and whether relationships between child and bear can provide commentary on inspiring environmental activism. Focusing on Hannah Gold's *The Last Bear* and its sequel, *Finding Bear*, Ritsema sees them as borderline eco-pedagogical texts that highlight the tension created when a typically cute subject is used to encourage environmental activism amongst its younger readerships.

The concept of slow violence is closely linked to ethical dilemmas and questions related to environmental justice, which Kaisu Rättyä focuses on in her article "Eco-Activism and Strategic Empathy in the Novel *Vastakarvaan*". The novel depicts a young Finnish student's ethical dilemma when her eco-anarchist friends are planning an attack on a fur farm that the protagonist's family owns. Rättyä's analysis is grounded in the concept of strategic empathy, exploring the ways in which the emotions and ethical decisions of the protagonist are represented in physical, social, and temporal settings, how types of dissent are presented, and how three types of empathy are represented: bounded strategic empathy, ambassadorial strategic empathy, and broadcast strategic empathy. The analysis demonstrates how the protagonist's dilemma is emphasized in different stages of dissent: her decision to participate in the attack or not is debated on different levels of narration.

Also, in other contributions, new analytical tools are developed and tested. Jonas Vanhove and Simon De Backer's article "Do I Dare to Leave the Universe Alone? Environmental Crisis, Narrative Identity, and Collective Agency in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction" draws on theories from literary studies and sociology to explore the impact of cultural narratives of environmental crisis and destruction on an emerging narrative identity in adolescents represented in young adult literature. They find that although two of the selected novels (*Dry* and *Green Rising*) affirm that narratives of environmental destruction engage the transformational potential of adolescents for society, the third novel (*Snowflake, AZ*) complicates this image by questioning whether the impact of narratives of environmental crisis could be overwhelming for adolescents. The article concludes that the young adolescent protagonists adapt their narrative identity in response to environmental destruction.

While Vanhove and De Backer draw on theories from literary studies and sociology, Corinna Lüdicke presents a linguistic method for analyzing how readers are guided in ecological children's and young adult literature, allowing them to follow and understand the protagonist's change towards becoming an eco-rebel. Her article "The Development of Ecological Identities in Children's Books: A Linguistic Approach to Character Positioning as Eco-Rebels" hypothesizes that the development of an ecological identity, although an individual evolution in the story, is a pattern of ecological children's and young adult literature (CYL). Lüdicke finds that the possibilities for identification that a text offers

its reader must be considered as crucial for the experiences gained within the fiction framework to influence real consciousness and development processes. For the analysis, Lüdicke expands Bamber's identity dilemmatic spaces to include linguistic categories and argues that the construction of the figure of the eco-rebel can be analyzed according to different linguistically based or narrative-based aspects, like speech markings or the development of an agenda.

In addition to the call for theoretical and methodological reflections and exploration, the Call for Papers welcomed activist reading as a method for analyzing both classic and contemporary texts. Two articles in this Special Issue suggest and test what they call rebellious readings. In his article "Allying with Beasts: Rebellious Readings of the Animal as Bridegroom (ATU 425)" Per Esben Svelstad seeks to challenge the patriarchal and anthropocentric value system often assigned to a Western fairy tale tradition. By performing what he calls "rebellious readings", Svelstad emphasizes how the female protagonist relates to her animal bridegroom and other nonhuman actors and discusses the ways in which the female protagonists and their enchanted, beastly husbands become with each other. While Svelstad understands rebellious readings as readings that seek to reinterpret texts in ways that go against the grain of their didactic, hierarchical normativity, Sofia Ahlberg and Suzanne Ericson, in their article "An Emergent Rebellion: Activist Engagement with Ann-Helén Laestadius' Coming-of-Age Novel *Stöld*", see rebellious readings as readers' risk-taking engagement with a text while learning "how to read our world now" in solidarity with the protagonist's struggle for her people's survival within an ecologically and socially just future for all.

Reading with young adults is also at the core of Tetiana Kachak and Tetyana Blyznyuk's article "Eco-Rebels in Contemporary Ukrainian Children's Literature as a Tool for Forming Readers' Eco-Activity". The article analyzes the eco-pedagogical potential of contemporary Ukrainian children's literature through the prism of young eco-rebels. The article further presents the results of a case study using ecocritical dialogues with 26 readers aged 14–15, reading Ukrainian children's literature centered on environmental topics. The dialogues revealed that such literary engagement and dialogue promoted critical thinking, empathy, and personal eco-involvement. The findings confirm that children's literature, when integrated with dialogic and participatory teaching methods, can serve as a powerful tool for shaping environmental literacy and civic responsibility in youth.

Responding to the Call for Papers, all ten articles in this Special Issue in their own way highlight eco-political aspects of children's and young adult literature. Read together, they provide insight into a broad spectrum of European literary texts for children and young adults and discuss a plethora of analytical and eco-pedagogical approaches to working with "eco-rebellious" literature. It is our hope that this collection of articles will inspire researchers and help literary educators to engage with the eco-rebellious potential of children's and young adult literature and help to keep the discussion of sustainable futures alive in times of geopolitical pressure.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Article

"You Two Are the Bad Guys!" Intergenerational Equity, Ecophobia, and Ecocentric Card Games in Disney's *Strange World* (2022)

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Abstract: Disney's *Strange World* (2022) explores the themes of "energy unconscious", "intergenerational equity", and "ecophobia", focusing on the legacy parents leave to their children. The film centers on three generations of men, each representing different attitudes towards nature. Jaeger Clade, the grandfather, embodies colonialist values, viewing nature as a hostile force to be conquered. His son, Searcher, an intensive farmer, sees nature as a battleground between useful beings and pests, focusing on improving society through domestication. In contrast, Ethan, Searcher's teenage son, adopts an ecocentric perspective. His worldview is expressed through the card game Primal Outpost, where he and his friends embrace symbiosis, interconnectedness, and the rejection of the man-nature divide. Ethan is the first to recognize that their ecosystem is a living organism reminiscent of the Gaia Hypothesis, advocating for a paradigm shift that the older generations fail to grasp. The article analyzes *Strange World* as a cli-fi allegory, urging humanity to choose between being parasitic destroyers or symbiotic contributors to ecological recovery. The film, while offering a simplified solution to climate change, presents a comic apocalyptic vision where youth-driven hope for change challenges older, ecophobic attitudes and offers a transformative, ecotopian message.

Keywords: climate fiction; animation cartoon; ecotopia; Gaia hypothesis; energy unconscious; hope

1. Introduction

"Catch!" calls the Once-ler.
He lets something fall.
"'It's a Truffula Seed.
It's the last one of all!
You're in charge of the last of the Truffula Seeds.
And Truffula Trees are what everyone needs.
Plant a new Truffula. Treat it with care.
Give it clean water. And feed it fresh air.
Grow a forest. Protect it from axes that hack.
Then the Lorax
and all of his friends
may come back." (Dr. Seuss 1971, n.pag)

In the famous picturebook—"a testament to the extent to which Anthropocene is already embedded in our collective conscience" (Scott 2018, p. 5)—the Once-ler bequeaths

his legacy to the young protagonist, the boy "who cares a whole awful lot" (Dr. Seuss 1971, n.pag). Today, many still believe that this "wrenchingly sad" (Scott 2018, p. 5) portrait of an anthropogenic post-apocalyptic world could still convey an "empowering" message (Makhijani 2021): "the next generation has to do better than the prior", explains Dr. Seuss Enterprises' president Brandt, and concludes, "We are all the Lorax".

Perhaps it is true. Perhaps our generation has witnessed the world ravaged by the Oncelers and cried out in indignation against the pollution of the air and water and the sufferings of the Bar-ba-loots, the Swomee-Swans, and the Humming Fish (Dr. Seuss 1971). Adopting an extremely effective definition formulated by Weiss in 1984, we could say that the Oncelers, with their worship of extractivism and consumerism, have squandered the "planetary trust", which should obligate "each generation to preserve the diversity of the resource base and to pass the planet to future generations in no worse condition than it receives it" (Weiss 1984, p. 499). If so, however, we—the Loraxes—have done little beyond complaining. And now the boys "who car[e] a whole awful lot" (Dr. Seuss 1971, n.pag) are left with an impoverished "nature capital" (Mintzer and Michel 2001, p. 215) and the unfairly heavy burden of finding the "clean water" and the "fresh air" (Dr. Seuss 1971, n.pag) necessary to regenerate the Truffula forest.

The problem of environmental intergenerational equity (Weiss 1992, p. 616), introduced as early as 1972 during Stockholm's United Nations Conference on the Human Environment—which stated that natural resources "must be safeguarded for the benefit of present and future generations" (United Nations 1973, p. 4)—looms ever more pervasively both in contemporary climate change fiction and activist movements.

Belittled as too young, inexperienced, and idealistic (Roy and Ayalon 2022), the leaders of Fridays for Future keep asking to "uproot the system" (Fridays for Future US n.d.), advocating for climate justice and equity, demanding governments keep the rise in global temperatures below 1.5 °C compared to pre-industrial levels, and urging world leaders to listen to science and "name the crisis as a crisis" (Fopp 2024; Fridays for Future n.d.). They feel "worried, frustrated and angered, as well as anxious about the future" though not hopeless (de Moor et al. 2020, p. 4). They accuse the adults of being "greedy" and "selfish" (Roy and Ayalon 2022, p. 2), yet they are aware that they are "school children who are fighting for [their] right to a livable future"; hence, they know that the "furthest possible extent of their influence involves pressuring governments and global bodies into taking action and holding them accountable" (p. 5).

Since the 1980s, authors of disaster literature and apocalyptic fiction have embraced "pollution, greenhouse gases, and global warming" scenarios in their dystopic narratives (Bradford et al. 2008, p. 7). They have painted frightening fantasies meant to act both as "cautionary tales" (Basu et al. 2013, p. 3) and "to display—in sharp relief—the possibility of utopian change even in the darkest of circumstances". (p. 3). The climate anxiety has spilled into the domain of animation films, where multiracial young heroines, heroes, or non-human protagonists lead rebellions against the adults' inability or refusal to alter their business-as-usual lifestyle, often singlehandedly saving their communities and the environment. From early experiments such as *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* (1992) and *Free Willy* (1993) to more recent works such as *Happy Feet* (2006), *Bee Movie* (2007), *WALL-E* (2008), *The Lorax* (2012), *Moana* (2016), and *Frozen II* (2019) (just to name the most famous), these films align with Leyda's concept of "cli-fi 2.0" (Leyda 2023, p. 32), in that "[b]y representing assertive young heroes whose wider circles of care include multiple generations and racial identities, these screen texts push the boundaries of cli-fi in their mediations of possible futures, while rebuffing the clichés of prior conventions" (Leyda 2023, p. 47).

With its focus on legacy and its representation of the land as a living creature, Disney's *Strange World* (2022) stands out as a powerful example of modern cli-fi 2.0 ani-

mation. This study will show how Disney's work foregrounds themes that are at the center of contemporary debate, such as intergenerational equity and the "energy unconscious" (Yaeger 2011), and, at the same time, functions as a compelling embodiment of Lovelock and Margulis's Gaia hypothesis[1] (Lovelock and Margulis 1974). Indeed, while depicting a utopian world on the verge of collapse, the film incarnates a model of "transformative utopianism" (Bradford et al. 2008, p. 2), in which the voice of the young protagonist—whose ecocentric attitude clashes with the extractivism and the ecophobia of the older generations—is not only heard by the adults but also manages to spur them to take immediate action to achieve the vital "system change" (Cannon 2019) necessary to save the planet.

2. The Film

Directed by Don Hall, Disney's *Strange World* (2022) is a family saga set in a fictional isolated land, Avalonia, a society whose technological progress is powered by a vegetal energy source known as Pando. The film is ambitious and relevant to several contemporary issues like climate change, energy dependency, and the consequences of exploiting natural resources; however, despite positive reviews from both critics and audiences, *Strange World* is, to date, Disney's least successful film of the 21st century, grossing only USD 73.6 million at the global box office and another USD 55 million from TV and streaming against about USD 317.4 million of total expenses (Lang 2023). The film's combination of ecological themes and inclusivity ultimately faced significant challenges in the global marketplace due to cultural resistance and limited marketing (Glass 2022).

One of the most notable aspects of *Strange World* is, indeed, its commitment to embracing diversity and representation. The film portrays a multiracial, integrated society, a "utopian place free of prejudice" (Woods—visual development artist in Reyes Lancaster (Jones et al. 2022, p. 45)), led by a competent female character, Callisto Mal. However, it is the choice of Ethan Clade as the film's protagonist, a gay teenage boy "who is freely himself without any idea that he should be anything but who he is" (p. 45), that sparked the most discussion. Ethan's identity is not a peripheral or subtextual element, as has been the case with many of Disney's previous LGBTQ+ characters. Instead, his "crush" (Hall 2022) for another male character, Diazo, is openly portrayed, making it the first time Disney has featured "a gay teen romance" in one of its animation films (Rude 2022).

While this representation has been celebrated by many, it also posed significant marketing and distribution challenges. The explicit depiction of Ethan's sexuality meant that the film faced bans or restrictions in several conservative countries, particularly, but not uniquely, in regions with strong Islamic values (according to Lang (2023), the film was not released in "all the Middle East, China, Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Turkey, Vietnam, East Africa (Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya), West Africa (Nigeria, Ghana), Maldives, Nepal, and Bangladesh. The film was not submitted for theatrical release in Russia either"). Furthermore, conservative parents in other parts of the world voiced their disapproval, leading to widespread calls for boycotts. For example, a US Christian blog so warned their readers: "Christian parents, be ready. We should be aware of these films not only in a defensive way (prohibiting our kids from watching), but in a way that prompts proactive resistance to the cultural values they embody" (McCraken 2022). The controversy surrounding *Strange World*'s inclusivity was further exacerbated when a local incident in Florida made the headlines: in 2023, a teacher from Hernando County School District faced disciplinary action after showing the film in a fifth-grade classroom. The teacher was accused of violating Florida's "Don't Say Gay" law, which prohibits discussion of LGBTQ+ topics in educational settings (Bekiempis 2023; Hernandez 2023; Walker 2023).

The focus of this study, however, is not the film's commitment to diversity or the ensuing controversies[2], but instead it is its functioning as an "ecodrama" (Clarke 2022)[3]. *Strange World* seems to begin where most films would end: the storyline follows a father-son duo who dedicate their lives to finding a way to cross the impenetrable mountains that isolate their country, Avalonia, from the rest of the world. In their last expedition, the son discovers an electric plant, which he names Pando, and he envisions a future for their people fueled by this new energy source. The father, Jaeger Clade, blinded by ambition, vanishes among the peaks, while the son, Searcher, returns home to establish a technologically advanced society powered by the newfound green and renewable electricity provided by the plant. All this, in *Strange World*, takes place during the first 6 min. The rest of the film is about what happens 25 years later, in a society totally transformed by the easily available electric energy supplied by Pando.

According to director Don Hall, the idea for *Strange World* originated when he heard his "two sons, thirteen and ten at the time, and some other kids [talk] about climate change. Climate change wasn't real, the other kids claimed. A hoax, they said. My sons countered with logic and facts, and ultimately, the argument ended with neither side convincing the other" (Jones et al. 2022, p. 8). He continues, adding, "I began to think deeply about the world I inherited from my dad, a farmer, and more important, the world my sons will inherit from me. The seed of a story was planted that day" (p. 8). From his words it appears evident that Hall's core idea of focusing the film on the motif of "fathers, sons, and legacy" (p. 9) is intrinsically connected to the theme of climate change and to the purpose of using "entertainment to allow [Disney's] audience to absorb complex social issues" and tell "a story that deals with humankind's relationship with the planet" (p. 9).

3. Bringing the Energy Unconscious to the Fore

We live in an age—perhaps not for much longer—in which we can enjoy the privilege of taking fuel for granted, relying on the "touch-a-switch-and-it's-light magic of electrical power" (Yaeger 2011, p. 309). And, as "the idea of energy has been growing increasingly abstract" (Scott 2018, p. 5), we easily—and gladly—forget that "human condition directly relates to fuel sources" (p. 7). This tendency to overlook energy's role extends to fiction as well. But what if we concentrated our attention specifically on that aspect? In her 2011 PMLA Editor's Column, Yaeger, inspired by Jameson's elaboration of the concept of the "Political Unconscious" (Jameson 2007) and driven by the desire to make "energy sources a matter of urgency to literary criticism" (Yaeger 2011, p. 306), introduced the idea of the "Energy Unconscious". She argued that "energy invisibilities may constitute different kinds of erasures" (p. 309) in narrative and that "thinking about literature through the lens of energy, especially the fuel basis of economies, means getting serious about modes of production as a force field for culture" (p. 308).

Strange World does precisely this: it foregrounds the energy source Avalonia relies on, revealing how its society is entirely dependent on the *cultivation*—read *extraction*—of its prodigious energy source. However, what begins as a utopian view of green power quickly reveals a darker reality: Pando's "clean" electricity is actually on the verge of destroying the protagonists' world. According to Don Hall and Qui Nguyen, cowriters of the screenplay, the story's climactic twist was one of their earliest ideas, and it was sparked by a question: "Imagine you discovered that you're living on the back of a living thing, and what you're doing is harming that—what would you do?" (Hall in Radulovic 2022a). From this prompt they developed an analogy for fossil fuels: an energy source that seems to foster human technology and prosperity but, as the protagonists discover, is also irreparably damaging the environment.

In order to make the narrative structure less easily predictable, they asked themselves, "How do we disguise it and slowly reveal that it's an environmental film?" (Hall in Edwards 2022). Enter Pando[4], the "miracle plant" (Hall in Jones et al. 2022, p. 34), which produces renewable energy and whose pods (visually inspired by Brussel sprouts), unlike oil, can be used directly as batteries, do not need to be processed, do not pollute, and produce no waste. The intensive cultivation of Pando still requires regular crop dusting against parasites, but the film initially downplays this detail, and the spectator is easily (mis)led to believe in Avalonia's utopia. Searcher's farm is depicted as one of those "quaint, charming, and bucolic" (Jones et al. 2022, p. 28) homesteads that can be "traditionally found in the Alps" (p. 29), and the family's portrait could not be more idyllic. Only when a strange illness begins affecting the crops, prompting the protagonists to follow the plant's roots underground, do they discover that Pando is, in fact, a parasitic plant whose roots—gnarled, invasive, and pulsating with an ominous green electric energy—are drawing power from the vital force of a massive creature: a giant turtle on whose back Avalonian civilization has developed. *Strange World* thus mirrors the classic pattern of "exuberance and catastrophe" in science fiction (Buell 2012, pp. 292–93). This twist forces the protagonists to confront the consequences of their energy dependency and to take action.

By making the relationship between human condition and fuel sources "overt and explicit", (Scott 2018, p. 7), *Strange World* brings our society's energy unconscious to the fore, unmasking the process of energy extraction and making of Avalonia "the perfect allegory for our planet" (Roy Conli—producer, in Jones et al. 2022, p. 16). Indeed, the film draws a parallel between the way Avalonians are draining the ecosystem's power through Pando roots and the way we extract the "energy stored from the photosynthesis of Carboniferous-era trees" (Scott 2018, p. 5)—alias coal—as well as the "braised biomass" made of "green algae from ancient seas" (p. 178)—alias oil. Viewed through this lens, then, Avalonia's Pando-culture may be seen as another form of "Petroculture" (Grewe-Volpp 2020), that is, a society whose "economy, politics, and culture" (p. 273) have been shaped by a "hegemonic form of energy" (p. 273) and that now must envision "a future with more sustainable energy sources, more muscle power, and savvy technological inventions" (p. 276).

4. Screening Ecophobia: The Older Generations

In Disney's *Strange World*, the portrayal of the older generations through the characters of Jaeger and Searcher Clade serves to focus attention on colonization, extractivism, and the entrenched anthropocentrism that guides the exploitation of the environment. The film's intergenerational story is marked by differing perspectives on nature, reflecting the evolution of nature-culture frameworks, from the celebration of the "progress paradigm" (McKinley 2008, pp. 320–21) through ecophobia and apocalypticism to the espousal of the Gaia Hypothesis (Lovelock and Margulis 1974) at the end of the story. Jaeger Clade, the grandfather, represents the expansionist, colonial stance, while his son Searcher, as a farmer, embodies a modern everyman full of good intentions and unaware of his active role in destroying the planet.

Jaeger, the quintessential adventurer, is modeled on what Leyda calls the "white/father hero trope" (2023). Don Hall, the film's director, and Jin Kim, the art director, note that Jaeger was created as the archetypal "ultimate man" and "macho" (Jones et al. 2022, pp. 14, 18), a towering figure with a strong, imposing physique, large mustache, body hair everywhere, complete with a machete, climbing ropes, and, later on, a flamethrower. The film opens with a musical sequence that presents, through a series of 'cartoony gags', the daring and exuberance of this character, who is visually conceived as a mix of elements

from Miyazaki's films and Franco-Belgian comics. His name, which translates to "hunter", hints at his identity as an aggressive conqueror of the natural world, someone who views wilderness not as something to coexist with but as an adversary to be subdued.

Jaeger's relationship with the environment seems to be directly linked with the colonial mindset described by scholars like Soper (1998) and Plumwood (1993, 2003), who argue that "the concept of colonization can be applied directly to non-human nature itself, and that the relationship between humans, or certain groups of them, and the more-than-human world might be aptly characterized as one of colonization" (Plumwood 2003, p. 52). In her seminal study on children's fiction published in 1984, Rose associates the evolution of the boy's adventure story genre, beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century, with the colonial stance, "which assumed that discovering or seeing the world was the same thing as controlling it" (Rose 1984, p. 9) and that, as such, still influences modern adventure stories for children. This ideology promotes an ambivalent attitude towards nature, seeing it both as primitive and irrational yet "treacherous" (Soper 1998, p. 71), friend and foe, "a 'virgin' terrain ripe for penetration" (pp. 104–5), awaiting to be "tamed and tilled in agriculture" (p. 103). Seen in this light, Jaeger's approach not only epitomizes his attempt to dominate and exploit his environment but also prefigures the actions of his son, Searcher.

Moreover, Jaeger's view of nature reflects an attitude that Estok defines as "ecophobia" (2018, p. 1), a term identifying a psychological condition that determines a spectrum of dispositions towards the natural environment including "fear, contempt, indifference, or lack of mindfulness (or some combination of these)" (Estok 2018, p. 1). If we accept Estok's hypothesis, that is, that ecophobia is an evolutionary survival mechanism embedded in our genes, then Jaeger's relentless drive to dominate and antagonize elements of the natural world that he perceives as threatening appears not only perfectly plausible but even justified. First, he is convinced that Avalonia's future—and his glory—lie beyond the "deadly peaks" (Hall 2022) that surround it; hence, he feels compelled to conquer them. Later, after penetrating inside their subterranean "labyrinth where everything's alive" (Hall 2022), he is forced to fight against those creatures alone for 25 years. His hostility towards what he considers "mindless monsters", then, does not come as a surprise.

The consequence of ecophobia, however, is that it can easily turn into an "irrational" fear (Estok 2018, p. 1) that "allows humanity to do bad things to the natural world". (p. 11). According to Estok, this fear may lie at the root of both the extensive damage humans have inflicted on the environment and also their reluctance to implement those changes that are necessary to prevent the impending catastrophe. A catastrophe that in *Strange World* is only hinted at and then narrowly avoided but that, instead, is fully depicted in its worldwide, destructive, and irredeemable impact in the apocalyptic cli-fi *The Day After Tomorrow* (Emmerich 2004). The casting choices of Dennis Quaid and Jake Gyllenhaal as father and son in both films seem to evoke, in Disney's animation, the specter of climate-induced disaster without needing to explicitly bring it again on stage.

The character of Searcher Clade, with his tighter bond with the environment and his choice to devote his life to Pando, challenges our everyday extractive practices. While Jaeger's worldview is defined by exploration and domination, Searcher's identity as a farmer and devoted husband and father presents him as the ideal humanist man. His greatest desire is the progress of his society, the civilization he has contributed to shape through his discovery of Pando, and he is genuinely convinced of the righteousness of his intentions.

However, Searcher's approach still falls within the ecophobic spectrum. He views nature primarily through a utilitarian lens, distinguishing between plants and animals he can domesticate and those he deems pests to be eradicated. He and his wife, Meridian,

routinely crop-dust Pando to protect it from parasites (describing this as "giving the field some extra love" (Hall 2022)), and he has no hesitation in spraying Pando dust to exterminate the underground creatures that, as he later finds out, are actually part of the giant turtle's immune system. His role as a farmer reflects an anthropocentric utilitarianism, which focuses on taming and controlling the environment for human benefit—a mindset that, though more subtle than his father's, still perpetuates the ingrained dualism between man and nature. Searcher can be seen as a representation of the middle generation, caught between the older generation's colonial mindset and the newer generation's growing awareness of ecological interdependence.

These perspectives on nature align with research on climate-related decision-making in the present time. Roy and Ayalon (2022) discuss how older generations, often holding political and economic power, tend to make decisions prioritizing immediate gains over long-term ecological consequences. This generational "myopia" (Davidson 2017) is evident in Jaeger's unchecked adventurism and Searcher's intensive farming practices, both of which serve their own immediate needs but inadvertently threaten the ecological balance that future generations should be able to rely upon. The dualistic logic of the domination of man over nature applies to both Jaeger and Searcher: Jaeger's colonial mentality turns nature into an arena for his heroism, while Searcher's farming transforms it into a battleground of productivity and pest control. In both cases, the natural world is seen as something to be utilized or fought against, not engaged with as a living entity with intrinsic value.

5. Ecocentrism at Play: The New Generation

The attitude towards the natural world of the younger generation, instead, is depicted in the film as radically different from the ecophobic/extractivist stance described above, and it mirrors what has been observed about contemporary teenagers by scholars such as Roy and Ayalon (2022), who describe this generation as "those who are expected to spend more than half of their lives adapting to climate change and whose futures are likely to be shaped significantly by irreversible environmental degradation". They are Dr. Seuss's boys "who car[e] a whole awful lot" (1971), with an activism driven not by choice but by necessity. Groups like Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, and Climate Youth (just to name the most popular) share the common feeling that the clock is ticking and that immediate action to save the planet cannot be postponed any longer. As the screenwriters maintain, in Disney's *Strange World* the character of Ethan—"a modern teenager" (Nguyen in Jones et al. 2022, p. 44)—is directly inspired by "young environmental activists" (p. 44) and, as such, represents a generational shift in environmental consciousness, embodying a deeply ecocentric worldview distinct from that of his father and grandfather.

Ethan's journey is emblematic of adolescent fiction's focus on the "formation of subjectivity" (Bradford et al. 2008, p. 12), which constructs "narratives of personal growth or maturation, stories about relationships between the self and others and between individuals and society" (p. 12). This development is central to Ethan's identity as he positions himself against his father's model while feeling a pull towards becoming an explorer like Jaeger Clade, the famous grandfather he has never met. His search for identity, however, does not imply that his personality is fickle or mutable. On the contrary, as his name seems to indicate—Ethan meaning "strength" or "firmness" in Hebrew—the boy possesses solid and mature values and convictions. First, he demonstrates a clear awareness of the importance of creating meaningful, healthy relationships, dismissing his grandfather's dated romantic advice as "toxic". Second, his ecocentric mindset appears firmly formed early on when, as his father chides him for not

clearing the field, he advocates for the weeds' right to survival: "Father, what is a weed other than a plant growing somewhere that you find inconvenient?" (Hall 2022).

Ethan shares his set of beliefs—which envision planetary coexistence rooted in mutual respect and understanding—with his peers, and together they reinforce their common cultural values by engaging in the fantasy role-playing card game Primal Outpost. The game—which, according to visual development artist Cory Loftis, "could actually be played" (Jones et al. 2022, p. 80)—reflects the biophilic and non-violent ethos Ethan and his friends embrace[5]. The objective of Primal Outpost, indeed, is not to conquer or destroy but to build a sustainable civilization and live harmoniously with the environment, challenging the traditional narrative arc of good versus evil. In what seems a filler scene of the film, Ethan attempts to teach his father and grandfather how to play. However, the adults' instinctual response is to try to destroy the creatures they perceive as threats, not realizing that even an unseemly "monster" like the "demon spider" (Hall 2022) can play a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance. Unable to see past traditional ecophobic bias, they cannot grasp a reality where "there are no bad guys". Frustrated, Ethan bursts, "You want bad guys? Fine. You two are the bad guys!" This remark, though apparently only an emotional response, actually underscores a critical point: humanity's hostility towards nature positions it as the planet's true "foe". This perspective resonates with a recurring idea of environmental movements, from the EarthFirst! eco-terrorists who considered humans as viruses (Klaus 1990) to Fridays for Future US's recent campaign "Aliens", which highlights how the damage inflicted by human activities such as greenhouse gases and carbon dioxide emissions, deforestation, and overfishing is "far more dangerous to the future of our planet than any aliens could ever be" (Fridays for Future US n.d.). It also evokes broader calls for intergenerational equity where "extending human rights to non-humans and even to ecosystems" (Cannon 2019) becomes central to redefining our relationship with the natural world. Ethan's refusal to frame nature as an adversary exemplifies this alternative worldview, recognizing that the path to sustainability is through mutual respect and balance, not domination.

The relevance of Primal Outpost in the film should not be overlooked. In their insightful study of youth activism, O'Brien et al. (2018) identify three ways in which contemporary youth are expressing dissent about climate change. Dutiful dissent, which operates within established systems without directly challenging core power structures and focuses on policy reform; disruptive dissent, actively contesting norms and policies through actions like protests and boycotts; and dangerous dissent, which envisions alternative systems, creating new structures that bypass existing frameworks. This latter form of dissent is precisely what Avalonian teenagers are exploring through Primal Outpost: they are challenging deep-seated power and economic norms and laying the groundwork for transformative change. By rejecting the ecophobic paradigms of his father and grandfather, Ethan subverts the traditional ideologies they hold dear, in effect embodying a form of everyday activism by championing the values of cooperation and respect for the ecosystem.

Recent studies on role-playing interactive games—*Pokémon Go*, for instance, in both its traditional trading-card version and in its more recent AR smartphone form—explore how these games may either threaten young generations' already weak relationship with nature (Dorward et al. 2017), a phenomenon known as the "extinction of experience" (Callahan et al. 2019), or, if creatively used with conservation goals in mind, offer enormous potential for "increasing eco-literacy regarding local biodiversity, raising awareness of environmental issues" (Callahan et al. 2019) and, more importantly, increasing positive affect through virtual engagement (Fletcher 2017). As Weik von Mossner (2017) argues in her study on affective ecologies, "embodied

cognition plays an important role in the simulation of social experience and moral understanding" (p. 3) and thus holds particular relevance for "theoretical and practical investigations of environmental narratives and the emotional responses they cue in readers and viewers" (p. 3). Ecotopian fiction—novels, films, animations, series, and even games—may act as an "imaginary training ground where we can habituate ourselves to experiencing more sustainable lifestyles" (Weik von Mossner 2017, p. 189). Indeed, the final outcome of *Strange World*, with its radical abandonment of Pando-fuel and its conversion from intensive agriculture to sustainable farming, does not appear too far from the "end of capitalism" invoked during school climate strikes (Cannon 2019) or the postdevelopment and anticonsumerist philosophies of degrowth movements, which were "launched as a challenge to continuous economic growth, with the goal of realizing a voluntary societal shrinking of production and consumption consistent with social and ecological sustainability" (O'Brien et al. 2018, p. 8).

In her ecofeminist study of young adult fiction, Curry (2013) observes that such stories, especially those depicting "radically ruptured post-apocalyptic societies" (p. 1), "attempt to develop a sustainable ethic of care that can encompass such 'feminised' peoples and spatialities, including nonhumans and the environment" (p. 1). In *Strange World*, Ethan's stance encourages the audience to recognize that young adults "occupying that threshold preceding integration into adult systems of social and political responsibility are in an especially privileged position to engender change" (Curry 2013, p. 197) and that, for this reason, their voice should be heard and heeded.

6. Conclusions: From Aliens to Symbionts

In *Strange World*, Disney takes the viewer on a journey that unfolds from within a vast, interconnected living organism. The colorful "junglelike landscape" (Jones et al. 2022, p. 87) reproduces the organs of a gigantic body, with a bronchial system—the "Windy Jungle" (p. 93)—characterized by pink and magenta mangrove-like breathing trees, an acid-yellow and green "Burning Sea" (p. 97) (which represents the stomach), and a "Petrified Cave" (p. 108) where the creature's heart is trapped in Pando's mortal clutch. As the protagonists venture beneath the mountains and into the underground to follow Pando's roots, they encounter a complex ecosystem of life forms, whose colors and shapes are meant to convey the "under-the-sea feel" of marine organisms (p. 142). Some of these creatures are indifferent, while others are aggressively hostile. However, the characters eventually come to understand that these "monsters" (p. 142) represent the immune system of the enormous being that hosts them and that they are fighting to eliminate the parasitic plant that human intensive cultivation has unwittingly strengthened, making it dangerous to the ecosystem. This immersive exploration climaxes when the protagonists escape the organism's body and discover its full form: an enormous turtle carrying the mountains, forests, and the entire civilization of Avalonia on its back. This image draws from the Algonquian and Iroquoian legend of Turtle Island, "an icon of life itself" (Robinson and Filice 2018), which supports the world.

Together with its mythological roots, this portrayal also clearly recalls the Gaia Hypothesis developed by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis in the early 1970s. According to this hypothesis, "the total ensemble of living organisms which constitute the biosphere can act as a single entity" (Lovelock and Margulis 1974, p. 3) to sustain environmental homeostasis. As Lovelock and Margulis suggest, Gaia functions like an adaptive control system, balancing atmospheric and ecological conditions to support life. Sagan and Margulis further described Gaia as the "nexus and nest" (Sagan and Margulis 1993, p. 350) of all global life, claiming that the "planetary surface [should be] seen as body rather

than place" (p. 350). Soon after the film's release, Marder criticized this depiction, asserting that it privileges the organized animal form—where all parts "serv[e] the needs of the whole" (Marder 2022)—over the "uncontrollable, exuberant, anarchic proliferation of plants", thereby promoting a fascist "totalitarian logic extending all the way to biology" (Marder 2022). However, through its integrated portrayal of life on our planet, *Strange World* transforms Earth's ecosystem into a living character, embodying in a tangible, visible creature the urgency of humanity's critical choice: to continue acting as a parasitic force that harms its host or to embrace a symbiotic relationship that protects its existence.

In *Strange World*, the generational divide in understanding environmental crisis is starkly portrayed through the characters' interactions within Primal Outpost. In the scene already mentioned above, Ethan repeatedly asserts that there are "no bad guys" in the game, a notion that the adults Jaeger and Searcher dismiss with a meta-filmic comment: "What kind of game has no bad guys?/That's just poor storytelling" (Hall 2022). Their reaction reveals a mindset rooted in ecophobia, which insists on the antagonism between man and nature. In her 1986 essay, Le Guin (2019, p. 728) describes this kind of narrative as the "killer's story", the one that focuses on "bashing, thrusting, raping, killing", and on a hero who needs "a stage or a pedestal or a pinnacle" (p. 729)—a man just like Jaeger's Clade, whose burning ambition is to conquer Avalonia's unsurmountable peaks. The older generation, accustomed to narratives defined by clear conflicts of good versus evil and zero-sum games, simply "don't get this game" (Hall 2022). For Ethan, instead, Primal Outpost's design is intuitive, mirroring his worldview of interconnectedness and symbiosis—"In layers of history, layers of biology, layers of naturecultures, complexity is the name of our game" says Haraway (2008, p. 16).

This tension between generations mirrors the broader ecological crisis we face, where many continue to cling to the old framework of struggle and sacrifice, typical of the tragic apocalyptic scenarios that have been part of our cultural tradition since the dawn of time. Garrard explains that tragic apocalyptic narratives, with their "counterposition of good and evil (friends and enemies)" (2004, p. 87), lead to feelings of helplessness and disengagement "since action is likely to seem merely gestural in the face of eschatological history" (p. 87). In this context, the repeated emphasis on "doom and gloom" messages (Arnold 2018)—prominent in both news and climate fiction—is paralyzing and discourages people from believing in their capacity to effect change. This is based on the psychological distinction between an internal and external *locus* of control (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002, p. 243): people with an external *locus* of control feel powerless in the face of vast, abstract crises like climate change and, consequently, are less likely to take meaningful action, as they believe themselves to be deprived of agency.

Just after the story's climax, when Ethan and Searcher have seen the turtle and attempt to explain what they have discovered to the others—*in primis* Avalonia's leader, Callisto Mal—the film briefly seems to adhere to the structure of tragic apocalypse. For about ten minutes, Callisto resists, even imprisoning the Clades, refusing to accept the evidence and alter course, "I don't know what you think you saw. But we came down here to save Pando. That plan hasn't changed" (Hall 2022)—a dynamic embodied by leaders all over the world that we, unfortunately, are still witnessing today. However, when finally facing the evident reality of the organism's existence and the way Pando is draining its life, Callisto, along with the rest of the crew, accepts the truth and rises to the new challenge of leading her people through a period of drastic sacrifices.

Strange World depicts a society where everyone, across generations, contributes to the common effort, suggesting that meaningful environmental change cannot be achieved by one age group alone but requires a unified commitment. The film's ending reinforces its message by fast-forwarding to a year later, when Avalonia is transitioning to

sustainable practices such as wind power and diversified agriculture. This solar-punk vision (McIntosh 2023; Norton-Kertson 2023) highlights the potential for systemic change when leaders and citizens work together. Meanwhile, Ethan and his friends take on roles as symbionts, no longer seen as alien threats by the immune system but instead accepted as active contributors to the ecosystem's recovery. Their practical activism and volunteer work inside the turtle's organism embody a regenerative relationship that sustains both Avalonia and the natural world. Granted, with its "quick fix", the film grossly simplifies the transition—omitting complex issues like economic upheaval or societal resistance—but the message remains impactful: as Roy and Ayalon (2022) effectively summarize, "to address climate change today, it is the current older generations that are expected to make sacrifices for a future of which they will not be a part".

This symbiotic turn in *Strange World* contrasts with the "doom and gloom" messages (Arnold 2018) and the "shock tactics" (McKinley 2008) that paralyze or overwhelm the public, while ultimately foregrounding a narrative of hope. The shift away from tragic apocalypticism towards what Garrard calls a "comic apocalypse" (Garrard 2004) acknowledges human fallibility while celebrating the potential for corrective action, engendering an internal *locus* of control (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002) that motivates rather than discourages. As Arnold (2018) points out, even though "the solution part of the story" may not be "as dramatic" and "smacks of advocacy", it is precisely what we need right now: a sense of agency coupled with a sense of urgency because, as Nairn (2019) showed in her study on the collectivization of hope and despair, "[h]ope can act as a catalyst for individuals and collectives to pursue social change" (p. 438). Indeed, if the environmental crisis is also "a crisis of representation" (Kerridge and Sammells 1998, p. 4), then, as Weik von Mossner convincingly maintains, "[w]hat we might really need is more critical ecotopias that imagine the way from here to there, eliciting not only desire for a more just and sustainable world, but also the hope that we can achieve it" (Weik von Mossner 2017).

Hope should be the new byword for the future, and fantastic fiction like *Strange World* can play an important role in providing humanity with "stories that articulate visions of hope for the biosphere" (Oziewicz et al. 2022). In presenting a Gaia-like world, the film underscores that today's human community is facing a choice: to be parasitic destroyers or to become symbiotic allies in a fragile web of life. By envisioning this scenario within a framework of comic, rather than tragic, apocalypse, *Strange World* succeeds in cultivating a narrative of hope, urging its audience to recognize that our choices today may indeed shape a better future, perhaps not for ourselves but for the younger generations and the diverse life forms with which we share this planet. Indeed, as Ethan concludes his letter to his father at the end of the film, we need to convince ourselves that "the best legacy we can leave is making a present worth opening tomorrow" (Hall 2022).

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Notes

[1] The Gaia Hypothesis, proposed by Lovelock and Margulis (1974), suggests that the Earth's biosphere acts as a self-regulating system, maintaining conditions suitable for life. It emphasizes the concept of symbiosis, where living organisms cooperate and

interact with their inorganic surroundings to form a complex, evolving system. This symbiotic relationship helps stabilize the climate and environment, highlighting the interconnectedness of all life and its role in shaping the planet.

[2] In 2022, the same year Disney released *Strange World*, the company also found itself in a contentious battle with Senator Ted Cruz and other conservatives over Florida's Parental Rights in Education Act, often referred to as the "Don't Say Gay" bill. The dispute escalated to the point of legal action (Panella 2023). While Disney's efforts to promote diversity have frequently been criticized as awkward or superficial (Smith 2022), its policies for inclusive hiring and representation continue to face strong opposition from conservatives (O'Neil 2022). Perhaps one of the most balanced assessments of Disney's inclusivity policy comes from Steve Rose: "Maybe Disney doesn't have to pick a side. The Republicans' current tactics feel like an attempt to turn back the clock—ironically to an era and a set of values Disney once embodied. But Disney is compelled to look in the opposite direction, led by a market that is increasingly global, young, and diverse. While Disney's centrism can be seen cynically as playing both sides or more generously as catering to all tastes, the important thing is that the 'center' has shifted considerably during the company's lifetime—and Disney has moved with it" (Rose 2022).

[3] Disney's *Strange World* is far from the company's first foray into environmental storytelling. From classics like *Bambi* and *The Lion King* to *Pocahontas*, *Wall-E*, *Moana*, and *Frozen II*, Disney's films (and documentaries) have long conveyed themes of respect for nature and the interconnectedness of life (Dorn 2024). Nonetheless, the company's environmental impact, including water and air pollution, plastic consumption, and carbon footprint from film productions, theme parks, and merchandising, has often been scrutinized and criticized (Ely 2022; Green Digest 2024). In recent years, however, Disney has pledged to achieve goals like zero waste, net-zero emissions, renewable energy use, and water conservation (Disney Impact 2020). While some experts view these efforts as genuine steps toward corporate responsibility, others remain skeptical, questioning whether they amount to greenwashing (IPE 2016; Pearce 2009; Pro 2022; Wood 2022).

[4] As a matter of fact, Pando (which, in Latin, means "I expand") is the name of a real organism: a massive aspen clone (Populus tremuloides) located in central Utah. Just like the film's plant, though appearing as separate trees, all share a massive, interconnected root system, making Pando the world's largest tree, spanning 106 acres, weighing about 6000 tonnes, and potentially up to 9000 years old (DeWoody et al. 2008; FriendsofPando.org n.d.).

[5] Primal Outpost is conceived as a blend of elements from popular board games like Settlers of Catan and trading card games such as *Magic: The Gathering* and the *Pokémon TCG* (Bassil 2022). In Primal Outpost, players "must work together to establish a settlement in the wilderness, learning to cooperate with the environment" (Radulovic 2022b). Cory Loftis, the visual development artist, devised the game as fully playable (Jones et al. 2022, p. 80), perhaps in the hope of repeating the success of *Onwards*, Disney's fantasy film released in 2020, whose board game *Quests of Yore* is still on the market.

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humanities

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Article

Vegetal Modes of Resistance: Arboreal Eco-Rebellion in *The Lord of the Rings*

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Abstract: This article posits that a fictional eco-rebel might be not just a human (child or young adult), but also a plant, revolting against the destruction of its dwelling place. The argument is furthered by way of a literary analysis of arboreal agency in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, building on perspectives from critical plant studies. Departing from a closer look at the etymological roots of the term "eco-rebel", the article highlights previous work on plants in Tolkien's epic, with an emphasis on trees, before engaging in close reading and analysis of three instances of arboreal hostility and rebellion in *The Lord of the Rings*. Ultimately, the article argues that Tolkien has created a novel kind of eco-rebel, with a basis in his acknowledgement of plant agency.

Keywords: fantasy; ecocriticism; critical plant studies; J. R. R. Tolkien; arboreal rebellion

1. Plants as Eco-Rebels—A Fantasy?

Can plants be eco-rebels, revolting against the destruction of their *oikos*, or dwelling place? An affirmative response to this question would require a view of plants as conscious and agential beings—as well as an extension of the more common meanings of the word rebel.

Etymologically, the word rebel is derived from the Latin "bellare", to wage war, with the prefix "re-", signifying "opposite" or "against"—and from the 1300s, a rebel denoted anyone "resisting an established or rightful government or law", becoming an "insurrectionist" and thus lawless (*Online Etymology Dictionary* n.d.b). More recently, the term is used about someone who exhibits "open or determined defiance of or resistance to any authority, controlling power, or convention" (*Oxford English Dictionary* n.d.b). The modern use thus metaphorically extends the reference of "rebel" to encompass the defiance not just of religious or governmental authority but also of social conventions. In this extended sense, a rebel is anyone who challenges prevalent norms. While one might hesitate to say that actual plants live according to social norms, *fictional* plants at least may sometimes display defiance of the norms and behaviour of human or human-like characters. This is the case, as I will argue, in J. R. R. Tolkien's epic fantasy, *The Lord of the Rings*, first published in 1954–1955 (Tolkien [1954–1955] 2005), and—more violently—in John Wyndham's post-apocalyptic novel, *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), which popularized the trope of the bio-engineered monster plant (a figure reappearing, for instance, in M. R. Cary's recent young adult fiction, *The Book of Coli*, from 2020 (see Hind 2024).

While rebels may champion various causes, eco-rebels more specifically rebel to protect and defend the environment. The definition of the prefix "eco-" in the *Online Etymology Dictionary* (n.d.a) as a "word-forming element referring to the environment *and man's relation to it*" (my emphasis) signals how language use tends to issue from a

human-centric perspective, even as the entry mentions that "eco-" is abstracted from the word "ecology", coined by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel in 1873 to denote "a branch of science dealing with the relationship of living things [in general] to their environments".

Is a plant a "living thing"? This depends, as is often the case, on whom you ask. In Genesis, to take an example from a culturally significant text, vegetation sprouts from the land on the second day of creation, while it was not until the fourth day that "God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing" (Gen. 2.21), indicating that plants are not considered among the living. This exclusion of plants from the realm of the living recurs in the story of the Flood, where God proclaims to Noah that he will "destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it" (Gen. 6.17) but also tasks Noah to save "two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you" (Gen. 6. 19). Consequently, Noah fills his ark, but, as Matthew Hall remarks, takes no plants (Hall 2011, p. 59). Apparently, there is no need, as God only intends to destroy "all life". It follows that if plants are not among the living, they cannot have any "relationship to their environments"—and thus cannot be eco-rebels. (But as we know, an olive branch at least survives the flood.)

The *Oxford English Dictionary* observes that "eco-" more recently not just refers to the field of biology but has taken on the meaning of "environmental", that is "of, or relating to the natural environment" (*Oxford English Dictionary* n.d.a). This delimitation of "environmental" as a reference to the "natural environment" is significant here, since it posits a distinction between human-made and natural environments, reserving the term "eco-", in the sense of "environmental", for references to the "natural environment". The *Oxford English Dictionary* further highlights two main meanings of "eco-": (a) It is used in compound words "[d]enoting (instances of) environmental damage, esp. resulting from human activity" and (b) it is used to denote "people, activities, organizations, etc., dedicated to opposing damage to the environment" (*Oxford English Dictionary* n.d.a). Here, the "etc." leaves some interpretive space regarding whom or what the agent exhibiting "open or determined defiance" against damage to the natural environment resulting from human agency might be—allowing me to posit that an eco-rebel might be a plant, if one concedes that plants have agency, and may have plans of their own.

Agential plants have long featured in myth and folklore, and a view of plants as "persons" prevails in some indigenous traditions (Kimmerer 2003; Hall 2011), even as both Chistian myth and the Western intellectual tradition tend to disregard plant life—the latter is demonstrated by Jeffrey A. Nealon in *Plant Theory: Biopower & Vegetable Life* (2016), where he, surveying the Western philosophical tradition, finds a "strange and consistent elision of plants within the voluminous work on life" (Nealon 2016, p. 11).

In the past couple of decades, however, a view of plants as intelligent and agential beings has been furthered with a new emphasis by researchers in the rapidly expanding field of critical plant studies, which unites plant scholarship from biology, philosophy, cultural studies, literature, and the arts. Looking back to previous plant scholarship, critical plant studies scholars highlight, for instance, how Charles Darwin formulated his theory of natural selection partly based on his botanical studies, which included studies on plant movement (Darwin 1875). Darwin's hypothesis that plant roots function analogous to an animal brain has also been dusted off in light of a series of recent studies: Biologist Anthony Trewavas (2005) has found that plants display a range of adaptive abilities that suggest the possession of species-specific intelligence. Likewise, Stefano Mancuso, who has detailed the variegated sensory abilities of plants, holds that a "plant's behavior shows that it can plan and use resources to bring about future ends: in short, this is typical of intelligent behavior" (Mancuso and Viola 2015, p. 49). Further challenging a cultural view of plants as insentient, Monical Gagliano (2018) has demonstrated through controlled experiments that

the *mimosa pudica* can learn and *remember*, for up to two months, not to close its leaves if exposed to regular drop procedures. Additionally, studies (Simard et al. 1997; Simard 2021) have shown that different tree species may share resources, and that trees communicate between themselves by the aid of vast, underground mycorrhizal networks, resembling, perhaps, the brain-like structure envisioned by Darwin. Such studies challenge a long-held view of plants as simple and insentient creatures. Consequently, when plants in children's and fantasy literature display agentic behaviour and the ability to communicate, such descriptions may now be read not only as literary devices of the fantastic, but also as reflections of biological knowledge about vegetal life.

Branching out from biological studies on the adaptability and intelligence of plants and on plant interspecies collaboration, the phyto-centric discipline of critical plant studies has raised philosophical discussions of plant phenomenology and plant thinking (Marder 2013; Irigaray and Marder 2016), provided analyses of the treatment of plants in various cultural and metaphysical systems (Schiebinger and Swan 2007; Hall 2011), and queried how the vegetal has "voice" and is put into language (Gagliano et al. 2017). Early works focusing specifically on literary plant representation are *The Poet as Botanist* (Mahood 2008) and *Plants and Literature: Studies in Critical Plant Studies*, edited by Randi Laist (2013).

In studies of children's and young adult literature, Lydia Kokkola's chapter, "Critical plant studies and children's literature" (Kokkola 2017), provides an early introduction to the field and examines its relevance to children's literature. Such connections are further developed in the international anthology *Plants in Children's and Young Adult Literature* (Duckworth and Guanio-Uluru 2022), followed by more regionally specific studies, like *Storying Plants in Australian Children's Literature: Roots and Winged Seeds* (Duckworth and Herb 2023) and *Planter i skandinavisk barne- og ungdomslitteratur. Bildebøker, klimafiksjon og sakprosa* (Goga et al. 2024), oriented towards the representation of plants in Scandinavian picturebooks, climate fiction, and non-fiction. The *Ecozon@* Special Issue, "Plant Tendrils in Children's and Young Adult Literature" (Duckworth et al. 2024), edited by Melanie Duckworth, Lykke Guanio-Uluru, and Antonia Szabari, has further explored the intersection between children's and young adult literature and plants. Critical plant studies may thus be labelled a fast-growing sub-field in children's and young adult literature studies.[1] This is hardly surprising, given that plants and plant-like beings have long been present in literature for children, with representations ranging from Cicely Mary Barker's prudent and anthropomorphic flower fairies to J. K. Rowling's violent Whomping Willow in *Harry Potter*, capable of thrashing a car—a figure likely inspired by Tolkien's Old Man Willow.

As the dictionary definitions above demonstrate, we tend to think of eco-rebels as persons (for instance, Greta Tunberg) or organizations (for instance, Greenpeace or Extinction Rebellion) that fight against, or "wage war on", human environmental damage. One might say that Tolkien was something of a literary rebel when he, with *The Lord of the Rings*, invented a novel genre that went on to become a template for much subsequent fantasy fiction (see Attebery 1992, pp. 9–10). Since a significant aspect of Tolkien's complex epic is its environmental dimension, developed not least through Tom Bombadil (a character likely inspired by the folkloric motif of the Green Man), as well as through a prevailing attention to plant life, Tolkien himself might be labelled an eco-rebel.

Against the backdrop of the interlocking planetary crises of deforestation, pollution, species loss, and climate change, the world is in dire need of eco-rebels—and such rebels are therefore increasingly celebrated as heroes in children's and young adult literature. Examining narratives about youth climate activist Greta Tunberg aimed at a child audience, Sinéad Moriarty finds that most of the stories about Tunberg are indeed fashioned as hero narratives—a form that Moriarty finds problematic due to its emphasis on individualism and exceptionalism (p. 192) and on "the white Western hero" (Moriarty 2021, p. 201). All

the same, Moriarty regards such stories as part of a wider trend of "unconventional hero stories", since the classical male hero is substituted by a child hero-figure (2021, p. 194).

The hero narrative has long historical roots and is central to much fantasy literature that, not least thanks to Tolkien, draws inspiration from epic myth. The idea of the outstanding individual is well known from epic poetry, going back as far as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. While inspired by the epic, when casting four hairy "halflings" as his main protagonists, one might say that Tolkien, in *The Lord of the Rings*, contributes to establish the figure of the child as hero. Another name for his hairy halflings is "Hobbits", and the idea that the Hobbits were conceived as "child heroes" is indicated in that *The Hobbit* (1937) originated as a story for Tolkien's own children.

In contrast, Tolkien has stated that he intended *The Lord of the Rings* for an adult audience. All the same, he stuck with a Hobbit protagonist and Michael Moorcock has famously (and notably as a means of derision) labelled the tale "epic Pooh", describing it as "the prose of the nursery room" and as "meant to soothe and console" (Moorcock 2004, p. 124). Be that as it may, *The Lord of the Rings* has engaged scholars for the past seventy years and might perhaps best be regarded as a cross-over novel (Falconer 2009), even as many readers often first engage with the tale in their teens (although many adolescents today might struggle to get through an 1100-page tome of epic prose).

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien has a complex ethical agenda (see Guanio-Uluru 2015), which I cannot fully do justice to in a short article. However, situating my reading in relation to previous studies of Tolkien's legendarium and drawing on perspectives from critical plant studies, I will in the following close read and analyze in particular three instances of plant animosity and rebellion in Tolkien's well-known epic: the hostility towards the Hobbit protagonists of the Old Forest, the attack of Old Man Willow, and the sacking of Isengard by the Ents and their hosts, asking: "What characterizes arboreal eco-rebellion in *The Lord of the Rings*, and how does such vegetal agency affect the Hobbit protagonists and their quest?" Thus, I aim to analyze instances in the narrative where plants fight back or exhibit "open or determined defiance" against damage to the natural environment resulting from human (or Hobbit, or Wizard) agency, and by so doing to foreground how Tolkien casts certain plants as eco-rebels.

2. Plants in *The Lord of the Rings*: Selective (Botanical) Animism

It is well established that Tolkien cared deeply for plants. In one of his letters to his American publishers, the Houghton Mifflin Company, he writes: "I am (obviously) much in love with plants and above all trees, and have always been; and I find human maltreatment of them as hard to bear as some find ill-treatment of animals" (Carpenter and Tolkien 1981, letter 165). Therefore, when plant life protests in Tolkien's works, as it occasionally does, the protesters might be read both as representations of *real* plants, rather than as metaphors, and as expressions of Tolkien's own distaste for human "maltreatment" of plants.

As a lover of trees, Tolkien may have keenly experienced the heavy exploitation of local woodlands during WW1, when imports of timber from the British colonies were subdued due to naval blockades (McCreary and Kerr 2002, p. 532). By then, forest cover in Britain had already been reduced from an estimated 95% 5000 years ago, dwindling to just 5% of the total land area by the beginning of the 20th century (McCreary and Kerr 2002, pp. 131, 132). Tolkien's agential trees, revolting against environmental destruction and human exploitation, may thus be instances of what Attebery has termed the "iconic" representative mode of fantasy (1992, p. 7). As such, they are a comment on the arboreal decimation Tolkien witnessed in his own environs, framed from a plant perspective.

Citing Tolkien, Patrick Curry notes how *The Lord of the Rings* is set in *this*, and not an imaginary, world: "'I have, I suppose, constructed an imaginary *time*, but kept my feet on

my own mother-earth for *place*. . . the theatre of my tale is this earth, the one in which we now live, but the historical time is imaginary'" (Tolkien, quoted in Curry 2004, p. 48). This remark from Tolkien underlines that *The Lord of the Rings* is meant as a reflection on his own contemporary world. Adopting Cheryl Glotfelty's influential definition of ecocriticism in *The Ecocriticism Reader* as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996, p. xviii), *The Lord of the Rings* may thus be classed both as fantasy and as an ecocritical text.

It was also a work of national romanticism. Verlyn Flieger highlights how Tolkien's legendarium was inspired by the search for national identity through language and myth sweeping many European countries before WW1: "the whole of Western Europe and the British Isles appeared to be engaged in the same search. Ireland, Scotland, Norway, and Finland all ransacked their cultural evidence of folktale, legend, and myth to uncover their heritage" (Flieger 2002, pp. 33–34). In the same vein, Tolkien sought to create a founding mythology for England, drawing on Anglo-Saxon poetry, the Icelandic Sagas, and English myth, nursery rhymes, and folklore. Tom Shippey notes that Tolkien was interested in the decent of fables and sometimes reworked old nursery rhymes like "the Man in the Moon" and "the Cat and the Fiddle", reworking them to explain their seeming irrationality, while tracing similar motifs in medieval English poetry (Shippey 2003, pp. 36–37), thus drawing conceptual and linguistic lines between rhymes present and past. *The Lord of the Rings*, written in narrative prosimetrum, display traces of this practice. Multiple tomes have been, and continue to be, written about *The Lord of the Rings,* and a comprehensive review of the research literature lies outside the scope of this article. Here, I will just call attention to a few studies that are of particular relevance to the current analysis of plants as eco-rebels in Tolkien's epic tale.

In *Defending Middle-Earth. Tolkien: Myth and Modernity* (Curry 2004), Curry notes how Tolkien's imaginative version of the Earth in a fictitious time reveals his love of plants: "I count sixty-four species of non-cultivated plants in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*–surely an unusual number for any work of fiction–in addition to his own invented (or, as it were, discovered) kinds . . .. Pride of place, however, goes to trees" (p. 51).

The narrative significance of trees in *The Lord of the Rings* has further been commented upon by Guanio-Uluru, who shows how references to the mythical White Tree of Gondor has a connective function in the epic and develops into a leitmotif as the revered tree is mentioned—each time by a different character—throughout the narrative (Guanio-Uluru 2015, pp. 60–61). While acknowledging the environmental dimension of Middle-earth, signalled, for instance, by the elves' close relationship to the natural world, Guanio-Uluru further ties the significant symbolic role played by trees in *The Lord of the Rings* to Tolkien's greater legendarium, as set out in *The Silmarillion* (1977), where it becomes clear that Middle-earth is lighted not by a sun but by the intermingled light from two trees, the silver-leaved Telperion and the golden-leaved Laurelin (see Guanio-Uluru 2015, p. 63). Thus, Tolkien's wider mythological vision may be described as arboro-centric, since the ethically good is associated with the light—which is flowing from two trees.

Both Dinah Hazell, in *The Plants of Middle-earth: Botany and Sub-creation* (Hazell [2007] 2015), and Walter Judd and Graham A. Judd in *Flora of Middle-earth: Plants of J. R. R. Tolkien's Legendarium* (Judd and Judd 2017) map the comprehensive role played by flora in Tolkien's works, and both volumes contain herbariums of the variegated flora described and invented by Tolkien. Hazell highlights, among other things, the many female Hobbits in the Shire with botanical names, like Marigold Cotton and Primula Baggins, while Judd and Judd, who carefully map out and describe the various botanical species in Tolkien's Middle-earth, demonstrate how his flora serves to underscore the northern temperate location of the Shire and Middle-earth.

Drawing on Hazell, John Charles Ryan observes that there runs a distinction between the capabilities attributed by Tolkien to vocalizing (or "sonic") trees relative to other plants: "While Tolkien attributes qualities of consciousness and memory to sonic trees, he denies similar intelligent qualities to herbs" (Ryan 2015, p. 125). Elaborating, Ryan notes that "[t]he plants (or plant-like beings) that murmur, speak or sing most commonly appear in the form of trees" (p. 126). The formulation "most commonly" is significant since not all trees are "sonic" in Tolkien's epic. Guanio-Uluru, who likewise comments on the anthropomorphizing trait of giving trees or tree-like characters a voice, traces the influence of different metaphysical positions on the varied descriptions of trees in *The Lord of the Rings*. She argues that Tolkien was inspired, among other sources, by Old Norse myth, a cosmology in which the *axis mundi* is the world tree Yggdrasil, described by Odin in the poem *Grímismál* as suffering from being gnawed by worms and bit by deer (Guanio-Uluru 2015, p. 47). These descriptions position Yggdrasil as sentient and invite the listener to sympathize with the tree. Guanio-Uluru finds that this motif from *Grímismál* is echoed in *The Lord of the Rings* in Tom Bombadil's translation for the Hobbit protagonists of the thoughts of the trees in the Old Forest that complain about being gnawed and bit without being able to defend themselves (see Guanio-Uluru 2015, p. 47). By contrast, she notes that the giant, beautiful—and fictive—*mallorn* trees in Lothlórien, a place described as "the heart of Elvendom on earth" (Tolkien [1954–1955] 2005, p. 352), do not have sentience but are presented as a silent backdrop to the story action. Guanio-Uluru therefore reads the descriptions of Lothlórien as inspired rather by Tolkien's Catholic faith and compares the mute mallorns to the likewise silent Tree of Knowledge in the Biblical Garden of Eden that does not invite sympathy nor signal sentience. Thus, Guanio-Uluru shows that the attribution of sentience to trees in *The Lord of the Rings* is not consistent but limited to *certain* trees, depending on Tolkien's sources of inspiration.

Fairy tales were another significant inspirational source for Tolkien. In *Gossip from the Forest*: *The Tangled Roots of Our Forests and Fairytales* (2012), Sara Maitland explores the link between (remnants of) old English forests and the European fairy tale tradition, arguing that collective myths and stories, such as those Tolkien tapped into, are shaped by the landscape in which a culture develops. Maitland argues that the Britons, as descendants of Germanic tribes, "share deep roots and similarities with the people of northern Europe" (Maitland 2012, p. 9), whose culture developed in vast areas of woodland. She underlines how the forest provides a setting "where a person can get lost and also hide" (p. 7), and where there are "acters, both human and animal; whose assistance can be earned or spurned; and there is–over and over again–the journey or quest, which leads first to knowledge and then to happiness" (p. 8). The treatment of forests in *The Lord of the Rings* is evidently inspired by such literary forbearers.

It should be noted here that Tolkien grants sentience not only to trees and forests. Curry finds "a real element of pagan polytheism" in *The Lord of the Rings*, citing "much evidence of an active animism", for instance, when the mountain of Caradhras "shows his displeasure by snowing heavily" (Curry 2004, p. 98) or in formulations like "'A great rain came out of the Sea, and it seemed that all things wept for Théoden and Éowyn'" (p. 99). Consequently, not *only* trees are sentient, and not *all* trees are sentient—an inconsistency that makes the analysis of instances of arboreal sentience and activism in the narrative all the more interesting. In this article, I will, as mentioned, focus on the specific narrative instances in which certain trees exhibit "open or determined defiance" against damage to the natural environment resulting from human (or Hobbit, or wizard) agency and thus figure as eco-rebels.

3. Vegetal Uprisings: The Old Forest and Old Man Willow

While the Shire, where the Hobbits dwell, is all peaceful domestication, a different world emerges once they step out of their idyllic homeland—made visible through changes in vegetation and plant life. Merry exclaims: "'There! You have left the Shire, and are now outside and on the edge of the Old Forest'" (Tolkien [1954–1955] 2005, p. 110). Here, the trees are rather different. As Merry observes:

> '. . .the Forest *is* queer. Everything in it is very much more alive, more aware of what is going on, so to speak, than things are in the Shire. And the trees do not like strangers. They watch you. They are usually content merely to watch you, as long as daylight lasts, and don't do much (. . .). But at night things can be most alarming, or so I am told. I have only once or twice been in here after dark, and then only near the hedge. I thought all the trees were whispering to each other, passing news and plots along in an unintelligible language; and the branches swayed and groped without any wind'. (Tolkien [1954–1955] 2005, p. 110)

Outside the cultivated Shire, an expression of arboreal agency and vegetal communication is immediately invoked. The forest has a language—and the trees pass information between themselves and move without being moved by the wind, suggesting a form of internal agency. Recalling the work of Simard (2021), the trees' communicative networks may be invisible to a human—or Hobbit—observer, as they might be underground. The experiments of Gagliano (2018), which indicate that plants have a form of memory, are also interesting relative to Tolkien's descriptions of the Old Forest, given the reason for the Forests' hostility and dislike towards strangers that is provided in the very next passage:

> 'They do say the trees do actually move, and can surround strangers and hem them in. In fact, long ago they attacked the Hedge; they came and planted themselves right by it and leaned over it. But the Hobbits came and cut down hundreds of trees, and made a great bonfire in the Forest, and burned a long strip east of the Hedge. After that the trees gave up on their attack, but they became very unfriendly'. (Tolkien [1954–1955] 2005, p. 110)

This passage suggests that the Forest is hostile towards the Hobbits because it somehow *remembers* (perhaps drawing on resources similar to the *mimosa pudica* in Gagliano's experiments) how Hobbits have cut down and burned "hundreds of trees". The act of burning down "a long strip" of forest positions the Hobbits at odds with, or as ignorant relative to, Tolkien's arborocentric mythology. The incident has an ethical dimension: it serves to suggests that the forest's animosity is warranted. The expression of antagonism and the motif of revenge seem to be anthropomorphisms (or, strictly speaking, *hobbitomorphisms*): the existence of this type of vegetal attitudinal response might be hard to measure or scientifically prove. All the same, the hostile and threatening forest is a well-known fairytale trope—and Tolkien here provides the reader with a potential explanation, from the viewpoint of the forest, for such instances of arboreal hostility.

Merry's formulation that the trees "attacked" the Hedge seems coloured by the Hobbits' outlook: Given that vegetal life may display human- or Hobbit-like attitudes, it is conceivable that the forest may have been curious about life on the other side of the Hedge (Mancuso describes plants' light receptors thus: "It's as if the whole plant were covered with tiny eyes" (2015, p. 50)). Given that plants have "eyes", the Forest might have moved closer in order to peer over the Hedge. Interpreted as an "attack", the approach is met with a violent response, thus souring Hobbit and Forest relations. Presumably as a consequence, the Forest seems now to actively hinder the Hobbits' progress, a form of agency indicated in passages like "[T]he trees seemed to bar their way" (p. 111) and "[t]he trees grew close again on either side, and they could no longer see far ahead. Now stronger than ever they

felt the ill will of the wood pressing on them" (p. 112). Thus, the Forest is no idyllic space but rather a hostile wilderness. At the same time, the narration underscores a sense of uncertainty relative to the Forest's agency: "Just behind them a large branch fell from an overhanging tree with a crash into the path. The trees seemed to close in before them" (p. 112). The falling branch could be incidental—or a willed arboreal act—and the frequent use of "seemed to" indicates an interpretive hesitancy relative to the attribution of a will to the Forest.

The Forest's hostility in Tolkien's descriptions recalls the lurking dangers that a forest setting often introduces in fairy tales. As noted by Maitland, "Forests, like fairy stories, need to be chaotic–beautiful and savage, useful and wasteful, dangerous and free" (2012, p. 10). The dangerous side of the Forest in *The Lord of the Rings* becomes more pronounced as the Hobbits proceed, since they seem to be funnelled through it by some unseen force, when the Forest bars their way in certain places: "They were being headed off, and were simply following a course chosen for them–eastwards and southwards, into the heart of the Forest and not out of it" (p. 114). In this manner, they are led towards Old Man Willow, a giant and malevolent tree at the centre of the Forest that induces in the Hobbits an urge to sleep and, quite dramatically, traps Merry and Pippin inside its bole: "Merry was trapped: another crack had closed around his waist, his legs lay outside, but the rest of him was inside a dark opening, the edges of which gripped like a pair of pincers" (p. 117). Not stopping there, Old Man Willow proceeds to attack Frodo: "Frodo was in the water close to the edge [of the river], and a great tree-root seemed to be over him and holding him down" (. . .) 'Do you know Sam, that beastly tree *threw* me in. The big root just twisted round and tripped me in!'" (p. 117). In these instances, Willow's agency seems unquestionable—but resembles less the activities of real trees.

Sam and Frodo's response is again to resort to violence: They beat Old Man Willow, to get him to release Merry and Pippin, and Sam eventually sets fire to his bole, in a move recalling the battle over the Hedge. This elicits an aggravated response, which suggests that Old Man Willow has feelings: "A tremor ran through the whole willow. The leaves seemed to hiss above their heads with a sound of pain and anger" (p. 118). Old Man Willow's subsequent threat to squeeze Merry in two is somehow apprehended by Merry: "He'll squeeze me in two (. . .) He says so!" (p. 118).

Old Man Willow's response to the fire again invokes a view of the Forest as an interconnected organism, able to communicate its feelings and intent, this time above ground: "There was a sound as of a wind rising and spreading outwards to the branches of all the other trees round about, as though they had dropped a stone into the quiet slumber of the river-valley and set up ripples of anger that ran out over the whole Forest" (p. 118). Here, the Forest clearly makes its anger toward the Hobbits' abuse felt, exhibiting "open and determined defiance" against the damage wrought by their fire. Unable to overcome Old Man Willow's resistance by themselves, the Hobbits require the help of Bombadil, who arrives to make the arboreal giant release them by threatening that he will "freeze his marrow cold if he don't behave himself" and "sing his roots off" (p. 120).

While Bombadil, in his later conversations with the Hobbits, paints Old Man Willow as a delinquent by holding that "his heart was rotten" (p. 130), he also provides the Hobbits with knowledge about the Forest. Speaking of Old Man Willow, his descriptions again recall Simard's research on the underground communicative web between trees in a forest and even her concept of "mother trees" (Simard 2021), that is, giant trees that connect with and sustain the trees around them:

> [H]is [Old Man Willow's] song and thought ran through the woods on both sides of the river. His grey thirsty spirit drew power out of the earth and spread like fine root-threads in the ground, and invisible twig-fingers in the air, till it

> had under its dominion nearly all the trees of the Forest from the Hedge to the Downs". (Tolkien [1954–1955] 2005, p. 130)

Examining such passages, one might say that Tolkien's descriptions of the old Forest combine close observations of trees with intuitions about their inter-relationships. At the same time, he anthropomorphizes the trees and the Forest by attributing to them emotions like revenge, hatred, anger, and pain. Bombadil serves as a translator between the Hobbits and the Forest—and one of his remarks echoes the regret Tolkien may have felt for the deforestation that was occurring in Britain around WW1:

> 'It was not called the old Forest without reason for it was indeed ancient, a survivor of vast forgotten woods; and in it there lived yet, aging no quicker than the hills, the fathers of trees, remembering times when they were lords'. (Tolkien [1954–1955] 2005, p. 130)

Bombadil's interpretations invite the Hobbits (and the reader) to consider their actions—such as cutting down "hundreds of trees"—from the sentient Forest's perspective. While the relatively minor incident with the Forest and Old Man Willow, where the forest rebels against their presence and Old Man Willow seeks to punish them, affects the Hobbits by slowing the progression of their quest, it also prepares Merry and Pippin for a larger arboreal uprising—that of the sacking of Isengard, which further develops the motif of vegetal eco-rebellion by turning sentient trees into vegetal war heroes.

4. Arboreal Eco-Rebellion: The Sacking of Isengard

Further on in their journey, Merry and Pippin are captured by Orcs, but manage to escape, following along the river Entwash, into Fangorn Forest, the dark home of ancient trees: "He [Merry] led the way in under the huge branches of the trees. Old beyond guessing, they seemed. Great trailing beards of lichen hung from them, blowing and swaying in the breeze" (p. 459). The comparison of the swinging lichen to beards genders the trees by slightly anthropomorphizing them and invokes the memory of Merry and Pippin's close encounter with Old Man Willow. In this forest too, the Hobbits find that the going is tough, and that the air becomes stifling as they move deeper into it. This time, however, they are not trapped—at least not immediately. Having refreshed themselves in the stream, they climb a small cliff-face to catch a few rays of sunlight that quickly vanishes behind a cloud when Pippin remarks, "This shaggy old forest looked so different in the sunlight. I almost felt I liked the place" (p. 463). His remark elicits a surprising response:

> 'Almost felt you liked the Forest! That's good! That's uncommonly kind of you,' said a strange voice. 'Turn around and let me have a look at your faces. I almost feel that I dislike you both, but do not let us be hasty. Turn around!' A large knob-knuckled hand was laid on each of their shoulders, and they were twisted round, gently but irresistibly; then two great arms lifted them up. (p. 463)

The voice turns out to come from "a most extraordinary face", belonging to:

> a large Man-like, almost Troll-like figure, at least fourteen foot high, very sturdy, with a tall head, and hardly any neck. Whether it was clad in stuff like green or grey bark, of whether that was its hide, was difficult to say. At any rate the arms, at a short distance from the trunk, were not wrinkled, but covered with a brown smooth skin. (p. 463)

This man-tree hybrid, with deep, green-brown eyes, "filled with ages of memory and long, slow steady thinking" and a voice "like a very deep woodwind instrument" (p. 463) and large feet with seven toes each, tells them that he is an Ent, called Treebeard. He does not disclose his real name, which "is growing all the time, and I've lived a very long, long time; so *my* name is like a story" (p. 465, emphasis in original).

Treebeard describes himself as a "tree-herd" and explains that it was Elves who "began it of course, waking trees up and teaching them to speak and learning their tree-talk", but that now "[s]ome of us are still true Ents, and lively enough in our fashion, but many are growing sleepy, going tree-ish, as you might say. Most of the trees are just trees, of course; but many are half awake" (p. 468). This explanation offered by Treebeard thus clarifies, within the logic of the fiction, why only some of the trees in *The Lord of the Rings* are sentient and have the ability to speak, while others lack this ability.

Listening to Merry and Pippin's news of the war against Sauron, Treebeard reveals that he knows both Gandalf and the wizard Saruman, whom, he says, used to be polite, but now has vile orcs under his command:

> 'He and his foul folk are making havoc now. Down on the borders they are felling trees–good trees. Some of the trees they just cut down and leave to rot–orc-mischief that; but most are hewn up and carried to the fires of Orthanc. (. . .)
> 'Curse him, root and branch! Many of those trees were my fiends (. . .) I have been idle. I have let things slip. It must stop'! (p. 474)

In this passage, Treebeard gives as his motivation for rising up against Saruman's destruction of the woods that the trees felled are his friends. Contemplating the devastation that he has noticed but failed to act on, he is stirred to action, and following a three-day long Entmoot (a council of Ents), Treebeard sets off to Isengard with an army of around fifty followers. When Merry asks whether they may really break the gates of Isengard, Treebeard replies:

> 'You do not know, perhaps, how strong we are (. . .) Trolls are only counterfeits, made by the Enemy in the Great Darkness, in mockery of Ents, as Orcs were of Elves. We are stronger than Trolls. We are made of the bones of the earth. We can split stone like the root of trees, only quicker, far quicker, if our minds a roused'! (p. 486)

Invoking the actual physical abilities of trees, such as their power to, very slowly, "split stone", Tolkien here foregrounds the enormous force inherent in tree roots. The reader has been alerted to this force once before, when Old Man Willow used his roots to push Frodo into the river. Awakened by the Ents, and joining forces, trees from Fanghorn march on Isengard, seeking revenge for Saruman's destruction of their kin, while simultaneously aiding the Company in their fight against the evil of Sauron. As the Ents march, their ranks seem to swell, when steadily more and more of them join in Treebeard's eco-rebellion.

One might say that Tolkien here has drawn on and further developed imagery conjured by set linguistic expressions like "the advancing forest" and combined them with close observation of actual trees to create a forceful narrative representation of plant movement[2]—a phenomenon acknowledged by Darwin (1875) and again in modern biological studies of plants (Mancuso and Viola 2015; Gagliano 2018). In doing so, Tolkien in his narrative representation highlights plant processes that are normally only visible in an extended temporal perspective (sometimes called "environmental time") and compresses them to a much shorter human- or Hobbit-like timescale, thus effectively foregrounding how powerful trees really are. As Merry later testifies, "'An angry Ent is terrifying. Their fingers, and their toes, just freeze on to rock; and they tear it up like bread-crust. It was like watching the work of great tree-roots in a hundred years, all packed into a few moments'" (p. 465).

When Gandalf and the rest of the company eventually arrive in Isengard, they are met with the wreckage:

> doors lay twisted and hurled on the ground. And all about stone, cracked and splintered into countless jagged shards, was scattered far and wide, or piled

> in ruinous heaps. (. . .). If the Great Sea had risen in wrath and fallen on the hills with storm, it could not have worked a greater ruin. (. . .) The king and all his company sat silent on their horses, marvelling, perceiving that the power of Saruman was overthrown; but how they could not guess. (pp. 555–56)

It is, of course, the work of Treebeard and all his fellows, who have staged a rebellion in the original sense of the word, "bellare", by waging war on Saruman in his stronghold, thus aiding in the larger war against Sauron. With the successful demolition of Isengard, the Ents and their hosts therefore become heroic figures in the war of the Ring and greet the King of Rohan in Isengard as victors when he arrives with his men.

Their time with Treebeard and his Ents affects Merry and Pippin in several ways. When they reunite with the Company, Gimli remarks, "'Why, your hair is twice as thick and curly as when we parted; and I would swear that both of you have grown somewhat" (p. 561). Their physical growth may be ascribed to a particular drink offered them by Treebeard:

> The drink was (. . .) very like the taste of the droughts they had drunk from the Entwash near the borders of the forest, and yet there was some scent or savour in it which they could not describe: it was faint, but it reminded them of the smell of a distant wood borne from afar by a cool breeze at night. (p. 471)

Like little saplings, the Ent brew seems to cause Merry and Pippin to shoot up and unfurl—also in the sense that they become more confident about their contributions to the war effort. Thus, their journey with the Ents in the Fangorn Forest carries within it a coming-of-age motif, where the younger Hobbits are empowered by vegetal agency and, literally, encouraged to grow. Thus, Merry and Pippin's encounter with Treebeard marks a turning point in the story with respect to Hobbit and Forest relations, quite in keeping with the fairy tale tradition, since, according to Maitland, "Coming to terms with the forest, surviving its terrors, utilizing its gifts, and gaining its help is the way to 'happily ever after'" (2012, p. 8). As Merry and Pippin make friends with Treebeard, who steps up and comes to their rescue, the arboreal rebellion at Isengard ultimately results in the overthrowing of Saruman. Therefore, it is also pivotal to the eventual demise of Sauron—much like we will be reliant on vegetal power to combat two great evils of our own time: climate change and species loss.

5. Concluding Reflections

Through this analysis of arboreal rebellion in *The Lord of the Rings*, I hope to have demonstrated that plants, at least in fiction, can be eco-rebels, contesting for space and protesting environmental destruction.

Through a carefully balanced anthropomorphizing of tree-like characters that are furnished with a backstory and given names, voices, faces, eyes, feet, feelings, and vengeful motives, Tolkien turns Old Man Willow and the Ents into narrative tools that enable him to figuratively protest environmental destruction, foremostly of trees and forests. By highlighting them as active and sentient, Tolkien avoids casting the trees as victims, but rather reminds the reader that trees are powerful, if slow acting, agents. Compressing time by narrative means, he highlights how in actuality trees will often outlast men and, with time, may reclaim lost territory—like the Ents and their hosts do in Isengard. Read in this manner, it is evident that plant rebellion is not an uncommon occurrence in our own world, since plants frequently protest the way humans use or abuse space by working to reorganize and reclaim it, in their own time, by growing over and through it.

As this analysis of vegetal eco-rebellion in *The Lord of the Rings* shows, Tolkien's agential trees go from being cast as delinquents with "rotten cores" to becoming war heroes. Gendered as males, they thus ultimately align with a male heroic pattern, where fairy tale heroes are "armed and ready for battle"—in contrast to a "heroine pattern" where fairy tale

heroines are "habitually bent on social missions, trying to rescue, restore or fix things with words as their only weapon" (Tatar 2021, p. 6). In this respect, Tolkien reworks a traditional fairy tale pattern and uses it to foreground the power and agency of trees, casting them as heroic eco-rebels and warriors, able to protest against deforestation and protect their own. Notably, however, words are also important to the Ents, who engage in a three-day long debate (Entmoot) before being moved to the extreme of resorting to violent destruction.

One might also argue that Tolkien the author is "bent on [a form of] social mission", trying to "rescue, restore or fix things, with words as his only weapon", in line with the heroine pattern identified by Tatar. And as Curry notes, Tolkien's complex tale has indeed served as inspiration for real-life environmental activists, implicitly helping to foster social change:

> In 1972, David Haggard sailed into the French nuclear testing area, an action which led directly to the founding of Greenpeace. His journal records that 'I had been reading *The Lord of the Rings*. I could not avoid thinking of parallels between our own little fellowship and the long journey of the Hobbits into the volcano-haunted land of Mordor. . .'. (Curry 2004, p. 44)

While Haggard does not specifically mention the eco-rebellious dimensions of *The Lord of the Rings*, I think the connection made here between literature and activism still demonstrates that the environmental power of the word and of story—as that of trees—are forces to be reckoned with, for eco-rebels of all stripes.

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Notes

1 There are examples of earlier readings of plant representation in children's literature from a posthuman perspective that do not reference critical plant studies, such as Zoe Jaques' discussion of trees (Jaques 2015) and Guanio-Uluru's analysis of plant–human hybridity (Guanio-Uluru 2018). While there are tangents between ecocriticism, posthumanism, and critical plant studies (Guanio-Uluru [2019] 2020), more in-depth discussion of these tangent fields falls outside the scope of this article.

2 Writing about the attack of the Ents, Tolkien holds that the Ents are "composed of philology, literature, and life" and connects their march to a literary memory: "Their part in the story is due, I think, to my bitter disappointment and disgust from schooldays with the shabby use made in Shakespeare of the coming of 'Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill': I longed to devise a setting in which the trees might really march to war" (Carpenter and Tolkien 1981, letter 163).

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Article

Slow Violence and Precarious Progress: Picturebooks About Wangari Maathai

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Abstract: Rob Nixon in his 2011 book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* writes "[i]n a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear" (p. 15). Nixon talks about the power of literature to render spectacular environmental violence which has become mundane and thus largely invisible. He points to the writing of Kenyan environmentalist and politician Wangari Maathai as work which captures the notion of slow violence. In her writing, Maathai creates the sense of urgency that Greta Gaard argues is a key boundary condition for an ecopedagogy of children's literature. This article explores seven illustrated biographies of Maathai. The article interrogates the extent to which the books capture what Rob Nixon describes as "slow violence", that is violence that occurs slowly, over time, and which is often overlooked. The article also introduces the term *precarious progress* to describe the fragile nature of the change initiated after slow violence. Finally, the article also draws on Val Plumwood's writing on place attachment and "shadow places" to explore how the Kenyan landscape is depicted as not mere object but subject in these texts and the way in which they work to foster a consciousness of place in their child readers.

Keywords: ecopedagogy; children's literature; picturebooks; Wangari Maathai; environmental picturebooks; environmental hero narratives; children's nonfiction

1. Introduction

Kimberley Reynolds sees "writing for the young as replete with radical potential" (Reynolds 2007, p. 1). Literature for children about environmental crisis seeks to harness this radical potential. This is particularly true for the kinds of texts that Kamala Platt describes as "environmental justice children's literature" (Platt 2004). Platt (2004, p. 196) argues that these texts depict "environmental issues tempered with those of social justice". These texts often advocate radical change. Yet, writers for children attempting to imaginatively represent environmental crisis are faced with significant representational challenges particularly related to the social justice issues inextricably tied to environmental concerns. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011) argue, many dominant forms of environmental discourse "do not fundamentally engage with questions of difference, power, and privilege (p. 14). Thus, as Clare Echterling argues, it is essential that, as children's environmental literature continues to grow in popularity, the texts interrogate questions of power and inequity and critical analyses of the texts considers "what kind of ecological citizenship" they are modelling for child readers (Echterling 2016, p. 79).

The representational challenges are particularly acute when attempting to display what Rob Nixon describes as 'slow violence', that is:

> violence that occurs gradually and out of sight [. . .] an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all [. . .] its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. (Nixon 2011, p. 2)

As Nixon outlines, much of this violence is legally endorsed, precipitated by governments and corporations, the slow-moving but devastating results often impacting underprivileged communities and communities of colour most acutely. Nixon argues that it is slow violence that characterises environmental destruction, particularly in the Global South. Nixon asks the following:

> How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most critical challenges of our time? (Nixon 2011, p. 3)

One of the ways in which authors of children's literature have attempted to capture the complexities of environmental issues and rouse public sentiment is through telling the stories of real environmental activists. One popular figure in recent children's environmental biographies is the Kenyan activist Wangari Maathai (1940–2011), who in 2004 became the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for her environmental work with the Green Belt Movement (GBM). This article explores seven biographies of Maathai: Claire A. Nivola's *Planting the Trees of Kenya* (Nivola 2008); Jeanette Winter's *Wangari's Trees of Peace: A True Story from Africa* (Winter 2008); Jen Cullerton Johnson and Sonia Lynn Sadler's *Seeds of Change* (Cullerton Johnson and Sadler 2010); Donna Jo Napoli and Kadir Nelson's *Mama Miti: Wangari Maathai and the Trees of Kenya* (Napoli and Nelson 2010); Franck Prévot and Aurélia Fronty, *Wangari Maathai: The Woman Who Planted Millions of Trees*, Dominique Clément (Translator) (Prévot and Fronty [2015] 2017); Corinne Purtill and Eugenia Mello, *Dr Wangari Maathai Plants a Forest* (Purtill and Mello 2020); and Gwendolyn Hooks and Margaux Carpentier, *Planting Peace: The Story of Wangari Maathai* (Hooks and Carpentier 2021). All of these texts are illustrated texts reflecting current trends. As Krzysztof Rybak argues, environmental picturebooks are a "significant publishing trend in recent years" (Rybak 2023). The majority are picturebooks for younger readers with the exception of Purtill and Mello's text, which is a middle-grade reader. The majority of texts are created by US authors/illustrators. Six of the seven writers are American, and one (Prévot) is French; four of the seven illustrators are American, one is Argentinian by birth (Mello), and two are French (Carpentier and Fronty). Much of the emotional impact of the texts comes through the "interanimation" (Lewis 2001, p. 36) of text and image. The illustrated form allows the authors and illustrators to work together to create reader engagement, as the text provides key details while the illustrations help foster engagement and visually chart the transformation of the Kenyan landscapes.

All of the texts can be understood as environmental justice children's literature in Platt's terminology (Platt 2004). Some of these texts have already been the subject of critical attention. Sharon Smulders analysed five of the texts explored here (all except Purtill and Mello's *Dr Wangari Maathai Plants a Forest* and Hooks and Carpentier's *Planting Peace*), concluding that the texts "mediat[e] questions related to eco-literacy, indigeneity, women's rights, economic subsistence and environmental justice" (Smulders 2016, p. 21). In contrast, Echterling's (2016) article exploring those same five texts argues that the texts "overlook the structural, imperial underpinnings of Kenya's socioenvironmental problems" and "put forth oversimplistic representations of isolated, easily resolved environmental crises" (p. 78). Echterling also argues that the texts perpetuate a focus on the individual over community action, an issue that has been explored in other non-fiction environmental hero narratives (Moriarty 2021). This article will interrogate the extent to which these works capture (or fail to capture) the idea of slow violence and argue that a number of the texts

showcase the idea *of precarious progress*—a term that I will use to describe the fragile nature of change following years of incremental damage. The article also positions Kenya as one of those "shadow places" of which Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood (2008) speaks and argues that the texts have the potential to foster engagement for their target Western anglophone reader in shadow places. To analyse the ways that the texts capture (or fail to capture) the ideas of slow violence and precarious progress, I will interrogate three elements of the texts: the written narrative, the illustrations, and the paratexts. The analysis of the illustrations will focus on composition, colour, and illustrative style. While acknowledging omissions and limitations, particularly in specific texts examined here, the article argues that these narratives have significant ecopedagogical potential as environmental justice children's literature.

2. Wangari Maathai and the Nixon's Concept of Slow Violence

"I was born as an old world was passing away" (Maathai [2006] 2008, p. 7) writes Maathai in her 2006 autobiography *Unbowed*. She charts the transformation of her rural Kenyan home from a "lush, green and fertile" (Maathai [2006] 2008, p. 3) landscape into a place she barely recognises when she returns from years of study abroad. In *Unbowed*, this transformation is not sudden or unpredictable. It is the logical consequence of years of mismanagement, exploitation and neglect of the natural environment. Maathai painstakingly traces the impact of colonisation on the relationship between the people and the land. She outlines how the attitudes towards the environment transformed through colonisation were not altered by independence. Instead, the exploitative approach and the focus on non-native crop species characterised the land and environmental policies of Kenyan politicians in the newly independent state. Maathai summarizes her work with the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK) and the GBM which grew from the work of the NCWK in similar levels of detail. The progress that they make is achingly slow, and the personal and political consequences she suffers are immense. Yet, by the end of the text, the GBM has affected significant change on a national and international scale. Tree planting formed the key focus of the GBM, and the group has contributed to the planting of over 30 million trees, transforming Kenyan landscapes and inspiring movements internationally.

Rob Nixon argues that the writing of Maathai and the work of the GBM captures slow violence. The issues they sought to highlight, in particular soil erosion and deforestation, did not pose a "sudden threat" but "both were persistently and pervasively injurious to Kenya's long-term human and environmental prospects" (Nixon 2011, p. 129). The concept of slow violence offered by Nixon has been widely influential within ecocriticism. Byron Caminero-Santangelo argues that it "make[s] ecocriticism and environmentalism more attuned to imperialism (past and present), to related global injustices, and to postcolonial literatures" (Caminero-Santangelo 2012, p. 176). A focus on slow violence illuminates the accretional impacts of inequalities. As Nixon asserts, it also foregrounds the primary victims of slow violence who are marginalised and often low-income communities (Nixon 2011, p. 4). Nixon argues that the GBM "serves as an animating instance of environmental activism among poor communities who have mobilized against slow violence, in this case, the gradual violence of deforestation and soil erosion" (Nixon 2011, p. 128). Using the "theatre of the tree" (Nixon 2011, p. 133), Maathai was able to mobilise a diverse range of individuals and communities to become involved in tree planting, to learn about soil erosion and the importance of native plants to wider ecosystems. The GBM also became intersectional in its approach as Maathai saw that those same forces perpetuating environmental destruction were also undermining women's rights, suppressing political protest, and engaging in rampant corruption and political violence, and worked to oppose these forces. As such, Maathai's work has often been analysed in the context of ecofeminism

(Nixon 2011; Presbey 2013; Graness 2018; Anae 2023). As Jonathan O. Chimakonam and Louise de Toit argue, "Maathai showed that environmental conservation and women's rights are two sides of the same coin" (Chimakonam and de Toit 2018, p. 6).

Nixon argues that through tree planting, the GBM achieved "a brilliant symbolic economy" and that the planting of trees became "an iconic act of civil disobedience as the women's efforts to help arrest soil erosion segued into a struggle against illicit deforestation perpetrated by Kenya's draconian regime" (Nixon 2011, p. 129). Tree planting had both a practical purpose as well as a symbolic power as an investment in slow, sustainable change. The GBM and Maathai individually faced significant opposition from corporate and political forces. Maathai was beaten at protests, threatened, imprisoned, lost her job at the University of Nairobi, and consequently lost her home. Through this opposition, she and the GBM persevered. She was elected to parliament in 2002 and was appointed Assistant Minister for Environment, Natural Resources and Wildlife. She also continued her work with the GBM and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 in recognition of this work.[1]

3. Children's Stories of Wangari Maathai: Tracing the Roots of Slow Violence

All of the stories examined here are non-fiction biographies of Wangari Maathai. They are also environmental hero narratives situating Maathai as the heroic figure whose life is worthy of celebration and who the child reader should admire and emulate. Clémentine Beauvais has noted "the idealising tendencies of the biography for children" (Beauvais 2020, p. 60). Environmental hero narratives such as stories about Swedish activist Greta Thunberg have also been critiqued as overly focused on the individual hero over and above collection action (Moriarty 2021). In her analysis of picturebooks about Maathai, Echterling concluded that "they all focus the history of the collective movement through the individual figure of Maathai, figuring her as the sole visionary and leader of the movement" (Echterling 2016, p. 78). The problem with environmental hero narratives is that they perpetuate a focus on outstanding individuals instead of modelling collective action. As Rebecca Solnit argues, "[p]ositive social change results mostly from connecting more deeply to the people around you than rising above them" (Solnit 2019). Echterling contends that this is particularly pertinent for environmental activism where works such as the ones explored here risk "reduc[ing] environmental and social movements to individual efforts" (Echterling 2016, p. 80). In most of these texts, the names of other GBM leaders are not mentioned, and Maathai is singled out as the leader and hero of the narrative. In this way, the texts do perpetuate the focus on individuals, which characterises environmental hero narratives.

However, the texts are still notable as examples of environmental justice children's literature, and one of the distinctive features of the texts is the focus on an African environmentalist and the Kenyan landscape in particular, as well as the level of complexity included in many of the texts. In her 2008 article "Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling", Val Plumwood describes "shadow places" as those places "that provide our material and ecological support", but which "are likely to elude our knowledge and responsibility" (pp. 146–47). Shadow places are created by a market culture which precipitates the destruction of natural environments, often in the Global South to serve consumer demands in the Global North, allowing consumers to remain untouched by the consequences of consumption. The texts examined here are produced for a largely American or British readership. Both of these are countries implicated in colonial and neocolonial violence in Kenya. Caroline Elkins describes the "virulent racism and white violence" that characterised British colonial rule in Kenya, and the atrocities committed, particularly in the final years of British

colonial rule (Elkins 2014, pp. 2–3). While the US was not a colonial power in Kenya, they are the leading market for Kenyan coffee, an industry that contributes significantly to deforestation. The NGOs Solidaridad Network and Conservation International who monitor the sustainability of the coffee sector note that coffee production has resulted in an average of 130,000 hectares of deforestation annually since 2020, and that income for coffee producers remains at or below the poverty line in eight of the ten top coffee producing nations (Panhuysen and de Vries 2023). Yet, despite the role that countries like the US and UK have played in Kenya, we can see Kenya as a "shadow place" for Western readers because the majority of readers remain blithely unaware of social or economic issues in the country. Kenya thus becomes a landscape that "consumers don't know about, don't want to know about [. . .] in a commodity regime they don't ever need to know about or take responsibility for" (Plumwood 2008, pp. 146–47). As detailed below, the books work to counter this ignorance providing readers with vivid pictures of the Kenyan landscape and details about the country's history and politics. The books also provide an insight into the slow violence that Maathai worked to oppose, and the precarious progress achieved by the GBM.

3.1. Tracing Colonial Violence

As Sharon Smulders (Smulders 2016) notes, the majority of writing about Maathai for child audiences draws directly on Maathai's autobiography *Unbowed*. In this text, Maathai goes to great lengths to trace the complex roots of the environmental issues she identified in Kenya. She writes about the arrival of European missionaries in the nineteenth century:

> within two generations they [indigenous Kenyans] lost respect for their own beliefs and traditions. The missionaries were followed by traders and administrators who introduced new methods of exploiting our rich natural resources: logging, clear-cutting native forests, establishing plantations of imported trees, hunting wildlife, and undertaking expansive commercial agriculture. Hallowed landscapes lost their sacredness and were exploited as the local people became insensitive to the destruction, accepting it as a sign of progress. (Maathai [2006] 2008, p. 6)

Maathai talks about the forced displacement of whole populations and the suffering under colonialism, including the "schism" it created in the minds of the colonised peoples (p. 6). The change she traces is wholescale but slow moving, and unimpeded by the advent of independence.

Echterling argues that the five texts she explored overlook the imperial underpinnings of the cultural and environmental issues that Maathai witnessed in Kenya (Echterling 2016, p. 78). The two texts not included in Echterling's analysis—Purtill and Mello's (2020) *Dr Wangari Maathai Plants a Forest*, and Hooks and Carpentier's (2021) *Planting Peace: The Story of Wangari Maathai*—do reference the impact of colonialism. Californian journalist and author Purtill and Argentinian-born illustrator and artist Mello's *Dr Wangari Maathai Plants a Forest* references the impact of colonialism on the Kenyan landscape and Kenyan peoples. The illustrations in the text, however, do not engage with the damaging history of colonialism, and the only white faces are nuns who teach Maathai in her early years. Purtill describes Maathai watching the struggles for Kenyan independence from university abroad:

> Wangari often thought about her home. Why do white people in Kenya have more say over the land than black people? Why is it all right for British settlers to decide to cut down trees that have stood for centuries? Kenya was a British colony—a part of the world Britain controlled as if it were part of their own country, no matter how far away it was. (Purtill and Mello 2020, p. 56)

The text then describes Maathai's excitement when Kenya gained independence and her hopes for the nascent democracy. Like a number of the other texts, *Dr Wangari Maathai Plants a Forest* links Kenya's struggle for independence with American values and implies that Maathai herself was positively influenced by the struggles for civil rights that she witnessed in the US, implicitly endorsing American values. NAACP Image award-winning writer Hooks and UK-based French artist Carpentier's *Planting Peace* similarly highlights the end of colonial rule in Kenya and the violence and uncertainty this involved for Kenyans. Hooks also notes that the new Kenyan president urged the people to return to rural areas and "Grow coffee and tea like the British [. . .] He believed selling those crops would help Kenya prosper" (Hooks and Carpentier 2021, p. 24). Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin note that colonial agricultural practices were depicted as:

> necessary and 'natural' impositions on, or substitutes for, the local bush or wilderness" and that as a result "indigenous ecosystems were irretrievably undone as 'wild' lands were cleared for farming or opened up to pastoralism. (Huggan and Tiffin 2015, p. 7)

Hooks demonstrates for young readers how British agricultural practices came to be understood as necessary and superior to local or indigenous ways of life.

One text clearly does not overlook this colonial history and its lasting impacts. French authors Prévot and Fronty's *Wangari Maathai* do not romanticise Maathai's rural childhood, which is commonplace in the other texts; instead, the book shows her father working on the estate of a white colonial settler. Prévot writes the following:

> Wangari's father works for Sir Neylan, one of the ruling British colonists. The British claim the best land for themselves and insist that Kenyans take Christian names. As a result, Wangari is called Miriam during her childhood. The British grow richer by cutting trees to plant more tea. Wangari remembers the first trees she saw fall. She doesn't yet know that she can change things with her voice and her hands. (Prévot and Fronty [2015] 2017, p. 13)

Fronty's illustration for the fourth opening is a double-page spread showing a colonial estate where Maathai's father works. There are two white women in the centre of the left-hand page, the colonial house is in the background. On the right-hand page, we see the young Wangari hiding amongst a plant, her father is sweeping/raking beside her. The use of light is notable here, as the two white characters occupy the foreground and are illuminated in bright colours while Maathai and her father are seen in shadow. They are also below the eye-line of the white characters who look down across the spread towards Maathai. Through both the illustration and the text we witness colonial domination, and the text specifically spells out the transformation of native landscapes through colonial agricultural practices. Smulders notes that "Prévot's commitment to eco-justice [. . .] is apparent in his indictments of African sexism, British imperialism, American racism and Kenyan neo-colonialism" (Smulders 2016, p. 30). Smulders also notes that in translation, the "intersectional analysis of oppression" is muted, and depictions of "the human and environmental impacts of white settler culture" are diminished, including the ways in which colonialism normalizes exploitative and discriminatory practices (Smulders 2016, p. 30). This text stands out amongst the English-language books about Maathai in its explicit indictment of colonialism and tying later injustices to colonial history, and so it is notable that even this account is muted in comparison to the original French edition.

Massachusetts-based author-artist Nivola's *Planting the Trees of Kenya* does not outline Kenya's colonial history in the body of the text, but addresses it briefly in the author's note. She also notes the abandonment of tradition farming practices in post-independence Kenya but does not draw an explicit connection in the way that Hooks does between colonial

attitudes and changing agricultural practices. Joe Sutliff Sanders in *A Literature of Questions* (Sutliff Sanders 2018) notes the importance of peritexts in nonfiction literature for children and argues that peritexts can support and encourage critical engagement. The peritexts in the books about Maathai explored here often play a key role, including providing links to environmental organisations making the connection between the literature and praxis for the reader. In some books such as Hooks and Carpentier's *Planting Peace*, the peritexts are more prominent. *Planting Peace* includes a foreword from Dr Jane Irungu who, like Maathai, was born in Kenya and travelled to the US to pursue doctoral education, along with an Author's Note which is placed before the text, a glossary, and links to relevant organisations. Prévot and Fronty (Prévot and Fronty [2015] 2017, p. 43) also include rich peritexts including a timeline of Maathai's life illustrated with photographs of the activist, and a map of Africa with geographical information, accompanied by information titled "Kenya Today". The information in Nivola's Author's Note is accompanied by illustrations, which help integrate it with the rest of the text and encourage younger readers to look at this additional information. However, by including this critical information *only* in the peritext and omitting it in the body of the narrative, the potential impact is limited and dependent on readers engaging with the peritexts. The other texts do not attempt to include any discussion of colonialism, thus limiting their ability to reflect the complex causes of Kenya's environmental issues. In contrast, those texts that do interrogate Kenya's colonial history are able to more fully capture the roots of slow violence, and the long-lasting accretive nature of this violence.

3.2. Tracing Neocolonial Violence

While a number of texts about Maathai choose not to engage with the colonial history of Kenya, the majority do focus on the political and corporate opposition faced by Maathai and make the connection between these forces and environmental destruction. Purtill and Mello's *Dr Wangari Maathai Plants a Forest* as the sole middle-grade text examined here has considerably more space to outline Maathai's work in detail. Purtill details Maathai's work with the NCWK and the collaborative nature of the establishment of the GBM. Purtill also explicitly places blame for the current situation with Kenya's politicians, as detailed below:

> The government sold away public land that used to belong to everyone. The government cut down the national forests for money. It wasn't right. So along with planting trees, Wangari started teaching people how to stand up for their communities. (Purtill and Mello 2020, p. 97)

In addition to being positioned as a causal factor in the environmental decline that Maathai recorded due to policies such as deforestation and encouraging high-return crops like tea and coffee, the Kenyan government and international corporations are also shown to be active opponents to Maathai's work. US-based environmentalist writer and activist Winter depicts Maathai beaten by police and imprisoned as she protests the destruction of parkland to create office buildings. The image shows a policeman with a club in the air hitting Maathai. She is running away with blood falling from her head in what is an explicit image of police violence. Winter also pictures Maathai standing in a jail cell. Authors including Prévot and Hooks describe in detail many of Maathai's battles with the government of President Moi, including successful campaigns to resist the construction of skyscrapers in a Nairobi park, her vocal opposition to his efforts to cling onto power, and her work with a group of mothers whose sons had been imprisoned for peaceful anti-government protests. In this way, the reader has a sense of the breadth of Maathai's work, and how her environmental activism intersected with other social justice causes. In *Seeds of Change*, Cullerton Johnson, an American educator and environmentalist, seeks to

highlight the role of international corporations in perpetuating the corrupt government of Moi and in resisting the work of the GBM. She describes the "powerful voices [that] rose up against Wangari's movement", including "[f]oreign business people, greedy for more land for their coffee plantations and trees for timber" (Cullerton Johnson and Sadler 2010, n.pag). The illustrations by Sadler, a Coretta Scott King Award-winning designer and artist, depict a boardroom with a majority of white men around the table, angrily discussing Maathai's work. The only green in this image is a plant which has been knocked over on the boardroom table. The book also references "corrupt police officers" working at the behest of "wealthy businessmen" (Cullerton Johnson and Sadler 2010, n.pag).

These books seek to capture what Nixon describes as the "embattled marginalization and vilification" (Nixon 2011, p. 145) that Maathai had to endure during her long struggle against Moi's government and her efforts to sustain the GBM. Marek Oziewicz writes that "[c]limate literacy is an understanding of the climate emergency [. . .] that centers on developing values, attitudes, and behavioral change aligned with how we should live to safeguard the Earth's integrity in the present and for future generations" (Oziewicz 2023, p. 34). Oziewicz writes that the development of climate literacy requires the following:

> looking past the upbeat, progressivist self-image projected by the global neoliberal civilization into its darkest and most oppressive design features: racism, colonialism, extractivism, ecocide, greed, materialist reductionism, short-termism, anthropocentrism, speciesism, and others. (Oziewicz 2023, p. 35)

By tracing, at least in part, the significant opposition that Maathai faced, the books work to demonstrate the nefarious nature of slow violence, those "darkest and most oppressive design features", and the way in which institutional forces are often positioned to perpetuate slow violence and resist changes that might seek to highlight or address this violence.

Plumwood argues that "[a]n ecological re-conception of dwelling has to include a justice perspective and be able to recognise the shadow places, not just the ones we love, admire or find nice to look at" (p. 139). She posits a critical bioregionalism which would "help make visible north/south place relationships" (p. 140). The majority of books explored here can be seen as environmental justice children's literature. They celebrate active resistance to environmental destruction, while acknowledging the complex and intersectional nature of environmental crises. Texts like Prévot and Fronty's *Wangari Maathai* and Cullerton Johnson and Sadler's *Seeds of Change* also helps make north/south place relationships visible, along with the often unseen but nefarious impact of foreign actors in postcolonial countries.

One text is conspicuous in its decision to de-historicise and depoliticise Maathai's story. Donna Jo Napoli and Kadir Nelson's *Mama Miti: Wangari Maathai and the Trees of Kenya* reimagines Maathai as a kind of sage or wise woman. Napoli is an Italian-American author and Nelson is an LA-based American author and illustrator whose work often focuses on African American history and historical figures. Rather than detailing her work with the GBM or the NCWK and how her community activism grew from these collective enterprises, Maathai is positioned as a lone figure responding to the request of local women. Napoli writes "One day a poor woman came from the western village to see the wise Wangari. [. . .] 'I have too little food to feed my family,' said the poor woman. 'There is no longer a job for me in the timber mill. And I have no other skills. What can I do?'" (Napoli and Nelson 2010, n.pag). Maathai gives the woman seeds and tells her "Plant them. Plant as many as you can. Eat the berries. Thayu nyumba—Peace, my people" (Napoli and Nelson 2010, n.pag). This pattern is then repeated as a multitude of women come with different pressing issues, and Maathai's answer is always to give seeds and urge the women to plant. Her efforts are successful, and Napoli shows the women rewarded

with firewood, food from the trees, shelter, or medicinal plants. Nelson's illustrations are striking, and he notes that the work is "rendered with oil paints and printed fabrics on gessoed board" (Napoli and Nelson 2010, n.pag) in order to evoke the textiles common in Kenya. However, the images like the written text ignore the work of the GBM, the structural issues that the organisation faced, and the legacy of colonialism.

Echterling argues that texts about Maathai often present "simplistic pastoral tropes of greenness and ecological unity which consequently present environmental crisis as having clear temporal boundaries and straightforward solutions" (Echterling 2016, p. 78). This is certainly evident in *Mama Miti*. In the Afterword, the political and social context of Maathai's work is highlighted, as is the collective nature of her work with references to the GBM and the National Council of Women of Kenya. In addition, the Afterword describes Maathai's arrests, and the text notes that Maathai was "often battling political and economic powers that stood to gain financially from cutting down the trees" (Napoli and Nelson 2010, n.pag). The author's note, too, provides important information including links to the GBM website and the Nobel prize website for more information on Maathai's life and work. These peritextual materials, however, do not necessarily seem aimed at the same readership as the book itself. The font is small in size, and the tone is academic. Sutliff Sanders states that throughout the history of children's nonfiction, "peritexts have served the caretakers of children more directly than they have served the children themselves" (Sutliff Sanders 2018, p. 120). In *Mama Miti*, the peritexts seem clearly aimed at an adult readership, meaning that the child reader is reliant on an adult to mediate this information. While Sutliff Sanders argues for the potential of peritexts to stimulate critical engagement, drawing on Sam Wineburg, he also notes that at times peritexts can be used to literally marginalise "opportunities for doubt" (Sutliff Sanders 2018, p. 110) and ensure that certain information is "safely insulated from the main text, whose authority it never really threatens" (Sutliff Sanders 2018, p. 110). In *Mama Miti*, there seems to be a missed opportunity to engage with these pressing questions in the body of the text itself, and by reframing Maathai as a solo wise-woman figure, rather than an academic leading a collective movement, some of the key elements of the narrative, and the opportunity to imaginatively depict the slow violence that Maathai fought against, are lost.

3.3. Visualising Slow Violence

Nixon suggests that we need to embrace "a more radical notion of displacement", one that refers not only to the physical movements of people from their places or origin but refers "to the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable" (Nixon 2011, p. 19). In many of the children's books about Maathai, we see a community losing the very land beneath their feet through soil erosion and decreasing crop yields. This loss is given dramatic urgency as we see, through Wangari's eyes, the transformation of her home from the lush fertile vistas of her childhood into a dusty and barren landscape where animals and humans struggle to survive. The books about Maathai visually and verbally chart how her rural Kenyan homeplace becomes transformed into a shadow place, a landscape taken over and denuded by cash crops at the expense of the health and wellbeing of the local people. The illustrations in the texts imaginatively depict this transformation, drawing on what Barbara Bader calls "the drama of the turning of the page" (Bader 1976, p. 1) in order to render spectacular what has been a gradual and thus less perceptible change. This gives the issues highlighted the sense of urgency that Greta Gaard argues is an essential boundary condition for an ecopedagogy of children's literature (Gaard 2009, p. 332). Given that all of these books are produced outside of Kenya, for anglophone Western audiences, this depiction of how a once lush landscape becomes a shadow place, has the potential to

tie the depiction of Kenya inextricably to the home landscapes of the reader because the Kenyan landscape depicted is a shadow landscape not for Maathai but for the authors and readers of the picturebooks.

In Nivola's *Planting the Trees of Kenya* the first, the fourth and the fifth openings offer a visual comparison for the reader to understand the changing landscape. The first opening shows the young Wangari standing in the middle of a field. There are trees in the foreground, including a large fig tree in the right middle-ground. There are hills covered in trees in the background and in the middle-ground there are lots of groupings of trees. The fourth opening shows this exact same perspective but now the fields are entirely dedicated to agriculture. There are many people picking crops in the fields. The trees are nearly entirely gone, and the hills once covered with trees are filled with crops. The fig tree that had stood in the right of the image has been cut down, and Wangari stands in front of the stump with her head downturned. What is interesting about this image is that if you were to glance at it without the context of the first image, it would appear to be a pastoral idyll with people cultivating the land which is still covered in green. It is only in the context of the first image that the sense of loss becomes clear. The fifth opening then shows the same landscape, but the degree of soil erosion and the loss of the trees is much starker. There are larger patches of brown earth where crops no longer grow. There are still fields of crops being tended across the background of the image, and the hills which were originally forested are still planted with crops, but the foreground shows the extent of the damage. Dead trees fill the foreground, and the text tells the reader "There were fewer and fewer trees with each one they cut, and much of the land was as bare as a desert" (Nivola 2008, n.pag).

Winter's Wangari's *Trees of Peace* also contains a powerful visual representation of the changes that Maathai charted in her home landscape. The first two openings depict the landscape of Maathai's childhood. Winter writes that "Wangari lives under an umbrella of green trees in the shadow of Mount Kenya in Africa" (Winter 2008, n.pag). The accompanying image shows Mount Kenya in the background, in the foreground are a row of trees with small dwellings in the background. Maathai stands at the front of the image holding a flower. The second opening shows the young Wangari and her mother with firewood on their back; they are walking through a forest and Wangari is looking up at the birds in the trees. These images are contrasted in the spread that depicts Maathai's return to her home following her studies. As the text tells the reader of Maathai's shock at the transformation in the landscape the image visually depicts this change, showing Maathai in the centre of the image, all around her are tree stumps. There is no green in the image at all. Instead of the sense of "place attachment" (Plumwood 2002, p. 233) that is evoked in the opening images, a series of three spreads shows environmental devastation and Maathai's feeling of dislocation from the place she now barely recognises. Sadler's images for *Seeds of Change* depict a similar alteration in the landscape, with images of tree stumps in a brown barren earth signifying the environmental destruction. The same visual transformation is charted by Fronty in Wangari Maathai as the images move from rich and colourful to stark, and the text by Prévot tells us that "Women can no longer feed their children, since plantations for rich people have been replaced food-growing farms. Rivers are muddy—the soil has been washed away by rain because there are no tree roots to hold it back" (Prévot and Fronty [2015] 2017, p. 19). Utilising the multi-modal format of the picturebook, these texts are able to convey the destructive nature of slow violence.

They are also able to utilise the combination of word and image to create a vivid portrait of the landscapes of Kenya, which becomes not mere backdrop but the subject of these texts alongside Maathai. Plumwood writes that "a critical sense of place based on knowledge and care for multiple places could be the form of place consciousness most

appropriate to contemporary planetary ecological consciousness" (Plumwood 2008, p. 149). For Plumwood, this importantly includes an acknowledgement and care for shadow places. In creating engaging narratives about Maathai and the landscapes she loved and worked to restore, the books offer readers the opportunity to engage with and care for another landscape, perhaps opening up their capacity to form a critical sense of place based on the knowledge and care for multiple places, their home places and those shadow places that so often "provide our material and ecological support" (Plumwood 2008, p. 143).

As many of the books outline, foreign corporations have played a key role in the destruction of the environment depicted across the texts, and they do so largely to feed European and American markets. Illustrations in books like Prévot and Fronty's *Wangari Maathai* or Cullerton Johnson and Sadler's *Seeds of Change* highlight the racial power dynamics that have contributed to the exploitation of the environment, depicted in vivid colour with pictures of corporate boardrooms and colonial fields. In the books, European and American landscapes and markets exist as their own form of shadow landscapes, but here the typical power dynamic is reversed. The exploited landscape is allowed to take centre stage, and the slow violence that has led to the destruction of the landscape is spectacularly depicted. Nixon writes that "to intervene representationally entails devising iconic symbols that embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with dramatic urgency" (Nixon 2011, p. 10). The form of the picturebook is perhaps one of the best ways to capture the dramatic urgency of slow violence because of its potential to harness these two types of signs, the conventional and the iconic, and to use the interaction of these signs to deepen reader understanding. As the reader follows Maathai's story in these picturebooks, they too have the opportunity to begin to love the places depicted, and then to mourn the loss of the landscapes of Maathai's childhood and, ultimately, to celebrate her ability to initiate the restoration of those places. The illustrations help to engender the connection to place and the empathy with the protagonists, and the written text provides vital context and information to understand how and why the landscapes came to be transformed in the ways we witness across the stories.

4. Precarious Progress

All of the texts about Maathai chart a positive transformation. They are, ultimately, hopeful stories for young readers about the possibility of addressing environmental degradation and, in doing so, improving the lives of humans and nonhuman animals alike. In depicting Maathai's long struggle against corruption and her painstaking work with communities across Kenya the books capture what I call *precarious progress*. Nixon notes that the disastrous effects of slow violence "play out across a range of temporal scales" (Nixon 2011, p. 7). This elides the calamitous character of that violence, leading people to "underestimate, in advance and in retrospect, the human and environmental costs" (Nixon 2011, p. 7). It is those lingering effects of slow violence that mean that resistance or restorative work is precarious in nature, working against ingrained indifference and processes such as deforestation, or chemical contamination of natural landscapes that have been enacted over decades or centuries. The books about Wangari Maathai for child readers highlight the fact that progress to address slow violence must be similarly accumulative. Maathai's work was not spectacular in nature. It involved groups of people coming together, creating nurseries, tending seedlings, and planting trees. It involved community education, political lobbying, and protest. It is spectacular primarily in its accretive nature, the knowledge that one tree becomes thirty million trees.

All of the books lead up to the moment when they can visually and verbally depict the hard-won transformation achieved by Maathai and the GBM. Nivola describes how the GBM volunteers bore witness to the gradual changes their work affected as follows:

> Slowly, all around them, they could begin to see the fruit of the work of their hands. The woods were growing up again. Now when they cut down a tree, they planted two in its place. Their families were healthier, eating from the fruit trees they had planted and from the vegetable plots filled again [. . .] (Nivola 2008, n.pag)

Cullerton Johnson describes how Maathai "dug in the dirt, planted seedlings, and spoke about women's rights. With everyone she met, she shared the seeds of change. In time, Kenya changed" (Cullerton Johnson and Sadler 2010, n.pag). Hooks writes that the GBM was "a long walk for Wangari. She believed in moving forward step by step, when others doubted her" (Hooks and Carpentier 2021, p. 60). Even Napoli and Nelson's *Mama Miti* describes how change came about "tree by tree" (Napoli and Nelson 2010, n.pag). In choosing the form of the nonfiction biography, the texts risk singularising Maathai, depicting her as the individual environmental hero, thus undermining the collective nature of the GBM. However, in most books about Maathai, the collective nature of the endeavour is emphasised consistently. The work of the National Council of Women of Kenya is highlighted in Purtill and Mello's *Rebel Girls: Dr Wangari Maathai Plants a Forest* and Hooks and Carpentier's *Planting Peace*, and the GBM is mentioned in all of the texts in either the body of the works or in the paratexts. The broader collective nature of the work, and the input of communities across Kenya, particularly communities of women, is outlined in detail. Purtill writes that "When each person planted a single tree, together, they created a forest. When each person raised their voice, together, they created a movement" (Purtill and Mello 2020, p. 113). The illustrations in every text depict images of collective work, in particular images of women working together to plant saplings, and Maathai working with children to plant trees.

Precarious progress is also a process which must be continually tended, rather than a fait accompli. Cullerton Johnson notes that even after she was elected to the Kenyan parliament, Maathai continued to plant trees. Prévot declares that "every day, even now, new [trees] are planted in Kenya" (Prévot and Fronty [2015] 2017, p. 37). The books demonstrate that change *is* possible, but that it must be nurtured and maintained. Maathai is an embodiment of the endurance required to resist slow violence. Oziewicz writes that "the shape of our future will be determined by the stories we choose to tell and by our courage to imagine what it takes to transition to an ecological civilization" (Oziewicz 2023, p. 35). In stories about Maathai and the GBM, what it takes to create the progress that the books celebrate is both substantial commitment, and personal and collective sacrifice. The books do not, for the most part, shy away from the hard work that is required, but they demonstrate the possibility of change if that work is carried out. Nixon writes about the potential of representational arts, saying: "[i]n a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses" (Nixon 2011, p. 15). By condensing the story of the GBM into short narratives for children, both the slow violence which created environmental degradation in Kenya and the precarious progress which has been made to address this degradation is imaginatively depicted, making the slow and the potentially invisible instead appear spectacular.

5. Conclusions

Julia Mickenberg and Philip Nel describe Nivola's *Planting the Trees of Kenya* and Winter's *Wangari's Trees of Peace* as examples of "radical" children's literature (Mickenberg and Nel 2011, p. 460). As the analysis above demonstrates, these are, in fact, two of the more conservative books about the activist. Certainly, there are issues and

limitations within this corpus, in particular the lack of more detailed engagement with Kenya's colonial history. To strengthen their impact for the intended Anglo-American readership, the texts could make the connection between the reader's own world and the destruction they witness in the texts more explicit so that the West's role in creating shadow places becomes more overt. There are also specific issues within individual texts. Winter, for example, shows in a closing image a picture of Maathai standing over a map of Africa depicted as a single landmass without national boundaries, whereas Europe pictured above is delineated by national borders. As Smulders notes, many of the US texts about Maathai overemphasise the impact of Maaathai's time in America on her conceptions of social justice, and thus depict "the GBM and its founder as indebted to second-wave feminism and western education in ways that situate the United States at the centre of global progress" (Smulders 2016, p. 29).

However, with the exception of *Mama Miti*, the texts are remarkable in their efforts to depict complex, interconnected environmental and social issues for their young readership. As such, they can be seen as environmental justice children's literature. The texts that most successfully capture the ideas of slow violence and precarious progress are those which sacrifice narrative simplicity in the service of authenticity and nuance by introducing questions of colonialism, neocolonialism, political corruption and violence, and the nefarious power of global corporations. What these books about Maathai also attempt to initiate is an ethics of care for a place beyond the reader's own homeplace. Kenya is not a mere backdrop for action here, but becomes a protagonist along with Maathai, as readers have the opportunity to view the landscape through Maathai's eyes, witnessing her love for, and understanding of, her homeplace. The picturebook form allows the landscape to be vibrantly depicted both in text and in images. DeLoughrey and Handley argue that postcolonial writers like Martin Carter and Pablo Neruda foreground "an ancestral relationship to place and the challenges posed by its discursive recuperation" and depict "a nature nurtured by the violated bodies of colonial history" (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011, p. 6). Drawing on Maathai's own writing, the children's books about the activist foreground this same connection to place which has been transmitted through generations. Moreover, the texts demonstrate this landscape slowly denuded by colonial and neocolonial practices, but then lovingly restored by people who have been marginalized, who reject their own disempowerment and claim agency to restore their local environments.

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Notes

[1] Maathai's ([2006] 2008) *Unbowed* provides a full outline of her early life, her work with the National Council of Women of Kenya, the establishment of the Green Belt Movement, her struggles against corruption and opposition, and her eventual success including the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize.

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Article

Loveable Lack: The Reimagined Wild of "Real" Bears

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Abstract: The image of the bear and its relationship to the human undergoes many representations in children's literature. Their bodies range from cute and squishable teddy bears to non-fiction representations of wild bears. For example, the lone polar bear, a popular visual device for expressing the "slow violence" of climate change, coined by Rob Nixon in 2011. This gray area then invites one to consider how these two opposing states influence one another in the context of conversations around climate change. Given the widespread adoption of the polar bear as an emblem of climate change, this article addresses how polar bear imagery is translated into modern children's literature when it often draws on cute aesthetics. Cuteness then calls into question how 'real' bears have been reimagined into fictional settings and whether relationships between child and bear can provide commentary on inspiring environmental activism. I explore Hannah Gold's *The Last Bear* and its sequel, *Finding Bear*, as borderline ecopedagogical texts which highlight the tension created when a typically cute subject is used to encourage environmental activism amongst its younger readerships.

Keywords: cute studies; polar bears; child agency; climate change

1. Introduction

Charismatic animals are often used in marketing and awareness campaigns for various charities and groups warning against the effects of the climate crisis (Manzo 2010a, 2010b). In this context, the polar bear appears as dominant iconography (Manzo 2010a, 2010b; Engelhard 2017; Henderson 2019; Wærp 2020). Recently captured by wildlife photographer of the year, Nima Sarikhani's award-winning piece from 2023 offers a glimpse into the polar bear and its decreasing habitat. Sleeping soundly, the male polar bear is curled up on a scrap of ice no larger than its body. The ice floe is tipped upwards at a precarious angle, threatening to submerge itself and take the bear with it.[1] In the work of Sarikhani and many other wildlife photographers', the polar bear presented with the loss of its natural habitat often coincides with "fear appeals" in which the visual device can distance observers from the imminent danger, pushing concerns for the climate into the future (O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009).

Therefore, communication of the climate crisis through the iconization of the polar bear has its limitations. Kate Manzo argues that polar bear images in climate change communication have "more to do with affect than cognition" (Manzo 2010a, p. 197), noting their "sweet and sad and loveable" associations (Barton 2008; Manzo 2010a, p. 198). So, although polar bear images may raise awareness, they fail to address important aspects of climate change communication: cognition, affect and behavior.[2] However, polar bears continue to captivate us. Henning Howlid Wærp concludes his study on "The Polar Bear in Nordic Literature for Children and Young Adults":

> Polar bears once symbolized strength, independence and the ability to survive in one of the world's harshest climates. They now represent vulnerability and the global ecological crisis. Without losing any of its power of fascination, one of the Arctic's most dangerous predators has been transformed into a threatened species in need of human protection. (Wærp 2020, p. 82).

Furthermore, polar bears can appear in Northern cultures' mythologies as "optimal spirit guides and intermediaries to the otherworld" (Henderson 2019, p. 252).[3] Henderson observes that "Polar Bear mythology, traditional folktales and legends are full of stories about transmogriphication—from bear to human or human to bear—or cosmically-aligned Ursines with access to supernatural realms; they are rarely about bears, as such, but externalize human emotions and morality" (Henderson 2019, p. 259). Perhaps these historical associations with polar bears perpetuate their power of fascination, giving rise to polar bear celebrities like Knut, who ensured an additional status to polar bears, as "a symbol of the economic potential of ecology", putting "a face to the climate crisis" (Engelhard 2017, p. 24). Manzo notes that images of helpless polar bears raise awareness, relying on their sad and loveable associations. These aspects reflect theories surrounding cute subjects. Both Daniel Harris and Sianne Ngai argue that a cute subject often has an "imposed-upon aspect or mien" (Ngai 2005, p. 816) and that cuteness aestheticizes helplessness for the qualities it lacks (Harris 1992, p. 179). Therefore, the iconization of polar bears in fear-appeals interpellates them as cute subjects, demonstrating a loveable lack. Given the widespread adoption of the polar bear as an emblem of climate change and the shifting associations with the animal overtime, this article considers how polar bear iconography in climate change discourse is incorporated into children's literature, considering the role of affects. I focus on how the relationship between the 'real' polar bear character, "Bear", and the child protagonist is used in Hannah Gold's duology *The Last Bear* (Gold 2021) and *Finding Bear* (Gold 2023) to communicate the climate crisis and encourage the child to become an environmental activist through the modes of engagement: affect, cognition and behavior.

2. The Temporal *Might* of the Child Activist

Communicating the dangers of the climate crisis through animal imagery, as noted above, expresses the "slow violence" of climate change (Nixon 2011, p. 2). Coined by Rob Nixon, "slow violence" is a kind of violence that "is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (Nixon 2011, p. 2). Slow violence then offers a framework for theorists to discuss the seemingly invisible threat of the climate crisis (Nixon 2011; Anderson 2021; Oziewicz and Saguisag 2021; Echterling 2016). As Brianna Anderson argues, slow violence can be seen in its effects not only on land but in the ocean, too. Anderson observes that the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, with 94% of it consisting of micro- and nano-plastics, is more like a "boundless, toxic soup" than a "floating trash island" (Anderson 2021, p. 175). From toxic plastic soup, coral bleaching and oil spills to droughts, forest fires, flooding, and species loss (amongst many others) (Oziewicz and Saguisag 2021), the damaging effects of climate change are here. Slow and accretive—yes—but with every year they gain momentum, pulling any potential solution out of the future and into the present.

Without a solution to the climate crisis, we gamble across temporalities. As Greta Thunberg argues on behalf of children: "There is simply not enough time to wait for us to grow up and become the ones in charge" (Thunberg 2019, pp. 32–33). In many of her speeches, Thunberg draws on the divide between child and adult perspectives on the climate crisis and the pressure that adult inaction puts onto younger generations (Thunberg 2019; Conrad 2021). However, the divide between child and adult working

relationships exhibited in Thunberg's speeches on approaches to dealing with the climate crisis reflects a larger discussion in children's literature studies. Lying "between the constructed and the constructive" (Rudd 2004, p. 7),[4] children's literature provides a space to discuss the "partially overlapping temporalities" between child and adult (Beauvais 2015, p. 6). As Clémentine Beauvais observes, narratives written for children provide "words uttered [. . .] *in* the present *for* the future [and are] intensely permeated with the past" (Beauvais 2015, p. 46).

In this light, children's literature and its discussions around adult normativity and child agency (Nikolajeva 2012; Beauvais 2015; Beauvais 2012; Gubar 2013; Rudd 2004) reflect the discourse around the climate crisis between the *mighty* child activist and adult authority. Furthermore, child activists like Greta Thunberg and Xiuhtezcatl Martinez become living examples of Beauvais' "mighty child". Beauvais explains "to be mighty is to have more time left; to be authoritative is to have more time past" (Beauvais 2012, p. 82). Therefore, child activists demonstrate their might when they use the temporal stage of childhood tactically to counter stagnant adult authority (Conrad 2021). Thunberg employs this technique in her address to the UN General Assembly:

> This is all wrong [. . .] I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope? How dare you! You have taken away my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. (Thunberg 2019, p. 96).

To counter the assumption that children lack agency to engage in climate crisis discourse, Thunberg criticizes adult authority using her child might, drawing attention to the abuse of adult power when their inaction in the present denies a future, not only for Thunberg but for the many other children and generations after her. As Rachel Conrad observes the "temporal strategies" of Thunberg's and Martinez's speeches, "when they insist on acting "now" rather than "then", young activists invoke time strategically as a rhetorical driver of an argument for their right, capacity, and necessity to take climate action in the present" (Conrad 2021, p. 226).

Children's literature, then, possesses the potential to explore children's agency in action against climate change, just as it has "*the potential* to question the adults as norm" (Nikolajeva 2012, p. 11), encouraging children to act and take advantage of their *mighty* childhoods. As Marek Oziewizc and Lara Saguisag observe, "it is necessary to reflect on how children's literature has represented the crisis and envisioned young people's agency to respond to it" (Oziewicz and Saguisag 2021, p. vii), encouraging children's environmental literature to take on an ecopedagogical role. Greta Gaard argues that aspects of ecoliteracy which can be effective in building towards ecopedagogy are teaching about, teaching in, and teaching through the social and natural environment, helping to teach connections of sustainability and urgency (Gaard 2009, p. 333). Therefore, one element of "ecopedagogy looks at children's environmental texts for their potential to illuminate current environmental issues, as well as the roots of the issues, and the strategies for responding to those issues, both individually and collectively" (Gaard 2009, p. 333). Accordingly, Hannah Gold's *The Last Bear* (Gold 2021) and sequel *Finding Bear* (Gold 2023) take some steps towards ecoliteracy but ultimately work as borderline ecopedagogical texts which highlight the tension created when a typically cute subject (the polar bear) is used to encourage environmental activism in the child protagonist. While these texts reflect a conventional hero narrative, the wilderness is not an "obstacle that the hero must overcome" (Moriarty 2021, p. 199). Instead, it is a catalyst in which the child can rebel against humancentric thoughts of the Anthropocene. Therefore, the relationship between child and polar bear can help to interrogate "the boundary that has been assumed to set our species apart from the rest of the living community" (Westling 2006, p. 30) through cute aesthetics and affects.

3. Sweet, Sad, and Loveable

Anthropomorphic re-imaginings of animals evolve and alter the animal the narratives are trying to represent. There is then a lack that one can perceive in the artificial animal depictions and in their designations as 'other'. Returning to Beauvais' observations of overlapping temporalities between children and adults, they note that the temporal state of childhood is often viewed as a state of lack (Beauvais 2015, p. 3). The effects of this view position children and animals together in a lack of power and agency. However, not only is their lack due to a perceived weakness, but it also fundamentally draws on the field of cute studies. Although cuteness is not strictly subject to the concept of adult normativity, it does draw parallels with the lack perceived of childhood. Harris defines cuteness as: "something becomes cute not necessarily because of a quality it has but a quality it lacks" (Harris 1992, p. 179). Referring to the abnormally diminutive features of the So Shy Sherri doll, Harris continues to point out that there is a lurking sadism and an attempt to aestheticize helplessness, to "maim, hobble, and embarrass the thing he seeks to idolize" in cute subjects (Harris 1992, p. 179). Furthermore, Ngai argues on cutification: "the more objectified the object, or the more visibly shaped by the affective demands and/or projections of the subject, the cuter" (Ngai 2015, p. 65). Lacking in size and abilities creates a deformation of the cute object and is further explored by Joyce Goggin, who notes of Mattel's "Liddle Kiddles" line that the name and the dolls are "doubly diminutive and doubly cute", with references to the nineteenth and early twentieth century uses of 'cute' to mean "small and compact" or "tiny" (Goggin 2016, p. 226). Therefore, when children and animals become aligned in their state of lack, they adopt a further category of cuteness.

However, in contrast to the loveable lack observed of cute subjects by Harris and Ngai, Joshua Paul Dale proposes a slightly altered definition of cuteness, taking inspiration from affect theory. Dale observes that upon encountering a cute subject/object, there is usually a tension which needs to be discharged and can occur in such phrases as "it's so fluffy I want to die!" (Dale 2016, p. 40). Dale argues that phrases of this kind "testify to the tension building in the subject experiencing the high positive affect that characterizes a strong cuteness response" (Dale 2016, p. 40). Therefore, cuteness as an affect, can trigger physical and emotional responses in the body of the subject, creating "the "AWW" factor" (Dale 2016, p. 46). As such, cute affects occur "in the midst of in-between-ness", a visceral force which drives us forward (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, pp. 1–2). The movement between states reflects that the encounter with "cuteness is reciprocal rather than one-way" (Dale 2016, p. 42). Despite cuteness' initial diminutive and disfiguring nature, it possesses the potential to empower in its in-between-ness.

One aspect of cuteness in the West heavily aligns children with cute aesthetics and stems out of Konrad Lorenz's *kindchenschema*. Lorenz argues that the cute response is irrepressible when presented by children and baby animals, supported by the idea that these features encourage human adults to care for their children. Therefore, cuteness equals care and designates a need to nurture the cute subject. However, this is only one potential result of the cute affect. As Dale observes, "we may all have the same capacity to respond to cuteness", but it will present in different ways, if at all (Dale 2023, p. 12). Lorenz's *kindchenschema*, therefore, becomes problematic when cuteness is assigned to features which are then, intrinsically cute, scientifically grouping those who are loveable and those who are unlovable (Dale 2016, pp. 42–45). Therefore, it is no surprise that Lorenz's theories are fundamentally aligned with his belief in eugenics and history with the Nazi Party (Klopfer 1994). However, what Lorenz stumbles upon and consequently draws attention to is how children often appear as cute subjects.[5] While I agree that childlike features are sometimes present in cute aesthetics as they coincidentally produce that cute affect, I do not agree that these childlike features are the sole expression of cuteness.[6] Instead, cuteness occurs

in many forms and with varying affects. Most frequently, cute aesthetics appear in small, round, bumbling, mammalian bodies with large eyes (Lieber-Milo 2022; Dale 2023), and sometimes with "furry bodies" which are "invitingly soft" (Dale 2023, p. 9).

This short introduction to cute studies demonstrates how cuteness can provide a new lens through which to view relationships with animals and children. For the context of this article, I believe, as Dale asserts, that cute aesthetics create cute affects. The cute affect, then, can have positive and negative connotations and the adjective 'cute' can stem from that lack and/or from joy upon encountering the cute object/subject. Thinking of affect as "sticky", Sara Ahmed writes, "affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects" (Ahmed 2010, p. 29). On happiness, Ahmed argues "happiness can generate objects through proximity", and they note on the morals of happiness that "certain objects become imbued with positive affect as good objects. After all, objects not only embody good feeling, but are perceived as necessary for a good life" (Ahmed 2010, pp. 33–34). Ahmed concludes that it is concerning "how much this affirmative turn actually depends on the very distinction between good and bad feelings that presumes that bad feelings are backward and conservative and good feelings are forward and progressive" (Ahmed 2010, p. 50). Ahmed draws attention to experiences when encountering cute subjects. Cuteness may provoke 'good' or 'bad' feelings and 'good' or 'bad' somatic responses, like the cute aggression of wanting to eat the cute subject.

So, it is in this state of in-between-ness, as observed by Gregg and Seigworth, that we can encounter the cute affect, leading to the "catharsis built into the cute response" in that enigmatic 'AWW' (Dale 2016, pp. 40–41). However, when we meet cuteness, before, simultaneously, and somehow after, the cute affect appears in multiplicities, and this is when positive and negative affects can occur. Therefore, the cute subject, in an assumed state of lack, is where children and animals are once again drawn together. So, when the child in Hannah Gold's work encounters the polar bear, it reflects those images of climate change communication, exhibiting the polar bear as "sweet and sad and loveable" (Barton 2008; Manzo 2010a, p. 198) and simultaneously produces cute affects, drawing on the lack found in the cute subject. Therefore, the next section will begin with considering the cute aesthetics of polar bears, which produce the cute affect in Gold's texts. Furthermore, the combination of cute aesthetics, cute affects and how they are associated with polar bears will shed light on the ecopedagogical attempts made in these texts. As such, cuteness, when combined with ecopedagogy, runs the risk of amplifying affect while reducing cognition and behavior in climate change communication in children's fiction.

4. Affect and Cognition

Outlined by Lorenzoni et al. in their study from 2007, inducing engagement from climate change communication devices is most efficient when climate change communication includes affect, behavior and cognition. These A, B, Cs of climate change communication ensure better engagement, addressing factors such as "underlying knowledge, values, experiences and lifestyles", which are then "affected by the wider social landscape" and determine the success of engagement (Lorenzoni et al. 2007, p. 449). Borrowing this definition of engagement, O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole (2009) explain that "fear-appeals" in visual representations of climate change, such as the "iconic" images of stranded polar bears on ice floes (O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009, p. 358), do not produce effective engagement. Instead, their study shows:

> [Fearful messaging] can enhance feelings that climate change is a distant issue in both time and space. Outcomes of both the icon and imagery studies indicate that meaningful engagement approaches must involve some degree of connection

> with "the everyday", in both spatial and temporal terms [. . .]. (O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009, p. 369).

Given these perspectives on climate change communication, it is unsurprising that when writing *The Last Bear* (Gold 2021) and *Finding Bear* (Gold 2023), Hannah Gold wished to write stories about "hope" and "making a difference" (Gold 2023, Author's Note, p. 339), compared to other dystopian forms of children's fiction on climate change (Gold 2021, Author's Note, p. 295). As such, these texts are pieces of fiction. However, given the importance of climate change discussions in these texts, the polar bear character is depicted as surprisingly realistic. He is not illustrated anthropomorphically, and he appears as if he is a real, wild bear. There are no elements of fantasy, magic or supernatural which allow him to talk or clearly communicate with the child protagonist, and when the two communicate, it is through her interpretation of animal behavior. Therefore, borrowing Lorenzoni et al.'s observations of effective engagement, I will use affect, behavior and cognition as a framework for analyzing climate change communication in Gold's texts. Especially considering polar bear affects on the child and whether they encourage cognition of the animal and its environment relating to climate change, and how a combination of affect and cognition changes behavior, encouraging child activism.

April, our child protagonist, moves temporarily to the uninhabited Bear Island as part of her father's trip to conduct meteorological research at the weather station located there. April's father is distant after the death of her mother, and as such, he throws himself into his work and April is left mostly to herself. One day, while April is out exploring the island, she encounters an injured polar bear and names him "Bear". During this first meeting, we see the effect of the injured animal creating engagement. While the fear-appeal of the injured polar bear is present, there is another factor at work: cute aesthetics. The perception of polar bears and their associations as victims of climate change develops the notion that they are sweet, sad and loveable, displaying a loveable lack in their helplessness. As mentioned above, cute aesthetics can stem out of "a certain neediness and inability to stand alone" (Harris 1992, p. 179). Furthermore, Ngai argues that "it is crucial to cuteness [. . .] that it bears the look of an object not only formed but all too easily *de*-formed under the pressure of the subject's feelings or attitude towards it" (Ngai 2005, p. 816). Hence, this polar bear embodies cuteness when he displays that lack identified by Harris and Ngai as cuteness "aestheticizes unhappiness" (Harris 1992, p. 179). When Bear and April first meet, April identifies that loveable lack as Bear is starving and wounded. However, April interprets the sharpness in Bear's face as "not a horrible sharpness the way some people's faces are sharp permanently. But a sharpness born of hunger and desperation" (Gold 2021, p. 65). Bear's weakness then promotes that cute aesthetic associated with an imposed mien of cuteness, inviting an interpretation of the polar bear's wild nature.

Encountering cute aesthetics in the wild polar bear creates the cute affect. By habituating Bear with oat biscuits and peanut butter, April comes close enough to observe his "chocolate eyes" (Gold 2021, p. 79). Throughout the duology, comparisons are made between the polar bear's eyes and the comforting sweet treat. This interaction further reflects Christine Yano's observation of cute objects with neutral facial expressions. They argue, in combination with Jean Baudrillard's view that "as a mirror the object is perfect, precisely because it sends back not real images, but desired ones [. . .] What is more, you can look at an object without it looking back at you" (Baudrillard 1996, pp. 89–90 qtd in Yano 2013, p. 20). Cute objects which display neutral expressions become this mirror, "reflecting back desired images [. . .], a mute presence that does not look back at you or judge" (Yano 2013, p. 20). This comparison between the 'real' polar bear's neutral expression and chocolate serves to create comfort and cuteness in the otherwise intimidating image of a 'real' polar bear. For example, during their first up-close meeting, April remarks that

"his dark, chocolate-coloured eyes [. . .] even from this distance seemed gentle" (Gold 2021, p. 65). Or when April is riding Bear for the first time, we learn that "Bear's steady pulse beat against her skin and there was something about it that felt both comforting and safe. Like coming home after a day at school to a house smelling of freshly baked chocolate cupcakes" (Gold 2021, p. 147). The combination of food and cuteness illustrates Tom Lee's examination of diminutive cute objects:

> Cute things are defined by their capacity to be available to us to bring into ourselves, whether in a literal sense through eating, or through a more abstract but no less real means of possession, such as buying or looking. (Lee 2016, p. 4).

Therefore, through the comparisons with the safety and comfort of chocolate, that which is consumable, the polar bear is interpellated as a cute subject, embodying cuteness in his chocolate eyes. Furthermore, the cute affect of the starving polar bear on the child protagonist motivates April to attempt to cut off the plastic and fishing wire wrapped tightly around his paw. The cute affect in this example prompts a caregiving response. However, it also leads to an interpretation of the wild animal. During their first encounter, April remarks, "you're *completely* wild. And wild animals don't need human names. But I have to call you something, so I'm just going to call you Bear" (Gold 2021, p. 78). The desire to name the wild animal draws similarities with Jacques Derrida's observation that "the animal is a word, it is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to another living creature" (Derrida and Wills 2002, p. 392). By naming the polar bear "Bear", he is adopted as a pet. Therefore, the initial cute aesthetics lead to cute affects and, in turn, interpellate the wild animal as a cute subject when they display that loveable lack.

The cute affects do have a positive effect as they encourage April to learn more about how Bear came to be stranded on the island. Demonstrating the "necessity of an anthropomorphic approach" in children's literature, as it can help encourage children to explore animals' real lives (You 2021, p. 188). Gold's *The Last Bear* illustrates how affect can lead to cognition when, even before their formal meeting, April glimpses Bear from the window of the weather station and immediately begins to question her father about Bear Island. She learns there are no bears on the island because "people *killed* them all [. . .] and the ice caps":

> Polar bears are mostly marine animals and they use the ice caps as a hunting ground to catch seals. But now the ice caps are melting it means that they can't travel as far as they used to. That's why the polar bear population is dropping. (Gold 2021, pp. 47–48).

Furthermore, after developing a friendship with Bear, April learns through "instinct, sensitivity and canny ability to fill between the gaps" (Gold 2021, p. 186) that Bear had lost his mother and was trapped on the island alone (Gold 2021, p. 191). Later that day, to verify her story, April learns of the dramatic loss of sea ice around the island. Her father informs her that "the polar ice caps have, in fact, melted more in the past twenty years than they have in the past ten thousand years" (Gold 2021, p. 195). Acquiring knowledge of climate change and explaining it in text informs not only the literary child but the reading child as they read the text. April responds to learning of the detrimental decrease in polar bear habitat:

> 'Then we have to do something! [. . .] Why aren't people *doing* anything about it? Why aren't *you* doing more?'
>
> Dad frowned. It was obvious he had never asked himself this question and his.

> bushy eyebrows knitted together like a confused caterpillar. 'I don't know.' (Gold 2021, pp. 195–96).

Asking her father, who does not seem to understand how important his role is, highlights the juxtaposition in climate change action, namely the temporal scale. Furthermore, it addresses Sinéad Moriarty's view that environmental encounters in children's literature can exhibit "conventional positions of the adult as teacher and the child as student" (Moriarty 2021, pp. 197–98). Affect and cognition in climate change communication in this text leads to changes in behavior. Armed with these facts, April becomes determined to help Bear escape Bear Island and bring him to Svalbard to be with the rest of the polar bear population. In the reimagined wild of the 'real' polar bear, Gold's books become borderline ecopedagogical texts and so address the importance of children's fiction to reflect on the climate crisis and, as Oziewicz and Saguisag argue, envision "young people's agency to respond to it" (Oziewicz and Saguisag 2021, p. vii). Therefore, the following section will explore the ways in which Gold's duology considers child agency when responding to the climate crisis.

5. Behavior

The behavior change resulting from affect and cognition in Gold's work promotes the importance of individual over collective action, simultaneously illustrating April as an environmental hero in her fantastical relationship with Bear. Moriarty argues that environmental texts for children tend to display the conventional hero narrative where prominence is placed on the individual hero's success, reflecting an "enduring cultural focus on the individual" (Moriarty 2021, p. 200). To counter this, Moriarty offers Roni Natov's concept of "community as hero" narratives where "through a discussion of the power and responsibility of the group, the "community as hero" model could celebrate collective action while also working to hold accountable the groups and organizations that continue to destroy environments" (Moriarty 2021, p. 207). Both *The Last Bear* (Gold 2021) and *Finding Bear* (Gold 2023) display a preference towards the individual eco-hero narrative while concluding with help from the collective, skewing messages around agency.

In the first book, April decides to help return Bear to Svalbard to join the rest of the polar bear population. This journey involves April risking her life by sailing herself and Bear a day's boat ride across the Barents Sea. On this journey, they are caught in a storm, and April is dragged under the waves. She is saved by Bear, and the two are picked up by her friend Tör on the cargo ship, who dropped April and her father at the island at the beginning of the narrative. April's determination to save Bear and Bear's rescue of April convinces her father of the possibility of friendship between human and bear and the importance of bringing Bear to Svalbard.

In the second book, April takes full responsibility for Bear's survival, even denying the help and advice of a trained expert on the tundra. The importance placed on the individual child hero is again illustrated when, on an expedition to rescue Bear (after April learns he may have been shot), April ignores the advice of their guide, Hedda. After she becomes separated from her group in the open tundra with only the sledding dogs for comfort, April resolves "Hedda was wrong. She wasn't just a child. Or even a girl. She was half-bear and she would fight to do the right thing. Even if she never saw Bear again, she would still fight for him" (Gold 2023, p. 168). This example demonstrates Gail Melson's observation of animal guide stories. Melson explains:

> In modern animal guide stories, the child—often a young girl—owes more than her survival to her animal saviors [. . .] The child parts the curtain that separates animal societies from human experience. Because the child truly understands the

> animals, from inside their world, she can become their intermediary with often hostile, uncomprehending adult humans. (Melson 2005, p. 153).

This format can aid climate change communication in children's fiction. However, Gold's texts position the individual child as solely interested in and responsible for the welfare of the polar bear. Furthermore, when April breaks apart from her community (even if they are uncomprehending adults), she risks the search for Bear. In this example, April becomes opposed to her community and instead of accepting help, endangers herself to seek out Bear alone. The result is that she almost drowns, and Bear saves her again. Overall, Gold's narratives position the responsibility of the climate crisis on the child as an independent responsibility instead of a collective one. Only when the child is at risk is the adult invited back into the climate change conversation.

Overall, these texts do envision child agency when responding to the climate crisis. However, the ecopedagogical message becomes mixed between child individualism and collective adult ineptitude. The combination of affect, cognition and behavior in these examples do attempt "to enlist readers in taking action, encouraging them to reflect on the world as it is, and to imagine future scenarios if environmental degradation proceeds unabated" (Massey and Bradford 2011, p. 110), but presents limited behavior which the child reader can execute.

While the affective and cognitive factors can have similar effects on the child reader, the texts show limited ways in which children may change their behavior and become climate activists themselves. As Gold states, "you don't need to single-handedly rescue a polar bear like April (I wouldn't advise that!), but I hope this book encourages every reader to believe that they too can help" (Gold 2021, Author's Note, p. 295). Here, the wording presents the dilemma which many children's books on climate change struggle with and this is identifying actionable tasks for the child reader to become engaged with climate activism. Clare Echterling notes that many of these 'What You Can Do' sections are "useful but they tend to recycle the same tips over and over again" (Echterling 2016, p. 296). To some extent this is true of Gold's texts as there are these types of tips scattered throughout. For example, in the first book we learn that April had been "a proud vegetarian for over two years" (Gold 2021, p. 48) but we are not told why that is important relating to April's commitment to protecting the planet. The second book presents a few more actionable tasks. For example, before April flies back to Svalbard we learn that "April felt bad about flying. It was, after all, one of the major causes of climate change" and "she vowed to donate a whole month's worth of pocket money to a company that planted trees to offset carbon emissions" (Gold 2023, pp. 49–50). Unfortunately, there is no reference back to this "vow" once the story concludes, skimming the surface of how children can respond to the climate crisis. In fact, in the "Author's Note" at the end of *Finding Bear* (Gold 2023), Gold addresses "some of the things we can all do" but with heavy emphasis on "the grown-ups" and the political action they might take, like signing petitions and looking into "how our pensions are funded" (Gold 2023, p. 342). Clearly, there is a disconnect presented in who has the power to affect change, reflecting discord between the mighty child and authoritative adult. Anderson argues that without addressing systemic problems, this kind of advice "ultimately disempowers children by suggesting that their ability to participate in environmental activism does not extend beyond opting to drink from reusable bottles [. . .] perpetuating the assumed lack of agency that children have" (Anderson 2021, pp. 185–86). Furthermore, Beek and Lehmen note that "as children are not usually allowed to participate in political debates on a national or international level, their agency in fighting climate change is largely directed to actions in the domestic space" (Beek and Lehmann 2024, p. 155) Anderson, Beek and Lehmann highlight key points which Echterling condenses down to this question: "why can't children be political?" (Echterling

2016, p. 294). Overall, these texts demonstrate that the combination of the cute affect of polar bears and cognition can change behavior. Cuteness has the power to affect change. But the texts would have benefitted from not a reimagination of the wild animal but a demonstration of it, responsibly placing the animal in its own life and illustrate change through a collective effort to protect the arctic, celebrating "the power of the responsibility of the group" (Moriarty 2021, p. 193).

6. Conclusions

A loveable lack seems to dominate climate change discourse with polar bear depictions. Their sweet and sad dispositions draw on cute aesthetics, and as such, they are poised to visually communicate the slow violence of climate change. The dominance of such images suggests a preference for surface-level engagement when the systemic problems can be glossed over and has led some groups like Oxfam to develop their Sisters on the Planet project (2008), where they adopted the slogan "people not polar bears" to communicate that climate change is also a social justice and poverty issue (Manzo 2010b, p. 98). Furthermore, the iconization of polar bears as an emblem for climate change highlights Anderson's observation that we should be wary of the cutification of climate change in children's fiction, as we risk "defanging" the danger of this crisis (Anderson 2021, p. 179). Therefore, when Gold presents Bear with a similar loveable lack that is illustrated in climate change communication of polar bears, it also draws on the lack found in cute aesthetics, which then invites the child protagonist to interpellate the polar bear as a cute subject. Clearly, there are benefits to the cute affect as it inspires April to action to save Bear from the island, and so, the terms of engagement (affect, cognition and behavior) are fulfilled. However, Gold's texts lack an important factor in climate change engagement: connection to 'the everyday', which suggests that these narratives could still have similar effects as fear-appeals featuring polar bears, only emphasizing the scale of the crisis, pushing solutions into the future.

Furthermore, *The Last Bear* (Gold 2021) and *Finding Bear* (Gold 2023) demonstrate a form of child agency which relies heavily on the traditional hero role, where the success of the individual is prioritized over collaborative achievements with the child's community. These texts then emphasize child *might* and adult ineptitude when handling issues of the environment, drawing on the temporal scale of the crisis. Overall, these texts do create an environment where the child reader can experience affect and cognition of climate change communication through the child protagonist. As such, when the child protagonist encounters animals depicted as 'real' in children's fiction, it can help navigate selfhood "through the lens of the 'the other', of which the animal is perhaps the most evocative and compelling form" (Jaques 2017, pp. 42–43). In this case, Bear's presentation of cute aesthetics and cute affect inspire April to become a climate activist. With these views in mind, Gold's duology presents opportunities to discuss child agency when combatting adult authority on the climate crisis through the child's relationship to the wild animal. While individual child responses to the crisis should be encouraged, they should also appear in a collaborative effort with larger communities so that overlapping temporalities unite to develop solutions.

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Notes

1 Nima Sarikhani. Ice Bed. The Natural History Museum, London. Wildlife Photographer of the Year, Special Award: People's Choice 2023.

2 Manzo (2010b) explains that cognition, affect and behavior combined have more positive effects for raising awareness on the climate crisis than if these factors operate individually.

3 For more information on the representations of the polar bear across Northern cultures, please see further: (Dolitsky and Michael 2020; Engelhard 2017).

4 Page number reference is from ProQuest generated PDF accessed 4 September 2024.

5 In fact, Mickey Mouse underwent his own cute makeover, at first appearing too much like an adult and mischievous mouse, to adopting rounded, childish features and a sweeter nature (Lawrence 1986).

6 For example, in Japan, not only are there *Kawaii* (cute) aesthetics, but also *kawaisō* (cute and pitiful) (Kinsella 2013, p. 236), *Gurukawa* (creepy-cute) and *Yami Kawaii* (sickly-cute) and these are just a few examples of the multifaceted cute (Lieber-Milo 2022, p. 757). Cuteness under Kawaii has similarities with how cuteness appears in the West. For further reference please see: Dale (2023); Kinsella (2013); Lieber-Milo and Nittono (2019); Lieber-Milo (2022).

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Article

Eco-Activism and Strategic Empathy in the Novel *Vastakarvaan*

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Abstract: Ecocritical children's literature research in the 2020s focuses on eco-activism, especially climate activism. Although the causes of activism have changed, different kinds of dissent are still relevant. This article focuses on Mika Wickström's novel *Vastakarvaan* (*Against the Grain*, published in 2002), which describes a young Finnish student's ethical dilemma: her eco-anarchist friends are planning an attack on a fur farm that the protagonist's family owns. It evaluates the novel with new theoretical insights from affective ecocriticism and narrative empathy, and the main concepts that have been explored are youth activism and types of dissent. The analysis is grounded in the concept of strategic empathy, exploring the ways in which emotions and ethical decisions of the protagonist are represented in physical, social, and temporal settings: how types of dissent are presented and how bounded strategic empathy, ambassadorial strategic empathy, and broadcast strategic empathy are presented. The analysis demonstrates how the protagonist's dilemma is emphasized in different stages of dissent: her decision to participate in the attack or not is debated on different levels of narration.

Keywords: affective ecocriticism; animal rights activism; Animal Liberation Front (ALF); dissent; strategic empathy; YA novel

1. Introduction

In recent research of ecocritical children's literature, activism has been related to climate activism, especially when discussing books inspired by activists such as Xiuhtezcatl Martinez or Greta Thunberg (see, e.g., Murphy 2024; Oziewicz and Saguisag 2021). Climate change is a global issue that requires global solutions. It is an intangible object and can be seen as a hyperobject that is indefinable in place, time, and causality (see Morton 2013; Oziewicz and Saguisag 2021). Hyperobjects are often associated with anxiety and fear because they are phenomena on a large scale and are difficult to counter and connect to responsible actors. Instead of these kinds of questions of activism and emotions, this article discusses activism connected to a smaller-scale, distinct issue, namely rebellion for animal rights. The aim is to study the forms that dissent takes in a Finnish young adult (YA) novel, which describes actions connected to the animal liberation movement and what kind of empathy is connected to rebellion and ethical decision-making.

At the beginning of the 21st century, young people's relation to nearby nature, wildlife, and animals' rights were more newsworthy than climate issues. Animal justice and ethical choices were more manageable as tangible problems, focusing on local concerns instead of global actions and issues of socio-economic injustice or intergenerational injustice linked to climate crises (Piispa and Kiilakoski 2022). Activism was connected to political movements or organizations, and narratives about Anomalia and Greenpeace were fed to the global population, also in Finland. The issue of animal liberation is bound to the attacks on

Finnish farms, while they opened a vivid discussion on animal justice and the treatment of animals. The issue was thematized even in Finnish literature, as literary scholars have pointed out in their studies on fur farming discourse in relation to different genres, like poetry or detective stories (Lahtinen 2013; Lehtimäki and Luhtala 2020). The animal rights movement was associated with Finland, especially as a youth movement, and young adult attacks on fur farms and ecotages starting in 1995 were widely noticed (Lundbom 2016). Activists started public acts of animal liberation and demonstrations. These can be seen as following the animal liberation movement's background philosophies, such as Tom Regan and Peter Singer's book *Animal Liberation. A New Ethics for our Treatment of Animals* (Singer 1975). In Finland, the Animal Liberation Front movement and national associations were established quite late. The armed attacks on mink and chinchilla farms in Ostrobothnian regions were serious. After an understanding of the problems caused by the liberation of animals to wildlife, the liberation front moved to video campaigns and used social media to reveal the maltreatment of animals (Lundbom 2016, pp. 47–48).

Animal rights activism was also reflected in YA literature before the flood of eco-dystopias (Rättyä Forthcoming). When activism focuses on animal liberation instead of climate change, the power relations are different. Animal liberation activists need to account for the suffering of animals inside and outside their cages and the survival of released animals. As well the livelihoods of farming entrepreneurs and their ability to take care of non-released animals must be considered. Sabotages and anarchism affect people in other ways than today's Extinction Rebellion attacks on museums, parliament buildings or traffic; activists attack small-scale actors instead of the bigger governance. The forms of activism and dissent vary.

Research on eco-citizens, environmental heroes, and eco- and climate-warriors in eco-criticism (e.g., Heggen et al. 2019; Massey and Bradford 2011; Moriarty 2021; Murphy 2024; Schreiber 2021; Stephens 2010) is expanding rapidly. Even radical environmentalism has been described in YA literature, such as Carl Hiaasen's novels (Aitchison 2015; Panos 2017). Effects and empathy have also been the focus of recent ecocriticism and eco-narratology (Gaard 2020; Weik von Mossner 2020b), and empirical ecocriticism has increased (e.g., Goga and Pujol-Valls 2020; Guanio-Uluru 2019; Małecki et al. 2020). This article zooms in and studies eco-activism and the animal liberation movement in the YA novel. The focus is on Northern Europe, Finland, where fur farms still function, although most European countries have banned fur farming by law. At the turn of the millennium, the animal rights movement's attacks in Finland have been dealt with in only a few YA novels. It might become a topic that will gain more prominence in the time of new materialist viewpoints (see also Ääri 2017).

The affective turn on children's literature research has been described in several articles and anthologies (see, e.g., Bullen et al. 2018; Coats and Papazian 2023; Stephens 2014). Still, the perspective of empathy has been focused on in only a few articles, for example, articles in the anthology *Affect, Emotion, and Children's Literature*. In their publications, Nikolajeva (2018) and Kokkola (2018) approached empathy in children's fiction but based their views on cognitive psychology or the concept of the theory of mind instead of affective narratology. Therefore, I find there exists a research gap in looking at empathy in a sense, as Keen (2007) presents it, and I combine the perspective with an issue of rebellion for animal rights.

The aim is to explore the ways empathy is built in a novel that discusses difficult ethical environmental justice issues; thus, the critical theoretical frameworks chosen for this article are effective ecocriticism (Bladow and Ladino 2018) and eco-narratology (James 2015) and the main conceptual frameworks are strategic empathy (Keen 2008) and youth

dissent (O'Brien et al. 2018). The youth dissent typology provides an adaptable frame for exploring representations of environmental activism. I explore the ways in which the emotions and ethical decisions of the protagonist are represented in physical, social, and temporal settings—how dissent is presented in the text and what kinds of strategic empathy are introduced.

2. Theoretical Framework

The affective perspective framing this article is grounded in affective ecocriticism (Bladow and Ladino 2018; Gaard 2020, pp. 225–27). The purpose of it is, as Bladow and Ladino (2018) described, "to identify the emotions that circulate environmental issues today, to clarify how that circulation works, to acknowledge the powerful role environments themselves play in shaping affective experience, and to identify new affects emerging in our contemporary moment" (p. 3).

2.1. From Activism to Disruptive Dissent and Eco-Anarchy

When O'Brien et al. (2018) studied the variety of forms of dissent, they focused on how youth challenge power relationships, especially those that are used for legitimating or constituting practices connected to perpetuating climate change. Based on an analysis of interviews and an extensive literature review of youth activism and political activism, they created a typology of three types of youth activism—dutiful, disruptive, and dangerous dissent. The borders of types are not clear cut, but they can exist, overlapping each other when describing youth's symbolic acts or political mobilization. Their view on youth as challenging the maintenance of the status quo in climate change policy provides a fruitful perspective for analyzing youth activism in YA literature. Although their focus is on climate change, this typology is applicable to other kinds of eco-activism. I will deploy it in my analysis of a novel about animal rights activism.

The first type of activism is dutiful dissent, which refers to dissent expressed through participating in activities organized by existing institutions. It expresses resistance to dominant practices. This kind of dissent can be focused on the decision-making process connected to fossil-fuel production or urban planning. Activists' actions are mainly targeted to strengthen the legitimacy of these organizations or institutions. The second type, disruptive dissent, questions the organizational and institutional power to make changes by challenging power relationships through protests, marches, or rallies. The third type, dangerous dissent, goes beyond boycotts by trying to create new forms or actions of rebellion that could cause long-term transformations. The practices and technologies vary greatly, and opening the critique against the systems gives rise to dangerous actions. The adjective dangerous in the label refers to the threat actions cause to the powerful and political elite. Beyond the three dissent types, there exist violent forms of activism (O'Brien et al. 2018). These forms of anarchist activism can turn to sabotage and terrorism—in this context, environmental violence, ecotages, and eco-terrorism. In the Finnish context and discourses of eco-activism, the word eco-terrorism was often used in both media texts and fiction (Lahtinen 2013; Lehtimäki and Luhtala 2020).

2.2. Affective Ecocriticism and Strategic Empathy

An affective turn has been taken during the last 20 years in ecocritical research (Gaard 2020; Weik von Mossner 2017, pp. 8–13). As James (2015, pp. 5–33) and Weik von Mossner (2017, pp. 12–13) expressed, there is a need for a narrative analysis of affective perspectives in ecocriticism. They draw the integration of ecocriticism and narratology from Lehtimäki's (2013) view of the cross-fertilization of these approaches. Thus, my analysis is grounded

in eco-narratology (Weik von Mossner 2020a). Following James' (2015, pp. 24–25) focus, the main questions of eco-narratology concern micro- and macro-narrative structures and different scales of environmental space and time. I achieved this by applying the concept of strategic empathy (Keen 2007, pp. 142–43; Weik von Mossner 2017, pp. 80–83, 103–4; also Małecki et al. 2020).

I rely on Keen's (2007, pp. 4–5) interpretation of the concept of empathy as "spontaneous, responsive sharing of an appropriate feeling" and describing how "we feel what we believe to be the emotions of others". My perspective has also been influenced by Paul Hogan (2018), who emphasizes how an "author's effort to cultivate reader's empathies towards thematic ends" (p. 184) is the purpose "for a particular audience". The further take on affective ecocriticism and empathy in this context is inspired by Weik von Mossner's (2017) writings.

Affective criticism provides tools for studying emotional experiences in fiction. When I study empathy in the text, I focus on how the characters experience the feelings or affective reactions of other characters in the novel (Hogan 2011, p. 63; 2018, p. 119). According to these premises, empathy in fiction can also be defined as aesthetic empathy, as it does not include the reader's actions (Hogan 2011, p. 276; Keen 2007, p. 4).

Strategic empathy has been connected to politically and ideologically minded author's techniques (Hogan 2018, pp. 128–30; Weik von Mossner 2017, p. 82). Keen (2007, pp. 142–43; 2008) described the choices the author has with the concept of strategic empathy, which can vary in the author's attempt to achieve the readers' attention from feeling with familiar others to emphasizing our common vulnerabilities and hopes. Bounded strategic empathy addresses readers who are compounded within the group (ideology), while ambassadorial strategic empathy aims to encourage prominent or possible group members to join the group. The third variation of strategic empathy is broadcast strategic empathy, which targets a large audience (Keen 2008). I apply this hierarchical model of empathy to my analysis.

3. Against the Grain: A Finnish View on Animal Activism

In the early 2000s, YA novels tackled lofty themes in various ways. As modern authority lost its significance in the lives of postmodern youth, the questioning of power and the testing of boundaries took on new forms. Emotional abuse, states of mind, and anorexia rose to prominence in Finnish YA literature. The limitations of life, death, and existence became central themes, shifting from the "problem" realism of the 1990s to ontological explorations of basic existence and responsibility.

Contemporary YA literature has dealt with questions of utopia and postapocalyptic themes, and the agency of young adults has often been placed in the near future. Ecocritical thematic have been studied more in children's literature and picturebooks and are often related to climate change questions. The YA literature that describes animal liberation issues is scarce, but the attacks that were designed and executed by young female activists especially raised the issue in literary fields (Laakso et al. 2019; Lahtinen 2013; Rättyä 2005, pp. 12, 36; Säntti 2011). According to the database of the Institute for Finnish Children's Literature, only a few YA novels concerning eco-rebellion with animal liberation or ecotage have been published. The first of these was published just after the media attention garnered by the attacks. Nora Schuurman, in her *Pelkääjän paikka* (Passenger Seat, Schuurman 1996), wrote about ecotages. Tapani Bagge's *Suden hetki* (Wolf Hours, Bagge 1999) deals with sabotage. Freeing broiler chickens, attacks against milk production farming, and mad cow disease (BSE) were items in Seita Parkkola's and Niina Repo's *Lupaus* (The Promise, Parkkola and Repo 2007), Anu Ojala's *Pommi* (The Bomb, Ojala 2014)

and *Petos* (The Deception, Ojala 2018). In *Pommi* and *Petos*, the activists change their modus operandi while they reveal mistreatment through video filming or broadcasting instead of direct attacks or releasing the animals, as in Mika Wickström's *Vastakarvaan* (*Against the Grain*) (Wickström 2002).

Mika Wickström (1965–) is a significant reformer of Finnish YA literature who portrays the postmodern world, geopolitics, and future threats faced by the youth of the 1990s (e.g., Grünn 2003). Wickström's book, *Sukupolvi X* (Generation X, Wickström 1995), sheds light on gang life and family estrangement caused by individualism and language. In his novels *Sebastian* (Wickström 1996) and *Kunniakierros* (Wickström 1998), he grapples with serious subjects, such as schizophrenia and doping. Wickström makes bold moves and unflinching dissections in both his narratives and settings, as seen in *Vastakarvaan*. His work is both timely and timeless and addresses his subjects robustly. Wickström can be seen as an ideologically minded author. In addition to his serious YA novels, Wickström has written fiction about sports in his earlier novels. He has also been acknowledged for his biographies and factual books.

In *Vastakarvaan*, Wickström explores the theme of animal rights activism. The narrator of the novel is Kirsi, a first-year biology student from Ostrobothnia. She grew up in a family that had a fur farm. Kirsi begins her biology studies at the University of Turku and, following her new friend Rosa enrolls in an environmental philosophy course where she experiences an ideological awakening. The course is taught by devoted lecturer Janne Saarikoski, through whom Kirsi becomes acquainted with the principles of ecological anarchism. Through Rosa, Kirsi meets a group of activists who put these principles into practice. They advocate for the philosophy of maximal freedom: "Anyone can do anything as long as they do not oppress, exploit, or harm other living beings or nature". However, the contemplation of ecological anarchism, maximal freedom and an anarchist society does not excite Kirsi initially. Gradually, she becomes more involved with the animal activist group and begins to change her views on the treatment of animals. She starts participating in demonstrations and gains access to the activists' plans for past and future actions. Eventually, Kirsi faces significant decisions: Is she willing to move from theory to action for animal rights, and what price is she ready to pay for her choices? Finally, she must face a choice between her family and her new friends and ideals.

Throughout the book, Kirsi repeatedly reflects on the lifestyle choices of her acquaintances, especially when she learns that her friends target animal testing laboratories and fur farms to draw public attention and further animal rights. As a biologist, Kirsi also wants to protect animals, but she is not unconditionally ready to accept her friends' approaches. Ultimately, Kirsi commits to participating in an attack on a fur farm. The nature of the operation requires Kirsi to first commit to the cell, and only then do the others reveal the target of the attack to her. Her world is shaken when she realizes that this time, her friends' target is her own parents' fur farm. The ending of the story is open, but Kirsi's decision is not told.

4. Analysis Method

The article explores (1) the ways in which the emotions and ethical decisions of the protagonist are represented in physical, social, and temporal settings, (2) what kinds of strategic empathy are presented, and (3) how different types of dissent are presented in the text. To analyze the novel, I explored the ways in which it represents the milieu, which consists of physical, social, and temporal settings; what kinds of empathy the characters experience and the author creates; and how dissent is presented in the text. I used ecocritical

content analysis (EcCA, see Rättyä 2018, Forthcoming), which has been inspired by Short's (2017, pp. 1–15) view on critical content analysis (see also Bradford 2017; Mathis 2015).

I examined the representations of the environment and a character's social relationships with typology ecological settings in text and pictures (Rättyä 2018). The typology covers three system levels. The first is the microsystem, which comprises the characters' immediate surroundings or settings. The second is the mesosystem, which comprises the milieus in which the individual participates, and the third is the macrosystem, which contains the social, educational, ideological, or institutional patterns of a culture or subculture. These system levels were studied in social, physical, and temporal settings. Social settings can be divided into system levels based on the scale and intensity of social connections. The distance from protagonists' homes constructs different physical settings in the micro-, meso-, and macro systems, ranging from local to global. Temporal settings extend from the immediate time of events to decades and centuries. (Rättyä 2018, pp. 161–63). After analyzing the ecological settings, I examined the emotions related to the types of dissent that the characters expressed in social and physical settings and reviewed the appearance of emotions at each system level. This reading applied typology by O'Brien et al. (2018), which consists of three types of youth activism—dutiful, disruptive, and dangerous dissent.

5. Results

5.1. Arenas for Eco-Activist Rebellion

The temporal macrosystem setting in *Vastakarvaan* is 21st-century Western society, which deals with technological items (mobile phones). Veganism, the Animal Liberation Front (ALF), and the attempts to ban fur farming signal the environmental turn in societies. The temporal mesosystem setting is described with short references to ecotage and attacks, such as Romania's cyanide catastrophe and attacks on Finnish fur farms. The plot is placed in actions covering almost one academic year from Autumn to Spring, depicting Kirsi's first lectures and Springtime. The Finnish seasons aptly reflect the scale of feelings, while the darkest moments in Kirsi's experience of animal treatment at home farm are in the darkest and coldest time of the year. The Spring sun and tinkling rills illustrate the new beginning at the end of the novel. The timeline is illustrated and periodized with rallies and ecotages.

In *Vastakarvaan*, discussions of the Finnish welfare state, Finnish law and political decisions, as well as the socio-economic questions of the social macrosystem, depict the social settings. The broader intellectual social milieu is made familiar in the text by introducing international eco-philosophers and authors. For example, animal justice issues are scrutinized with the help of Peter Singer's texts. Moral philosophers Jeromy Bentham and Tom Regan are also mentioned in Saarikoski's lectures on eco-anarchism.

Social settings are quite limited. Kirsi's nearest friend is Rosa, who proves to be a radical activist. Rosa's friend Carita enters Kirsi's nearest circle. During her visit to her childhood home, Kirsi spends her time with family members: mother, father, brother Kimmo, and her ex-boyfriend Arto. Otherwise, only lecturer Janne Saarikoski has a bigger role in her life—as a kind of mentor and a short love story before Kirsi realizes her affection for Rosa. The mesosystem of social settings is also quite narrow. Some study mates are presented in connection with parties and lectures. This concentrated, tightly packed assemblage is used skillfully to enlighten the questions of animal justice while the cell of activists is tightening its grip on Kirsi's actions and possible actions against fur farms.

The physical settings are in line with the social settings. The dichotomy of ideological foundations is depicted on the micro level between Rosa's and friends' rooms where banners are made for rallies and Kirsi's own childhood home farm, lecture hall for eco-

anarchism and moral philosophy contra fur farms at hometown on the meso level, and academic world and fur industry at Ostrobothnia on the macro level.

Thus, the arenas for eco-activist rebellion are built from the micro level to the macro level with dichotomies: Kirsi's small circles at home change to cells of activists, and the rural district of fur farmers to an environmental philosophy course at university and eco-philosophers.

5.2. Towards Bounded Strategic Empathy

The dichotomies at system levels in settings emphasize Kirsi's two-fold standpoint—whether to understand and accept fur farming and farmed production as a trade or to rally for animal rights. In the narrative, Kirsi's empathy-inviting dilemma is accentuated with first-person narration. Her choice to appraise animal justice is built up with four sections in the novel *Vastakarvaan*. I explored what kind of empathy exists and what kinds of strategies are to be considered with the help of Keen's (2007, 2008) hierarchical model of strategic empathy.

The first section presents the ideology of eco-anarchy and animal rights as well as moral-philosophical perspectives. The author's strategy to discuss these questions can be regarded in Keen's terms as broadcasting strategic empathy. The lectures by Saarikoski and the works by Singer and Bentham are introduced as quite neutral informative resources. The gospel is targeted at a broader audience that is not expected to act. Ambassadorial strategic empathy, which addresses people outside the group but aims to cultivate their empathy (Keen 2008, p. 483), is present in the first and second sections, where Rosa and Janne talk about the issue of animal rights. This appeals to Kirsi's and readers' emotions by considering the issues at a more personal level: her choices of clothing and fabrics (leather, cotton, or line), her diet (veganism), fossil-fuel energy, and transport are challenged. What kind of decisions do she and other people make in their daily lives, and what kind of effects might they have?

The third section delves into more concrete actions that need to be taken, according to eco-anarchists. This bounded strategic empathy, which is aimed at the persons already being part of the inside group (Keen 2008, pp. 481–82), arises when Rosa and Carita commit Kirsi for radical activism by taking her to rallies, hiding the secret documentaries of the cell and preparing the attacks. The change from dutiful to disruptive dissent is shown in first-person narration of Kirsi's excitement at the meeting before the target is exposed.

> I waited in silent excitement, wondering what it was about—a liberation strike, toppling hunting platforms, sabotaging road construction machinery, gluing the locks of a slaughterhouse. . .?
>
> - -
>
> When Carita asked me to open the map file to the page of Ostrobothnia, my heart nearly stopped. There was still a chance to back out. I knew nothing about the strike. Ostrobothnia was a large area. I could have said I agreed to go anywhere but Ostrobothnia. (p. 252)
>
> [Odotin jännityksestä mykkänä, mistä oli kyse—vapautusiskusta, metsästyslavojen kaatamisesta, tietyökoneiden sabotoinnista, teurastamon lukkojen liimailusta. . .?
>
> —
>
> Kun Carita pyysi minua avaamaan karttatiedostosta Pohjanmaan sivun, sydämeni oli pysähtyä. Vielä olisi ollut mahdollisuus perääntyä. En tiennyt iskusta

> mitään. Pohjanmaa oli iso alue. Olisi voinut sanoa että suostuin lähtemään minne tahansa mutten Pohjanmaalle. (p. 252)

At this moment, the activist's pride in their work is also mentioned; the pride is that so many farms have already been targets.

The final section concerns Kirsi's decision to be part of the eco-activist cell. The author's strategic empathy does not seem to continue on the side of the action; the novel ends with the open question of whether Kirsi decides to participate in the sabotage. The closure is open, and the author loosens the grip. Throughout the novel, the author uses expressions of anarchism, anarchy, and eco-terror. This reflects the time of publication and the Finnish context. Terror is mainly used in chapters that talk about media attention on rallies and sabotages.

5.3. Invitation to Dangerous Dissent and Eco-Anarchy

As the first-person narrator explains her feelings during and after the first lectures, her own beliefs and understanding of the world are questioned. She hears about ecological anarchism for the first time, and the lecturer combines eco-anarchism with the philosophy of maximal freedom. It is explained that anyone can do anything so far as they do not subjugate, deprive, or harm other living creatures or nature and that in an anarchist society there is no power hierarchy but only autonomic individuals. That leads to their own responsibilities (pp. 11–13).

Kirsi's knowledge of what animal rights are is turned over from her previous insights:

> I hated philosophy. I applied to study biology because I loved animals and nature and wanted a profession in which I could combine work and hobbies. I had lived in the countryside all my childhood, roamed the forests, and learned to respect nature on its own terms. Environmental philosophical contemplation meant nothing to me. I simply did not understand what it was about or why it was needed. (p. 16)

> [Inhosin filosofointia. Olin tullut lukemaan biologiaa, koska rakastin eläimiä ja luontoa ja koska halusin ammatin, jossa pystyin yhdistämään työn ja harrastukset. Olin asunut maalla koko lapsuuteni, samoillut metsissä ja oppinut kunnioittamaan luontoa sen omilla ehdoilla. Ympäristöfilosofinen pohdiskelu ei merkinnyt minulle mitään. En kerta kaikkiaan ymmärtänyt, mistä siinä oli kyse ja mihin sitä ylipäänsä tarvittiin.]

Kirsi is provoked by the lecturers' ideas and Carita's questions about why she is wearing leather clothes or eating animals. She is upset when city girls tell her how to relate to animals, even though she had a very close relationship with animals during her childhood. They tell her that she does not have enough knowledge. Kirsi turns in tears. As a first step to understanding animal justice, she is encouraged to read Peter Singer's Justice for Animals. Thereby, Kirsi's earlier choices of living are gradually questioned. In the first and third portions of the book, Kirsi does not understand why Rosa is a vegan. Kirsi sees milk products as a normal part of the food industry and as a good way to favor local organic farms. Her own beliefs are highlighted, and she admits that it is not worth arguing with Rosa or Carita while her own knowledge is not sufficient.

These changes reflect the idea of broadcast strategic empathy and dutiful dissent. First, Kirsi is given general information on the possibilities of changing her lifestyle and participating in the movement, starting with her own smaller-scale actions. However, her actions are not quite what her new friends expect. Their actions are disruptive and aim to challenge systems.

The next level of insight into activists' actions is when Rosa is caught and injured during an attack on a chinchilla farm. The short episode makes the philosophy of total freedom concrete and real. When Kirsi describes her feelings about Rosa's experiences, Kirsi (in a first-person narrator) expresses how devastated she is.

> I was shocked to my core. What else could I have been? I did not believe Rosa to be like that. She could not be that foolish. She was an animal rights activist, "fox girl". She was ruining her life—and the lives of the farmers. The rodents would have been perfectly fine with their breeders. They received the best food and better treatment than most people. The same applied to other farm animals, such as foxes and minks, even though they all eventually ended up being killed.
>
> [Olin sydänjuuriani myöten järkyttynyt.
>
> Mitä muutakaan olisin voinut olla? En uskonut Rosaa sellaiseksi. Hän ei voinut olla niin tyhmä. Hän oli kettutyttö. Hän pilasi elämänsä—ja elinkeinonharjoittajienkin elämän. Jyrsijöillä ei olisi ollut mitään hätää kasvattajiensa luona. Ne saivat parasta ruokaa ja paremman kohtelun kuin valtaosa ihmisistä. Sama päti muihinkin tarhaeläimiin, esimerkiksi kettuihin ja minkkeihin, vaikka ne kaikki tulivatkin lopulta tapetuiksi.]

Rosa explained that they had done the background checking of the farm and the real condition of the place.

Kirsi (p. 76) then admits that she does not accept animal cruelty or approve of violence, while the misconditioning needs to be changed in legal ways. She places herself in a way that can be understood as dutiful dissent (O'Brien et al. 2018). The debate continues between Kirsi and Rosa; they discuss Finnish law and the Finnish way of accepting lower levels of animal rights questions than, for example, England or Sweden. Kirsi justifies her own view with the harm that will happen when animals are let into the wild nature (pp. 78–79). This phase does not end with mutual understanding; Kirsi is not ready to accept Rosa's ideas before there is a better solution for the problem and the entrepreneurs. Kirsi understands that theory and practice do not proceed at the same tempo. Wickedly, Rosa asks Kirsi to hide some restored data concerning the attacks. Kirsi is now part of the inside group. This ends the first section by opening the door from dutiful dissent to disruptive dissent and showing Kirsi what dangerous dissent is.

The second section starts with a description of Rosa, Carita, and Kirsi, who are preparing themselves to participate in a rally against animal production. Kirsi has stepped into the side of disruptive dissent and challenged the powerful by participating in the rallies. Her knowledge has grown, and her thoughts have changed:

> Everything I learned during autumn supported my belief that humans should better understand the uniqueness of nature and their responsibility for it. The idea that some saw evolution as nature's great war, from whose suffering the noblest of animals, humans, had emerged, did not align with my own thoughts. It was necessary to understand that nature was not based on hierarchy but on diversity. Nature did not necessarily have a higher purpose than life itself. (p. 96)
>
> [Kaikki mitä olin oppinut syksyn aikana, tuki käsitystäni siitä, että ihmisen olisi pitänyt paremmin ymmärtää luonnon ainutkertaisuus ja vastuunsa siitä. Se että jotkut näkivät evoluution luonnon suurena sotana, jonka kärsimyksistä oli syntynyt eläimistä ylevin eli ihminen, ei vastannut omia ajatuksiani. Piti ymmärtää, ettei luonto perustunut hierarkiaan vaan monimuotoisuuteen. Luonnolla ei välttämättä ollut sen ylevämpää tarkoitusta kuin elämä itse.]

Her decisions of action are strengthened when she visits her home farm during the Christmas holidays. Finally, she had to leave earlier than expected when she heard the screaming and whining from their own fur cages. This is repeated twice (pp. 137, 143). Her feelings are not described in detail, but her reaction to crying is. The step from disruptive to dangerous dissent is not a big step, and even this does not really seem to follow the maximal freedom aspect (which was the starting point for lectures on eco-anarchy), while Kirsi is forced to take part in liberation action under time pressure.

6. To Conclude

Vastakarvaan describes a young student's ethical dilemma: her eco-anarchist friends are planning an attack on a fur farm that the protagonist's family owns, and she is involved. To explore the affective experiences and environmental topics depicted in the novel, the main concepts chosen for use in this study were types of dissent (O'Brien et al. 2018) and strategic empathy (Keen 2008). The analysis demonstrates how her dilemma was emphasized; her decision of whether to participate in the planned sabotage or not is debated on different levels of narration. This can be seen as a strong suggestion for implied readers to identify their own opinions.

With the help of different forms of strategic empathy and a typology of dissent, I explored micro- and macro-narrative structures and narrative strategies and identified the choices and emotions circulating animal justice issues in this novel. The typology describing forms of dissent revealed the layers of activism. However, as an analysis tool for further studies, I suggest an expanded typology with two forms of rebellious actions: ecotages and eco-terrorism. As Kirsi describes her thoughts on rebellion, first come sabotages, then ecotages, which cause financial loss (p. 209). The dissent typology was derived from youth activism on climate change in real life in O'Brien et al. (2018) research, which is based on power relationships. Ecotages and eco-terrorism move beyond power positions while potentially affecting everyone limitlessly. The two added forms of activism or anarchy are though described in YA fiction and depict violent, radical, and illegal actions. As such, they evoke negative emotions and can be used as tools for strategic empathy. Inspired by Weik von Mossner's (2017) readings, I applied Keen's idea of strategic empathy in my analysis and examined the three variations of strategic empathy in the actions of the main characters and their ways of impacting each other. The author's empathy strategy also aims to reach and speak to the implied audience through broadcasting and ambassadorial strategic empathy. Empathy is built from public to private, bounded belonging to an ideological group, emphasizing the character's position as an outsider. By taking the main character to the border of dissent and ecotages, the moral values and empathy for the person who must make the decision are brought to the forefront.

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Article

Do I Dare to Leave the Universe Alone? Environmental Crisis, Narrative Identity, and Collective Agency in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction

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Abstract: Narrative identity, or the construction of a coherent life story to shape a sense of self, is a crucial aspect of identity formation. Narrative identity is impacted by the prevailing cultural narratives during the period of adolescence. This article, drawing on theory from literary studies and sociology, explores the impact of cultural narratives of environmental crisis and destruction on an emerging narrative identity in adolescents as represented in young adult literature. The selected novels—*Dry* by Neal and Jarrod Shusterman, *Green Rising* by Lauren James, and *Snowflake*, *AZ* by Marcus Sedgwick—examine their protagonists' agency and transformational potential. They foreground collective agency and human–nonhuman assemblages as possible responses to environmental crisis. Although two novels (*Dry*, *Green Rising*) affirm that narratives of environmental destruction engage the transformational potential of adolescents for society, the third novel (*Snowflake*, *AZ*) complicates this image and questions whether the impact of narratives of environmental crisis could be too overwhelming for adolescents to bear. The article concludes that the young adolescent protagonists adapt their narrative identity in response to environmental destruction.

Keywords: narrative identity; YA fiction; climate change; characterization; narratology; adolescent identity

1. Introduction

"Am I a criminal?" Luca, age 15, looks directly into the camera. Together with their best friend Bo, Luca has recently been detained for participating in a non-violent protest organized by Extinction Rebellion, a group of climate activists who employ the tactic of civil disobedience to garner political attention for the ongoing and urgent climate crisis. The arrest was captured on camera by film director Pieter Van Eecke as part of the documentary *Planet B* (Van Eecke 2023), which follows the lives and friendship of Luca and Bo as they go through adolescence while facing the threat of climate change. "No" seems like the obvious answer to Luca's question[1]. Bo and Luca are not criminals but teenagers concerned about their future. For young people, that future has, according to Margaret Somerville, become a "storied future of inevitable entanglement in the fate of the planet" (Somerville 2017, p. 399). The awareness of an entanglement between the fate of the planet and the fate of the individual seems to be an essential feature of growing up in the Anthropocene. Originally proposed as a new epoch marked by the impact of Western industrialized societies on the geological layers of the Earth (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000), the Anthropocene has

become an umbrella term under which to consider the social and ethical implications of our current timeframe[2].

One of the strengths of the documentary *Planet B* is that it depicts the paradoxical and conflicting emotional responses that can arise from living in the Anthropocene. Yes, it is tragic that Bo and Luca, who are only just teenagers, have to spend time in jail for asking older generations to consider their future. However, the documentary also portrays examples of intergenerational parental love and care[3] that cannot be overlooked, either. And yes, it is absolutely grim that Bo and Luca need to actively search for ways to convince the political apparatus that their lives matter, but they are doing this in a seemingly idyllic fashion: hanging out with friends, laughing, sitting in the long summer grass while the sun is warming their faces. It is this emotional contrast between the threat of human extinction and the inevitability of people seeking joy and meaning in companionship that prompts us to consider how contemporary young adult literature imagines the impact of environmental crisis on the developing selfhood of adolescents.

The circumstances for adolescents in the Western world have definitely changed over the past decades. The omnipresence of technologies that constantly demand attention, for instance, or the increase in cultural narratives of planetary destruction that leave young people without a perspective for the future, are just two ways in which growing up in the Anthropocene is different from before. However, the way in which adolescents build their selfhood in the Western world, by experimenting socially to discover who they are and how they are seen by others, remains the same. This is due to what Robyn McCallum calls the "dialogic construction of subjectivity". McCallum notes that "ideas about and images of the self are defined in relation to existing social codes, structures and practices" (McCallum 1999, p. 256). Even when the instability of the world order pressures the social codes and practices of the Western world, Western adolescents will still experiment with these social codes and structures to construct their particular narrative identity. According to the sociologists McAdams and Mclean, a narrative identity is "an internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose" (McAdams and McLean 2013, p. 233). As people use patterns from a menu of cultural narratives to construct their narrative identity, the current cultural moment, which is marked by stories of planetary destruction and extinction instead of societal progression, influences how adolescents construct their selfhood. In the Anthropocene, the quest for meaning, expressed here through the concept of narrative identity, comes into conflict with the ostensible impossibility of a meaningful life under the threat of destruction.

Using the real teenagers from *Planet B* as a starting point, this article questions how YA literature, a genre dedicated to understanding the twin properties of growth and power (Trites 2000), is negotiating the entanglement of personal and planetary fate. According to Roberta Seelinger Trites, "all YA novels depict some postmodern tension between individuals and institutions. And the tension is often depicted as residing within discursive constructs. Once protagonists of the YA novel have learned to discursively negotiate their place in the domination-repression chain of power, they are usually depicted as having grown" (Trites 2000, p. 52). However, with the sword of Damocles of climate change hanging over adolescents' heads, the tension between adolescence and power is not simply a matter of discourse. Instead, as Alice Curry notes, "unlike child readers, whose potential for effective social responses to climate change is limited, young adults await the imminent transgression that will see them affirm, or refute, the social systems that regulate them" (Curry 2016, p. 23). In other words, to properly engage with the challenges of the environmental crisis, contemporary environmental YA fiction should offer different ways to understand both growth (i.e., narrative identity) and power (i.e., agency

on the personal and collective level). Therefore, this article examines how current cultural narratives of future destruction influence the construction of adolescents' narrative identity. We have selected three novels that each present a different scenario of environmental crisis. In Neal and Jarrod Shusterman's *Dry*, teenagers, who have all grown up with different kinds of parental care, have to try to survive when California's water supply dries up. In Lauren James' *Green Rising* (James 2021), adolescents from different backgrounds develop the ability to grow plants from their fingertips. Their new hybridity evokes a different understanding of the transformative potential of human networks and nonhuman agency. In *Snowflake, AZ*, by Marcus Sedgwick (Sedgwick 2019), a young adolescent is made ill by the modernity of the world. This ecosickness narrative (Houser 2016) seems to ask how one can regain agency in an unstable world driven by the idea of eternal growth. The three books offer depictions of adolescent protagonists that are all impacted by environmental crisis just when they are starting to construct who they are. While not all the selected novels' protagonists can rise to meet the immediate threat of ecological crisis with decisive action, every one of their fates is inextricably tangled with that of the planet.

2. Planetary Fate and a Developing Narrative Identity

As a genre, YA literature has always been invested in growth and power as the adolescent comes into contact with the world. However, Robyn McCallum argues that "the image of empowered individuals capable of acting independently in the world and of making choices about their lives offers young readers a worldview which for many is simply idealistic and unattainable" (McCallum 1999, p. 7). Especially in times where power seems to be both at the tip of our fingers (for instance, through social media) and unreachable (climate crisis seems too big a crisis to handle), YA fiction needs to portray the developing selfhood of adolescents with necessary nuance. For instance, the question that young Prufrock asks himself in T.S. Eliot's poem and that is at the heart of Trites' discussion of YA literature, "Do I dare disturb the universe?", rings differently in a world where the universe has already been disturbed to the point of destruction. Alice Curry argues that the destruction that comes with the apocalypse is the "tipping point" that targets "the very values, relationships and social structures on which human life as we know it is based" (Curry 2016, p. 25). The apocalypse thus functions as an "epistemic blind space", a space in which "humanity's relationship with the earth can—and for the novel's protagonists, must—be reassessed" (Curry 2016, p. 193). However, the dominant focus on the apocalypse in YA literature ignores how climate change already impacts the lives of adolescents today, in the pre-apocalyptic world.

That climate change is a genuine concern for many adolescents today, one that impacts how they act in and on the world, was visible through the Youth for Climate movement. Although this is not the first generation to be confronted with and prominently engage with sociopolitical issues (e.g., the civil rights movement and Vietnam war protests), climate change remains a uniquely configured challenge. Firstly, climate change is what is often called a "wicked problem" (Levin et al. 2012), where the complexity of the issue, involving numerous conflicting parties and interests, can feel dispiriting. Secondly, the idea that, with anthropogenic climate change, the effects of our actions are always delayed adds an intergenerational dimension to this crisis. A notion such as "colonizing the future" (Van Reybrouck 2022), i.e., the theft by current generations of the resources of future generations, poignantly lays bare the fact that we need different tactics to imagine the consequences of our actions on future lives. Lastly, in the Western world, the notion of entanglement with the fate of the planet has led young people to what Sarah Pickard calls a do-it-ourselves politics, "which is 'enacted through lifestyle politics involving everyday decisions and

daily habits" (Pickard 2022, p. 732). For young people, in a very profound way, the fate of the planet is part of the everyday.

The sociological concept of narrative identity informs the way in which we approach the entanglement between personal and planetary fate in our analysis of the three contemporary YA novels. Sociologists argue that personal identity develops in accordance with narrative structures. In adolescence, people begin to retrospectively order their memories and link them to their present selves, setting out to craft their "life story" (Mclean and Mansfield 2012; Chen et al. 2012). Although certain aspects of identity begin to form earlier in childhood, the narrative construction of a cohesive life story does not start until adolescence, since only then do individuals develop the ability to reflect on past experiences and incorporate them into an overarching narrative (McAdams 2011). In relation to climate change, projections of the future among contemporary adolescents are different to those of earlier generations, as ideas for the future are now mixed with feelings of anxiety and hopelessness (Clayton 2020).

From a more philosophical perspective, Paul Ricœur writes that the narrative mediation of identity "borrows from history as much as fiction" (Ricœur 1991, p. 73). Thus, our life stories are a mixture of fact and fiction. Memories are infused with a sense of meaning and teleology. The life stories that we create for ourselves, consciously or subconsciously, give us a sense of purpose and self-continuity (Habermas and Bluck 2000). While narrative identity has been thoroughly explored in social sciences, it also has potential for analysis in literary studies, where it has so far remained underexplored. Given the similarities between the readerly experiences of characters and "real" people established by, for example, Palmer (2004) and Zunshine (2006), we argue that the concept can be equally applied to the construction of identity in fictional characters. This, in turn, allows us to look at the ways in which people and characters navigate and remediate "inconsistencies" in their life stories. For environmental YA fiction, this means that it is not necessary to imagine an apocalypse to consider the impact of environmental crisis on adolescence. Instead, by focusing on how climate change can cause adolescents to construct their narrative identity in accordance with a cultural narrative of future destruction, YA fiction can accurately explore how the current timeframe is helping to shape contemporary adolescents' selfhood. The three novels that we have selected engage with environmental crisis in a semi-contemporary setting (although apocalypse is never far away) and explore the impact of a cultural narrative of future destruction. They engage with both realistic and fantastical modes in order to materialize the abstract issue of climate change into something more concrete, as well as to explore the affective dimension of growing up in the Anthropocene.

3. Peers and Parents in *Dry*

In Shusterman and Shusterman's *Dry* (Shusterman and Shusterman 2018), an already-barren Southern California's water supply is cut off. With no water available from the taps, the thin veneer of civil society quickly cracks. The novel follows four teenagers who have all grown up with different forms of parental care and are now, due to the circumstances, forced to fend for themselves. The narration and focalization, which switch between the teenage voices with every chapter, shows how their narrative identity is reshaped by this ecological disaster. From the perspective of a self-constructed narrative identity, the act of narrating is as crucial as the experience. As Michael Bamberg writes, "narratives, irrespective of whether they deal with one's life or an episode or event in the life of someone else, always reveal the speaker's identity. [. . .] By offering and telling a narrative, the speaker lodges a claim for him/herself in terms of who he/she is". (Bamberg 2005, p. 223) Bamberg goes on to state that the sharing of personal stories is a social happening where the speaker positions themselves as a (partly fictional) character to highlight certain

aspects or major themes of who they are. He stresses that people do not consistently position themselves homogeneously in the different stories that they tell but juggle "several story lines simultaneously" (Bamberg 2005, p. 224) to stake the claim that they are well-rounded, multifaceted individuals. In *Dry*, there are two groups of people who impact the positioning of the protagonists' narrative identity: the parents and the peers.

As the parents are absent during the actual moment of crisis, it is the contact with and the gaze of their peers that co-construct how they will make critical life-or-death decisions. These decisions come from a narrative identity that is still taking shape and is now challenged by completely new circumstances. Alyssa, for example, sees herself as someone with a clear political point of view on gun control, one of the major sociopolitical topics in the US in recent decades. When Kelton brings a gun to Alyssa's home for protection, her first reaction comes from this particular aspect of her selfhood: "'I marched against these!' [. . .] 'How could you bring one into my house?'" (Shusterman and Shusterman 2018, p. 93). Later, however, while looking at the gun's magazine, Alyssa thinks, "It represents everything that I hate about the world. But this isn't the same world it was yesterday. Finally I hand [Kelton] the magazine, then I start pedaling again, because I don't want to see him snap it into the pistol". (Shusterman and Shusterman 2018, p. 99) Alyssa is conflicted about having to violate her ideals to survive but eventually puts aside her moral convictions in favor of the more pressing problem of survival. However, by telling Kelton that she marched against guns first, Alyssa clearly positions herself in a narrative as a character in favor of gun control. According to Michael Bamberg, this performative "positioning" serves to propose certain aspects of identity in a social setting (Bamberg 2005). In subsequently having to act "out of character" by giving Kelton the magazine of the gun back, effectively not performing the identity that she proposed, Alyssa dissociates herself from the identity that she was adopting, creating a discontinuity in her emerging life story. Feeling as if she has trespassed against her dominant identity, she is unable to look at Kelton loading the magazine into the gun. Kate McLean and Cade Mansfield write that "when the canonical story is broken, often by a negative disruption, narrative is the means by which the break can be mended" (Mclean and Mansfield 2012, p. 437). In this case, Alyssa starts to adapt her narrative identity to account for the imminent crises by placing the need for survival above her moral convictions of being anti-gun. In this way, she can reconcile her disruptive actions with her overarching life story.

Even in the extreme circumstances of the Tap-Out, as the crisis is called, the adolescent protagonists remain acutely aware of their relationship with their peers. Consider the following excerpt, where Alyssa has just found out that Kelton used to spy on her with his drone:

> There's a battle raging in my head now. Part of me wants to file this away and deal with it when we're not in a crisis. His brother is dead. There are more life-and-death challenges we have to face. Yet there's the other part of me that will not be silenced or ignored. The normal part, which won't let such an unacceptable act slide just because there are bigger things to worry about. No matter what else is going on, I have every right to what I'm feeling. (Shusterman and Shusterman 2018, p. 278)

The crisis in which Alyssa finds herself partly inhibits her reaction to the betrayal and feeling of powerlessness caused by Kelton spying on her. Yet, she realizes that her "normal" identity, her dominant life story, does not allow this infringement on her privacy. While she tries to suppress her reaction, just like with the gun, she finds herself unable to. Alyssa shows the possibility of adapting her narrative identity to account for new realities, but she struggles to completely let go of some parts of her established life story.

Of course, parental care is also an important part of a constructed narrative identity. Or, as Trites argues with Lacan, "the idea of the parent is so seductive, so central to the subject's sense of –definition" (Trites 2000, p. 61). Furthermore, in YA literature, the parental figure is often problematic, as they "usually serve more as sources of conflict than as sources of support" (Trites 2000, p. 56). Trites notes that even "their physical absence often creates a psychological presence that is remarked upon as a sort of repression felt strongly by the adolescent character" (Trites 2000, p. 56). In *Dry*, parental care is indeed presented as a complicated spectrum of control and letting go, of absence and presence.

Alyssa and her little brother Garrett grew up with loving parents, who go missing in the beginning of the catastrophe. This prompts Alyssa and Garrett to head out to find and save them. The idea that children need and want to save their parents resonates with dominant environmental discourse that sees the child as proxy for a future generation that serves as the beacon of hope (Kverndokk 2020; Jewusiak 2023). Alyssa and Garrett, however, are woefully unprepared for such a task: "Returning home means a measure of safety, but it also means failure. Unless Mom and Dad returned while we were gone. I hold onto that hope like the frayed end of a lifeline, because I still refuse to face any of the alternatives" (Shusterman and Shusterman 2018, p. 136). Alyssa and Garrett thus need to rely on their peers who have been raised differently, such as Kelton.

Kelton grew up with parents who fit in the category of so-called doomsday preppers, and Kelton oscillates between idolizing and despising his upbringing. The crisis, however, confronts Kelton with the truth about his parents. Not only were their invented doomsday scenarios a response to a deeply rooted but imagined fear, all the doomsday prep in the world still did not prepare them for the consequences of the Tap-Out. This leads Kelton to realize the truth about his parents: "But there's that moment when you realize they're not superheroes, or villains. They're painfully, unforgivably human. The question is, can you forgive them for being human anyway?" (Shusterman and Shusterman 2018, p. 150).

Henry, the son of sly mercantile parents, who left Henry to his own devices during the crisis, caricatures the position of self-serving rich people who stand to benefit from the crisis: "The Tap-Out has not only contributed to my growth as a person, but has proven to be a fantastic learning experience in business and commerce". (Shusterman and Shusterman 2018, p. 186) The final position on the spectrum is Jacqui, whose parents had too many struggles of their own and, too, left her to fend for herself. This has left Jacqui with a tendency toward self-destruction, always attending to what she refers to as the *call of the void*: "daring the universe to end you" [. . .] "I know that feeling intimately. It's where I live, I eat, sleep and dream of the void, and whenever it calls my name, I'm there in the front row ready to answer" (Shusterman and Shusterman 2018, pp. 123–4). The juxtaposition of these versions of parental care offers an image of the previous generation as either self-serving, scared, careless, or simply naïve. The protagonists, as is of course a central trope in most YA literature, must either embrace or reject these positions.

Environmental crisis forces the adolescents in *Dry* to reconsider their early narrative identity. This early selfhood has been shaped by the care of their parents, who in this narrative do not simply perform the role of an authority to be railed against. *Dry* depicts a more complicated version of the intergenerational dimension of climate crisis. The novel suggests that the current environmental crisis exceeds individual parental care. Instead, what is needed to face the crisis is collaborative action between adolescents from all walks of life.

4. Information Dissemination and Multispecies Collectives in *Green Rising*

In Lauren James' *Green Rising*, 1 in 20 adolescents suddenly develop the ability to grow plants from their bodies. With the actual power to reverse climate change at their fingertips, these "Greenfingers", as the adolescents are quickly called, find themselves fighting Dalek Energies, a major oil corporation. Due to their plant-growing abilities, the "Greenfingers" can contact and share experiences with each other collectively through a mycorrhizal network. Theoretical paradigms that have been inspired by environmental crisis and the consequences of the Anthropocene framework, such as new materialism or posthumanism, aim to decentralize the human and foreground human–nonhuman collectives and assemblages. The plant–young adult hybrids in *Green Rising* speak to these perspectives, as well as to the growing interest in multispecies collectives (Caracciolo 2020; Lambert 2021). As Chloe Germaine notes in her discussion of *Green Rising*, the novel draws "on a more contemporary construction of the child as a social agent whose action will bring about transformative political change, as well as a more generous account of the agency inherent in vegetal life" (Germaine 2023, p. 159). These two dimensions, the political and the nonhuman, are explored in the character of Hester, the daughter of the oil company's CEO.

Initially, Hester has been groomed by her father into being the perfect successor for the CEO position of Dalek Energies. She has been sheltered from her peers her whole life: "She could talk to a delegation of businessmen without breaking a sweat, but a group of teenagers? There was no training course she could take to prepare for that" (James 2021, p. 52). The selfhood that was built for her by her father quickly crumbles when Hester discovers, through intense contact with other adolescents, the true scale and severity of climate change. Such a major challenge to a person's narrative identity can result in two different responses. One response is for the break to be mended through narrative (re)construction. For example, *Dry*'s Alyssa mends the break by constructing a narrative where her atypical actions are warranted in temporary circumstances. The second response is the integration of the disruptive element into the person's life story, where it can even become the dominant narrative thread (Pals 2006). Jennifer Pals writes that an important aspect of this second process is "exploratory narrative processing", "the active, engaged effort on the part of the narrator to explore, reflect on, or analyze a difficult experience with an openness to learning from it and incorporating a sense of change into the life story" (Pals 2006, p. 1081). She notes that integrating exploratory narrative processing with a coherent positive resolution can foster lasting self-transformation. Difficult experiences, as challenges to identity, become essential to life stories, shaping personal growth and well-being.

Upon discovering that her narrative identity has been built on the lies of her father, Hester has to radically shift her narrative to address the invasive climate change that has acted as a disruptive narrative thread in her original, dominant life story. At first, Hester and her father seek a consolidation between their two different stories. Hester offers her father the opportunity of reconciliation by imploring that there must be a way for him to save the planet, while her father continues to manipulate his daughter, arguing for the necessity of oil consumption. Returning to McCallum's notion of the dialogic nature of subjectivity, Hester will rebuild her narrative identity in dialog with a conflicted and confusing political reality, forcing her to choose between pragmatical and moral positions.

The ethical and pragmatical implications of Hester's reconfigured personal narrative identity, what Germaine sees as the child's potential for "transformative, political change" (159) in *Green Rising* receives a counterpoint through the idea of the plant–human hybridity of the "Greenfingers". As a "Greenfinger", Hester is a member of a group of adolescents

that has started to develop an intersubjective, collective identity through their enhanced connection to nature. Through their powers, "Greenfingers" can use a mycorrhizal network to contact other "Greenfingers". This direct and embodied network functions as a thought experiment: what happens if we see agency differently? Or, as Shannon Lambert notes, how might "bodily patterns, chemicals and affects" help in reconsidering agency as "non-singular and nonanthropocentric" (Lambert 2021, pp. 15–16)? In *Narratology Beyond the Human: Storytelling and Animal Life*, David Herman argues that "resituating oneself vis à vis other forms of creatural life can alter one's sense of who and what one is" (Herman 2018, p. 63). Herman sees two possible positions: metamorphosis and hybridity. The hybrid is, in Herman's words, "the self in dialogue with the other", whereas metamorphosis is a "self becoming other" (Herman 2018, p. 51). Hybridity and metamorphosis describe how the novel constructs coming-of-age in the Anthropocene. The plant–young adult hybrid depicts an exaggeration of our entanglement with the non-human, where the element of metamorphosis, the young adult finding their place in a shifted world, depicts the difficulties of negotiating the new political realities in the Anthropocene.

The mycorrhizal network, offering "Greenfingers" the experience of collectivity, is of course unavailable in real life. This fictional, symbiotic relationship cannot be weaponized in the fight against environmental crisis. However, the juxtaposition of the mycorrhizal network with a different kind of network does highlight other options that are available to young people today. This real option might even be more achievable and more effective, as it is a power that is already being used by many adolescents today: social media. At the end of each chapter, which is very traditionally narrated by a third-person narrator and closely focalized through one of the protagonists, the reader finds texts in different textual genres. These are all forms of public communication: public safety notices, online forum posts, social media posts, advertisements, Buzzfeed-type quizzes and clickbait articles, scientific abstracts, podcasts (presented here as a transcript), vlogs (presented as a transcript), newspaper articles, live reports, and group chats. All these forms of communication display what Alan Palmer calls the "intermental mind" (Palmer 2005), a long-lasting, shared cognition between a group of people. In some ways, these collective communications function like a mycorrhizal network, warning others about what it is like to grow up under the pressures of the Anthropocene.

Green Rising resonates with contemporary ideas of adolescence, arguing for the transformative power in young people and our collective human–nonhuman nature. However, not all adolescents react the same way to the challenges brought forward by living in the Anthropocene. The knowledge that we are living on a dying planet can also overwhelm and paralyze.

5. Sickness, Illness, and Lethargy in *Snowflake, AZ*

Where *Dry* and *Green Rising* offer characters that are capable and agentic, characters that young people can project their hopes for themselves on, *Snowflake, AZ* by Marcus Sedgwick takes a different approach to investigating the entanglement between personal and planetary fate. *Snowflake, AZ* is what Heather Houser calls an ecosickness narrative, which functions to address "the inseparability of our somatic and ecological fates" (Houser 223). In *Snowflake, AZ*, young adult Ash is searching for their lost brother and ends up in a community of outsiders in Snowflake, Arizona. The community comprises people who have withdrawn from the modern world, because modernity—for instance, electricity, microwaves, or modern chemicals—made them ill. This undefined environmental illness (EI) also affects Ash, who becomes lethargic in the face of the overwhelming origin of their illness.

The novel distinctly connects Ash's illness with the fate of the world by framing the story as narrated by an older Ash in a post-apocalyptic future: "And we were all sick, we were all sick. We just didn't know it yet" (Sedgwick 2019, p. 342). Heather Houser uses the term sickness to emphasize "the relational dimension of dysfunction in contemporary narrative" (Houser 2016, p. 11). For Houser, sickness "links up the biomedical, environmental, social, and ethicopolitical" and "shows the imbrication of human and environment" (Houser 2016, p. 11). Sickness thus comes from an entanglement of the personal with all these systemic socio-economic forces, which exert a deep influence on the personal level. The people of Snowflake call themselves the "Canaries" for being the proverbial canaries in the coal mine, ignored by rational and scientific thinking but experiencing real consequences nonetheless. In fact, what they are feeling is the imposition of macro socio-economic forces on the personal scale. This feeling is expressed in their illness, which is different from the idea of sickness. According to Houser, illness is related to or defined by personal experience: "regardless of what blood tests, scans, x-rays, or biopsies might show, illness exists to the extent that someone lives with it and even assumes it as an identity. Self-perception decouples person and diagnosis; whatever the content of the diagnosis or treatment might be, the person can determine the form and meaning that illness assumes" (Houser 2016, p. 11). Ash's environmental illness indeed goes undiagnosed and unacknowledged by society. Through the ideas of a systemic world sickness and a personal illness, the novel articulates how a cultural narrative of environmental crisis can overwhelm young people in such a way that there is little of their transformational potential left.

Ash's defeated reaction to their realization of being ill is characteristic of their stay in Snowflake. In stark contrast with Alyssa in *Dry* and Hester in *Green Rising*, who both respond to their crises with resolute and decisive action, Ash reacts to the intrusion of changing planetary forces in their life with resignation and inaction. They become gradually more withdrawn from society and, eventually, even withdraw from the group of similarly afflicted people as they move to a log cabin on their own: "And like I said before, there is no point in me telling you all about each of those days. What happened was this: I was sick, I was tired, I could barely move, and I became the most miserable kid in Arizona". (Sedgwick 2019, p. 113) Ash's illness leads to an alienation from society. As Robyn McCallum writes, "[i]n general terms, alienation in its various aspects—powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, self-estrangement and cultural estrangement---denotes the radical, perceived or actual, separation of the self from the social world; the inverse of subjectivity" (McCallum 1999, p. 99). Where Alyssa (*Dry*) and Hester (*Green Rising*) affirm their narrative identities around their potential for transformation, both on the personal scale and on the social scale, young Ash, due to their possibly psychosomatic illness, cannot build a narrative identity around agency, as they feel that they have none in the modern world. Older Ash, however, who narrates the story retrospectively, does see what they could have done but failed to do: "[. . .] I thought, huh, Ash, maybe you was a snowflake, but so was we all. [. . .] We were all as fragile as a tiny crystal of ice. And then I thought, but yeah, you put a lot of snowflakes together and what have you got? You got an avalanche". (Sedgwick 2019, p. 341) This realization, that agency comes not from the individual but from the collective, resonates with *Dry* and *Green Rising*. However, Ash does not realize this during the social experimentation phase of Western adolescence but only when it is too late.

In *Snowflake, AZ*, the intrusion of environmental crisis does not spark any action in the adolescent protagonist. The cultural narrative of a sick world does, however, pervade their narrative identity and strongly affect their subjectivity, as it alienates Ash from society, and they therefore cannot build a narrative identity around their transformational potential and

agency. *Snowflake, AZ* therefore offers a disturbing counterpoint to *Dry* and *Green Rising* and shows how climate change, in this the case, the cultural narrative of the anthropogenic destruction of the planet and the lack of future perspective, can be so overwhelming that it leads to lethargy. By the end, it remains unclear how Ash, as a single young adult, will acquire any agency in the face of climate change. Although the novel does point towards a collective agency and identity as a possible solution for environmental crisis, it does not seem to underscore the transformative potential of adolescence. Instead, *Snowflake, AZ* seems to indicate that the challenge of climate crisis in the Anthropocene is too massive to handle.

6. Conclusions

In this article, we have suggested that the current environmental crisis is so pervasively present in current cultural narratives that it becomes co-constitutive in adolescents' narrative identity. We started from the premise that the Anthropocene, the awareness of an entanglement between our personal fate and that of the planet, conjures up conflicting affects and ethical implications for young people growing up today. While young people still need to experiment with the social codes and values of contemporary society to discover who they are, they also need to take into account cultural narratives of environmental destruction. The YA novels discussed here have shown three ways of considering the impact of environmental crisis on the construction of selfhood. *Dry* imagines the sudden collapse of civility, brought on by a water shortage. This apocalyptic event forces adolescents to reconstitute their narrative identity vis à vis who they were before the event, as well as vis à vis each other. The parental generation is not the enemy in this novel, as the systemic problems causing the environmental crisis are much more complicated than the simplified intergenerational conflict that is often conjured in environmental discourse. *Green Rising* foregrounds how a collective mind, imagined here both in the mycorrhizal network of the multispecies "Greenfingers" collective and the mixture of different textual genres, can inspire and uplift the construction of a narrative identity that is collective in nature. Lastly, *Snowflake, AZ* employs an ecosickness narrative to explicitly fuse the fate of the planet and one character's personal fate. Here, however, the sickness of the world becomes an insurmountable problem that takes away all agency from the young protagonist. In fact, the different types of crises presented in these novels all seem to indicate that the best option for meaningful transformative action is collective agency. We believe that by focusing on the literary representation of the entanglement between the developing narrative identity of adolescents and the cultural narratives of planetary destruction, we can better understand the peculiarity of growing up in the Anthropocene. Further research could add nuance to and enhance this proposition by including non-fictional accounts written by young adults growing up in the Anthropocene, such as McAnulty's (2021) or Lack's (2022). The use of empirical methodologies, both in literary studies and sociology, can further strengthen our understanding of what it means to grow up with the fate of the planet entangled with your own.

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Notes

[1] Unfortunately, democratic countries from the Global North seem to disagree as they are passing new draconian laws to disproportionately sentence climate protesters to long periods in prison (see the recent report by Trevor Stankiewicz (Stankiewicz 2024) for Climate Rights International *On Thin Ice: Disproportionate Responses to Climate Change Protesters in Democratic Countries*).

[2] Even though the suggestion for the Anthropocene as a new geological epoch has been rejected by the Anthropocene Working Group, the term clearly sparked the academic imagination and quickly entered academic and popular discourse, with Hamilton et al. (2015) even referring to the Anthropocene as a 'new human condition' (4). However, the term Anthropocene (>Anthropos meaning human) does not accurately evoke the distinctions between different human contributions to current environmental crisis, nor does it evoke the systemic forces that have contributed to climate crisis. Therefore, scholars have suggested alternative names for the Anthropocene, such as Plantationocene, Capitalocene, or Chthulucene. See Haraway (2015) for a discussion of these different terms. We acknowledge the lack of nuance inherent in the term Anthropocene. However, because it is already widely accepted, we continue to use this term.

[3] In the documentary, this love is expressed in a very prototypical way: when Bo arrives home after spending the night in jail, her parents ask her if she managed to get some sleep and have a proper meal, as if she had just come home from summer camp.

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Article

The Development of Ecological Identities in Children's Books: A Linguistic Approach to Character Positioning as Eco-Rebels

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Abstract: Eco-rebels can provide readers a role model that encourages sustainable thinking and action in everyday life. The protagonists in ecological children's and young adult literature (CYL) are mostly ignorant at the beginning. They learn as the story progresses and develop into environmentally conscious individuals who are taken seriously and actively committed to protecting their environment. This article would like to present a linguistic method for analyzing how readers are guided in ecological CYL, allowing them to follow and understand the protagonist's change towards becoming an eco-rebel. This study hypothesizes that the development of an ecological identity, although an individual evolution in the story, is a pattern of ecological CYL. The possibilities for identification that a text offers its reader must be considered as crucial for the experiences gained within the fiction framework to influence real consciousness and development processes. In this context, Bamberg's identity dilemmatic spaces are used for the analysis, allowing the construction of identity in storytelling to be made tangible. These identity dilemmatic spaces have been expanded to include linguistic categories. The construction of the figure of the eco-rebel can thus be analyzed according to different linguistically based or narrative-based aspects like speech markings or the development of an agenda.

Keywords: children's and young adult literature; ecological identity; identity analysis; identity dilemmatic spaces; role model function

1. Introduction

Hoydis et al. (2023, p. 2) emphasized "that literature can and ought to be a key element of climate education and action". Ecological topics are, therefore, largely established in the literary world and demonstrate the social relevance, interest, and awareness of the ecological challenges we are currently facing (Standke and Wrobel 2021, p. 6). Accordingly, it is not surprising that the topic is increasingly finding its way into media offerings for young people. In children's and young adult literature (CYL for short), an ecological perspective—even in books that are not classified as ecological literature—can hardly be missing nowadays (Wanning and Stemmann 2015, p. 6).

So, there is a need to focus on the great field of literature for young readers, which explicitly aims to educate them ecologically. The following article delves into ecological narratives within CYL, focusing on the main characters' roles as eco-rebels. In this article, eco-rebels are defined as individuals who actively confront and challenge the dominant societal narratives that emphasize economic growth and/or consumerism at the expense of environmental preservation. With a strong ecological agenda, these activists strive to raise awareness about environmental issues and militate for sustainable practices. They set themselves apart from mainstream societal norms by adopting alternative lifestyles,

promoting green initiatives, and pushing for societal and political changes that prioritize eco-friendliness. Their efforts aim to inspire others to reconsider their relationship with the environment and foster a sense of community among those committed to environmental activism.

This article introduces a new methodology for analyzing how these eco-rebels—who mostly are the protagonists (i.e., the main characters) of the story—are constructed and how their journeys might resonate with readers, offering them meaningful avenues for identification. It seeks to uncover the identification opportunities these characters offer the readership by exploring the eco-rebel's origin, motivations, struggles, and interactions with the environment and other characters. By constructing inspiring eco-rebels with whom readers can relate, the ecological texts offer readers a means of identification that encourages them to reflect on their own values and roles in ecological activism. The potential for identification within ecological texts is significant because the engagement of young readers with ecological texts and topics cannot be overstated. As young readers identify with these characters, they may become more invested in the environmental challenges faced by the characters, ultimately fostering a deeper understanding and concern for the real-world issues at hand. Ecological CYL offers readers the opportunity to imitate the ecological action of the characters in the work by way of their role model function (Mikota 2017, p. 9).

Since it is a cognitive fallacy to think the presentation and conveyance of ecological knowledge alone will result in ecological action (Hoydis et al. 2023, p. 17), the emotional connection or identification with the eco-rebel in the book might be a key factor in ecological change: The protagonists in the books are mostly ignorant at the beginning and—just like the readers—learn as the story goes along and develop into environmentally conscious individuals who are taken seriously and who are actively committed to protecting their environment. Although literature "is rather a trigger and a means of inciting transformation by powerfully reframing ways of seeing and thinking", (ibid., p. 20) and not the panacea solution to the ecological problems we face as a society, it can have a significant impact. This article's method, therefore, emphasizes the importance of character development and identification in CYL in creating a connection between the readership and the urgent environmental issues portrayed in the narratives.

There are factors that can help with the identification process:

1. The eco-rebels are usually protagonists who are the same age as the presumed readers, since the effect of ecological reading is stronger the closer the plot is to the recipients' world (Hollerweger 2017, p. 99). If the story picks up readers in their own real lives, they can more easily set out on the path to gaining ecological knowledge together with the protagonists.
2. Ecological CYL is characterized by a broad spectrum of characters, so that the protagonists can position themselves in relation to numerous characters who, therefore, have different attitudes towards the ecological topic, which also makes their convictions visible (Mikota 2017, p. 11). Such a multi-perspectival narrative can thicken "our understanding of climate change as a collective action problem, including a collectivity of unlike-minded people." (Hoydis et al. 2023, p. 35).

By way of identification, the readers may follow the increase in ecological knowledge and, thus, the learning process of the main character. They see that the character develops and changes into an eco-rebel: The protagonists develop their own agenda, distance themselves from individuals or groups or feel that they belong to them, and are influenced by their surroundings or, conversely, lead to a change in their environment. Given the blend of fiction and factuality, and the potential for readers to identify with the protagonist, reading ecological CYL can be a practical and effective way of transferring the awareness and

development processes acquired in the fictional reading process into reality. It empowers readers to put the consciousness that develops while reading into action, thereby making the knowledge gained applicable in real-life situations (Hollerweger 2017, p. 99). Through this exploration, the article aims to illuminate CYL's significant role in shaping young people's understanding of ecological identities and activism.

The different design options for the eco-rebel in a work of fiction can achieve the ecological narrative goal in different ways, influencing the recipients. This article introduces a new linguistic method for analyzing how the reader is guided in ecological CYL, representing a linguistic interpretation of a method already known in communication studies. This method can help us to gain a profound understanding of the protagonist's journey towards becoming an eco-rebel, potentially inspiring new perspectives and approaches to the popularization of ecological knowledge. The approach is—as now will be shown through an exemplary CYL analysis—suitable for analyzing fictional characters in CYL that transform into eco-rebels, as it aids in understanding how they interact with their environment; how they cope with the controversies and conflicts within this environment; and how this interaction influences their values, insights, and—last but not least—their identities. It emphasizes the depiction of eco-rebels in a way that encourages and inspires readers to engage in critical thinking and take action. To sum up: This study hypothesizes that the development of a character's ecological identity in the narrative—hence, an identity that is closely tied to an ecological agenda—is a central pattern of ecological CYL, even if it is an individual evolution in the story. This study is based in an ongoing research project which aims at developing an interdisciplinary informed model for linguistic analysis of ecological fiction for young readers.

2. Materials and Methods

The method of linguistic analysis proposed in this article aims to provide access to the linguistically based potential for promoting ecological thinking and action in narrative ecological CYL, for which the identification offerings in the text are analyzed.

The working hypothesis of this article is that Bamberg's (2008, 2011, 2020) identity dilemmatic spaces—a notion that has its origin in the analysis of spoken interaction—can be used to analyze the construction of eco-rebels in ecological fiction for young readers if they are combined with linguistic analysis. The linguistic use of Bamberg's model leads to a change in analysis to show more clearly when and where which type of identification is offered in the text (for example, based on the narrative's linguistic form, like the characters' speech and description). Discussions about the identification that a text offers its reader, which can be considered crucial for the experiences gained within the fictional framework to influence real-life consciousness and development processes, can be managed better if they are based on the results of a well-founded linguistic analysis. Thus, the linguistic analysis of the construction of eco-rebels in ecological CYL may make it possible to pinpoint the linguistically based potential for promoting critical thinking and activism among readers in the long term.

2.1. Identity Dilemmatic Spaces

Identity is a theoretical construct that answers the 'who-am-I question' and is continuously (re)constructed in everyday life (Bamberg 2020, p. 262). In narratives, the author constructs the identity of the portrayed characters in the storyline. However, those characters can still convey an answer to the identity question and influence the readers as they cognitively follow the identity dilemmas the characters go through. The formation of an ecological identity can be shown in a storyline by navigating through identity dilemmas (meant as conflicts between the two opposites of a scale), where a person has to choose

between different paths (therefore, dilemmatic spaces in Bamberg's terms; see below). "The identification opportunities that a text offers its reader are crucial for ensuring that the experiences gained in the context of fiction influence real consciousness and development processes." (Hollerweger 2017, p. 98, translation by C.L.[1]). In order to work out these opportunities, the present article uses a methodology with which the construction of identity in narratives can be analyzed. This method is about how the protagonist (in this article, the eco-rebel) positions himself/herself and what internal changes occur in the process. Bamberg's "identity dilemmatic spaces" are used to analyze this identity navigation. The concept of identity dilemmatic spaces comes from interaction analysis in communication studies. Bamberg (2020, p. 224 ff.) distinguishes between three identity dilemmatic spaces of central importance for constructing identities when telling stories, which can take place on the following three levels:

1. The story-narrators "position characters vis-à-vis one another in the story they tell" (Bamberg 2020, p. 244), thus constructing the characters' relation to one another in the story.
2. The story-narrators "position themself vis-à-vis their interlocutors in the process of telling" (ibid.) in the communication situation: "At this level, linguistic, paralinguistic and bodily means (facial, gesture, proximity) are interrogated" (ibid., p. 251), and hence this level navigates the interactional territory.
3. The story-narrators "position themselves vis-à-vis dominant master storylines/discourses and thereby convey a sense of who they are—to their interlocutors and to themselves." (ibid., p. 244)

The three levels form a multi-step analysis, starting with the first level and concluding with the third. For the purpose of this article's text-analytical approach, a methodological adjustment is necessary because the analytical object of the analysis shifts from the conversation to the fictional text. For CYL, the *narrator* (speaker) from the second and third level becomes the *author* of the book (not the narrator of the story!), while the term *narrator* is retained on the first level. This terminological change highlights the different ontological and narratological categories that come into being with the shift from conversation to textually anchored and fictional narratives. The terms *author* and *narrator* are not interchangeable because, in narrative theory, the *author* writes a story, and the *narrator* tells the story in the book; they are different entities that cannot be treated as equivalent. Since the author writes the story, he or she also designs the narrator who tells it inside the book. In a conversation, there is no author—only a speaker, the narrator of his or her own story. Bamberg (2020, p. 249) pointed to the difference between conversation and fictional text by writing: "However, to position ourselves as narrators vis-à-vis our interlocutors is different from how we position the characters vis-à-vis one another inside the story-world". Accordingly, only the first level of Bamberg's model is relevant if fictional texts are being analyzed, as it is the only one based on the storyline told and not on the conversational context in which the author (book)/narrator (conversation) operates and interacts with his or her readers/listeners. Therefore, the first level can be most easily adapted to fictional texts that also focus on the story and its linguistic representation done by the author, who—through the narrator—"positioned [the story characters] for interactive purposes" (ibid.). This level is the only one that focuses on the characters in the story told without providing a sense of how the storyteller (in conversational situations, the *speaker*/*narrator*, and in books, the *narrator*) intends to come across.

The other two levels are conversational analyses that heavily focus on local and social components of face-to-face communication, like the facial expressions and gestures of the individual telling the story, and rely on the presence of a recipient who can register those or imply that the narrator is part of the storyline. Those components cannot be analyzed if

we determine that the narrator becomes the author of the book, who is not represented in the storyline and thus cannot position himself/herself vis-à-vis his conversational partners, who would be the recipients of the book. However, the first level only plays on the level of linguistic content because it focuses on the story told and can, therefore, be made tangible through textual analysis. Bamberg uses conversation transcripts for this level, which—through adjustments to the method, such as omitting the examination of paralinguistic signals—can be compared to a fictional text in principle, as the focus is on the storyline. In this article, the first level is taken over for the analysis of fictional texts as a way to analyze how the narrator (who is designed by the author) constructs the characters in the book's story by examining the three identity dilemmatic spaces:

1. Sameness/difference: This is about whether one character is constructed as the same (=sameness) or different (=difference) from other characters in the story. For example, the siblings Hansel and Gretel in the famous fairy tale are constructed as same and then become "strongly positioned vis-à-vis witches [. . .] and stepmothers [. . .], and less strongly positioned vis-à-vis fathers [. . .], so that themes (what the story is about) can emerge" (Bamberg 2020, p. 149). This way, their uniqueness or similarity can be compared to other characters (Bamberg 2011, p. 6).
2. Agency/passivity: Characters in the story can be constructed as passive recipients of forces (classically biological/natural or social) (=passivity), but it is also possible to construct the world as a product of the ability of the characters in the story to act (=agency). This distinction is crucial in determining their level of responsibility. If the characters develop an agenda and become active themselves, then they have an influence on the world around them and can be held responsible for their success or failure (Bamberg 2020, p. 249).
3. Continuity/change: By linking events from the past and the present in the narrative, it is possible to establish whether people or institutions have experienced a gradual or radical change (=change) or whether they have remained the same (=continuity) (ibid., p. 250).

Bamberg (2008, p. 1) emphasizes:

> Of course, these three dilemmas are highly interwoven. It could be argued that the construal of sameness and difference across time forms a presupposition for constructing others and self as same and different, which in turn can be said to be a basic building block for constructing and changing the world in a productive way.

If a change in the positioning towards other characters and their beliefs and values is observed in the work, a change in the main character's attitude can also be attested. Therefore, a change in *sameness/difference* also leads to an adjustment in *continuity/change*. *Agency/passivity* can either trigger these changes or arise from them. Thus, the individual categories interact and the transitions between them are fluid.

2.2. Linguistic Expansion and Adaptation of the Identity Dilemmatic Spaces

Navigating through the three identity dilemmatic spaces on the first level of positioning provides information about the essential aspects of the character's identity, which works particularly well in narrative stories (Bamberg 2011, p. 14). In this genre, the characters must be contextualized in time and space, the events selected for narration are presented in a quasi-causal and non-teleological sequence and follow a heuristic and action-driven approach in which they unfold their meaning retrospectively, as they are designed and interpreted in the context of the overarching structure (ibid., p. 7). Accordingly, the identity dilemmatic spaces are suitable for the analysis of fictional texts, even if corresponding

adaptations to Bamberg's method have to be made to work on the purely written medium. In fictional works, the characters are explicitly constructed in a certain way due to their fictional nature, which is also reflected linguistically. This means that all formulations and positioning can be assumed to be a conscious decision made by the author for a specific purpose. If, for example, a linguistic change or character differentiation is recorded, this can be treated as a conscious adaptation to achieve a specific narrative goal. In this way, linguistic changes or abnormalities in fictional texts can also be used as implementations of the identity dilemmatic spaces. Thus, the analytical focus shifts from interactive communication studies (analysis of the conversation and the conversational situation) in Bamberg to literary and linguistic studies (analysis of the linguistic representation of protagonists and their identity) in this article. The change in the object of analysis also means a change in the methodology. However, it is essential to note that this change in methodology is not a limitation but rather a demonstration of the adaptability of the research approach. It allows us to analyze fictional texts for young readers on a linguistic level, introducing an innovative approach that enriches the original methodology.

This article now deals specifically with positioning analysis in relation to identity dilemmatics and tests a linguistic extension of the categories discussed, which are transferred from interaction analysis to literary studies. The qualitative–hermeneutic analysis method in Figure 1 combines Bamberg's three identity dilemmatic spaces, *sameness/difference*, *agency/passivity*, and *continuity/change*, with linguistic markers to analyze the linguistic expression of these dilemmatic spaces. Therefore, the method is suitable for conducting a character analysis in fiction in order to work out how the characters are constructed in the novel and how eco-rebels are presented in a way that inspires the reader to think critically and become active themselves. The semantic and lexical characteristics were established using inductive research methods and emerged while applying and thus trying to sharpen Bamberg's notion of identity dilemmatic spaces. The characteristics were established by applying Bamberg's first level of positioning to CYL and in the associated search for linguistic markers linked to each of the three identity dramatic spaces, which may accompany the navigation through the spaces. For example, it was shown that positioning towards antagonists in ecological CYL is usually accompanied by a negatively connoted description of the characters, which could then be included as a category of linguistic analysis in the model in Figure 1. The application of the method is inevitably based on processes of linguistic interpretation, as the categories used are not always clearly distinguishable: this is evident in the identity dilemmatic spaces, where certain overlaps and dependencies between the categories are always present, as Bamberg himself postulated (Bamberg 2008, p. 1), as well as in the demarcation of semantic and lexical markers. As part of the ongoing research project, the categories are to be further sharpened and coordinated with one another.

There is a close interaction between the semantic and lexical levels. Therefore, the comprehensive analysis of the dilemmatic spaces deals with linguistic categories and examines how the story is linguistically divided into thematic units and thus unfolds from the protagonist's perspective. Conclusions about the dilemmatic spaces can be drawn from the linguistic markers, which include lexical and semantic units. For example, a character who is introduced as a role model for the protagonist (semantic level) will probably also be described with positively connoted attributes (lexical level), which automatically qualifies them as close to the protagonist (*sameness* instead of *difference*). Accordingly, these characters and their belief systems are shown in a positive light and thus also become role models for the recipients of the text.

Sameness/difference	
Semantic characteristics	**Lexical characteristics**
• Semantic positioning • Description of characters' actions • Representational figures/belief systems • (Framing of) conflicts	• Speech markings • Speech reference/summary • Visual character description • Character (re)naming
Agency/passivity	
Semantic characteristics	**Lexical characteristics**
• Description of characters' actions (active or passive) → changes caused by external factors OR influence on the environment • Explicative-argumentative presentation of reasons for action	• Naming of characters (protagonist) • Stating an agenda
Continuity/change	
Semantic characteristics	**Lexical characteristics**
• Change in the semantic positioning • Change in the descriptions of characters' actions • Change in representational characters/belief systems & goals	Change in… • the speech marking • the speech reference/summary • the optical character description • the character naming • connotations/green speech • change frames/temporality particles

Figure 1. The dilemmatic spaces of Bamberg on the basis of their linguistic extension (own representation).

2.3. Analysis Object

The application of the analytical model is presented using the German-language Y.A. book *Die Welt, von der ich träume* (*The World I Dream Of*; original title of the French book: *Et le desert disparaîtra/And the Desert Will Disappear*) from 2021, which is a prototypical representative of a larger corpus of ecological CYL in the author's research. The book by French author Marie Pavlenko is 176 pages long and recommended for readers aged 10 and up. Although the analyzed text is a translation, it can be used to apply the analytical model because it involves the stereotypical eco-rebel story arc of ecological CYL and highlights the previously presented methodology to show how CYL can convey an ecological message to readers. In other words, the book is analyzed as an example for some CYL patterns and not for its literary value in the sense of the author's originality. Since the book targets the German literary market, the German translation of Dr. Cornelia Panzacchi is intended for a German readership; it can be therefore analyzed on its own merits without comparing it to the French version (which none of the German readers will know), as this article does not focus on cultural differences between different literary markets. The book shows the classic characteristics and prototypical action of an ecological dystopia for young readers and is intended to illustrate what can happen to the world due to unecological actions.[2] It can therefore be used to conduct an exemplary analysis of ecological CYL, as it represents a prototype of the genre.

The book is set in a dystopian future in which the world consists almost entirely of deserts and thus illustrates climate change on a global level. Today's world is only part of seemingly fantastical stories told by the eldest in a tribe. The 12-year-old protagonist, Samaa, lives in this world and tribe, and she wants to join the all-male hunters on desert expeditions for the purpose of finding and felling the last remaining trees. These felled trees are then sold in the city as *Oltz* (an invented fantasy term for *timber*) and thus secure the existence of the tribe. After Samaa's wish is repeatedly rejected, she displays rebellious activism and secretly follows the hunters on their next expedition. However, she soon

loses sight of the men and becomes lost in the desert. While fleeing from a predator, she falls into a sinkhole with a water source and a tree, which she names Naia in the course of the story. In the sinkhole, her previous knowledge and belief system are tested, and she realizes that cutting down trees leads to the desertification and death of the world. A tree changes from an object that ensures the survival of the tribe as a monetary source into an almost human-like mother that means survival and security and that needs to be protected. After an extended stay, Samaa is accidentally found by the returning hunters and rescued from the sinkhole. She tries to share her findings and to save Naia from being felled. However, it becomes clear here that the young eco-rebel has undergone a development that the newcomers cannot understand. The hunters cut down the tree, but Samaa is able to save tree seeds and, thus, she creates the green world in the epilogue.

3. Analysis

The linguistic analysis was carried out step by step using the analytical model presented. The novel was divided into three parts for analytical purposes: beginning, transition, and conclusion. These were not divided in terms of percentages according to the number of pages in the book but are based on content, i.e., as soon as Samaa questions her belief systems, the transition phase begins, and when she has a fully developed value system, the conclusion begins. The beginning, therefore, includes the parts from the beginning of the story (page 9) to page 76 (41%). The transition takes effect from there and continues to page 133 (35%). The conclusion starts from where the transition ends and goes to page 171, where the main story ends (24%). This classification thus excludes the prologue and the epilogue, as they take place later and have nothing to do with the positioning of the—now-deceased—main character, Samaa.

3.1. First Part: Beginning

The beginning of the story has a particularly pronounced positioning, as all the characters are introduced here and connected to the main character, Samaa. The characters and their belief systems are introduced and described in detail so that readers can understand the relationships, who represents which position, and what someone looks or behaves like. In the analyzed book, Samaa is positioned primarily in relation to the elder and the hunters. They are two opposing groups: While the hunters advocate felling trees to reach the precious Oltz, the elder advocates the opposite and thus propagates the protection of nature.

For the analysis, we first look at the speech markings of the characters in relation to which the main character, Samaa, positions herself. This is then intertwined with visual character descriptions, character and trait assignments, and the main character's wishes and hopes about the other characters in the story. In the story's first section, the dilemmatic space *continuity/change* cannot yet be discussed, as events from the past must be compared with more recent events for changes.

At the beginning of the story, statements made by the elder are summarized with "blah blah blah" (Pavlenko 2021, p. 18)[3] and dismissed as "nonsense" (ibid., p. 12) or "rubbish" (ibid., p. 31) that "gets on everyone's nerves" (ibid., p. 17). Attempts by the "old know-it-all" (ibid., p. 77) to impart knowledge are usually—in almost three-quarters of the cases—framed dismissively: "she's making something up" (ibid., p. 12), "she's babbling" (ibid., p. 20), "she's claiming" (ibid., p. 12), or "she is just talking nonsense" (ibid.). The latter, together with variations of *tell*, occurs most frequently in quantitative terms. The lexeme *tell*, however, is framed in a special way because Samaa dismisses the content of the stories told as fantastic because she believes "in what the elder tells us, just as one believes in fairy tales" (ibid., p. 83). From Samaa's point of view, the "world conjured up by the

elder" (ibid.) cannot be transferred to reality and is therefore not perceived as knowledge. The elder is thus defined as an imaginative, albeit confused and uncomfortable person, rather than being seen as a teacher who wants to provide fact-based information about real circumstances. After another teaching session by the elder, Samaa postulates: "I'm not listening anymore. She can't change my opinion anyway." (ibid., p. 18) Here, it becomes clear that Samaa has a fixed system of beliefs that is not based on the one of the elder and that she is not (yet) ready to adjust it. However, Samaa's exact agenda remains unclear at this point. The quote, "The men, on the other hand, despise the elder. No wonder [. . .]" (ibid., p. 12) also illustrates an adoption of the hunters' negative opinion with regard to the elder. The personal aversion and demarcation are also reflected in the character description: the elder is described as *old* five times, which is underlined five more times elsewhere by age markers such as toothlessness, bony fingers, and wrinkles, which set her apart from the young Samaa, who is not even considered a woman in her social group. In addition, the elder is described as "disgusting" (ibid., p. 19), "confused" (ibid., p. 25), and "an old witch" (ibid, p. 77) with "ice-blue eyes" (ibid., p. 43) and a "brittle voice" (ibid, p. 43), who should "rot in the Murfa [a tent]" (ibid, p. 78) or be eaten by predators. Overall, Samaa wants to have as little contact as possible with the elder.

At just 28% of all speech markings in this first part of the book, neutral speech markers such as *say*, *add*, or *use/use word(s)* are used significantly less often than negative speech markers. This percentage includes all words for the speech of the elder—be it those that accompany the elder's speech in communication situations or those that are a referential, reflective or summary evaluation of the elder's statements provided by Samaa. Words with positive connotations about imparting knowledge, such as *explain*, are not used at all. This negative evaluation of the elder's statements shows that Samaa wants to distance herself from her and the knowledge she imparts, which is reflected on a lexical and semantic level.

The hunters "speak loudly" (ibid., p. 22), *call*, and *shout*, thus demonstrating their presence and strength. This is underlined by statements such as "I feel his power" (ibid., p. 24) or "I thought he was wise, powerful. Immortal" (ibid., p. 20). Samaa looks up to them. Therefore, the hunters' statements are initially framed differently than those of the elder: 95% of the speech markers are neutral or positive. In 81% of cases, neutral verbs such as *answer, say, speak, entertain*, or *tell* are used. For the hunters, the word *tell* counts as a neutral speech marker—in contrast to the elder—because Samaa treats their stories as truth. When the hunters "tell about the hunt" (ibid., p. 28), they unquestionably share actual events. In 14% of cases, the speech markers are framed positively: The hunters "report[. . .] on their adventures" (ibid., p. 22) and "explain" (ibid., p. 35) the world. A hunter "is right", and Samaa absorbs "his words, whatever he says" (ibid, p. 20) because a hunter is a "respected man" (ibid., p. 26) who is full of strength and represents security. Overall, Samaa treats the positively connotated hunters as a much more potent source of information than the elder. While Samaa is afraid that the elder "will talk to me for hours" (ibid., p. 42), she is sad if there is no extensive conversation with the hunters: "Afterwards, Solas [. . .] will not tell me about the hunt. [. . .] The euphoria that still prevails in the camp has not affected me." (ibid., pp. 28–29) There is a clear distinction in assessing the value of conversations for Samaa and, thus, also a difference in group membership. Samaa feels that she belongs with the hunters, which is also reflected in her desire to participate actively in their work and to accompany them. The hunters are perceived as knowledgeable adventurers who imply the tribe's survival and security. This is shown in quotes such as "If the hunters are successful, we will live" (ibid., p. 15) and "Now that the hunters are with us again, no predator will attack me" (ibid., p. 22). The elder, on the other hand, preaches exactly the opposite: According to her, the hunters are ignorant "fools" (ibid., p. 17) who close themselves off from the truth and, therefore, endanger nature by cutting down trees, thereby making everything worse and

endangering humanity's survival. Since Samaa distances herself from the elder as a person, her assessments, and the content of her attempted knowledge transfer, Samaa positions herself as different (*difference*). She adopts the hunters' belief system and is convinced that felling trees means the tribe's survival. Therefore, she wants to engage in the same activity that her role models do. In order to avoid being conflicted, she, therefore, assesses the elder in the same way as the individuals in the group of hunters do: as an old woman who spreads nonsense and who is to be despised. With her decision, "I will be a hunter" (ibid., pp. 46, 49), she shows that she feels she belongs with the hunters and not with the elder and thus shares their beliefs and goals (*sameness*), even though the hunters deny her participation based on her gender. Her defiance in accepting this demarcation and the social role assigned to her—initially without any ecological reference—points to her rebellious nature (initial approach to individual *agency* and thus to *change*). In the beginning, Samaa does not have a clear agenda of her own and instead takes on that of the hunters, which is explained by naming a purpose (ensuring survival).

These kinds of representation of different world views and values and their connection with characters appearing in the text is prototypical for ecological CYL (Mikota 2017, p. 8). The ecological discourse can thus be presented as comprehensively and accurately as possible, and the eco-rebels can distance themselves from or embrace dominant groups and their agenda.

3.2. Second Part: Transition

In the transition phase, the main character, Samaa, increasingly calls into question the two groups. She deals with their agendas and the underlying knowledge and makes her own observations based on these varying sets of knowledge. In doing so, she examines the content of the knowledge transfer of both groups and links it with her own findings, which leads to an initial change in her evaluation of the other characters. The transition-phase is already foreshadowed by the discovery of a tree in the sinkhole: "If I were a hunter, I would cut down this tree and bring it to her [the elder] to prove to her that she is wrong" (Pavlenko 2021, p. 66), where it becomes apparent that she is not a hunter, and then Samaa begins increasingly to deal with the nature around her.

In the transition phase, based on her own direct experiences with nature, Samaa begins to check the truth of the elder's statements and discovers apparent inconsistencies but also much confirmation. As she deals with the nature around her, she unintentionally returns again and again to the elder's stories: "I have to think about the elder again" (ibid., p. 67). She takes a closer look at the knowledge of the elder and tries to classify it and, if necessary, to add her own insights: "The elder talked about trees that heal and others that poison, but I think she meant the bark." (ibid., p. 102) This is also reflected in the speech markings, which are presented in a more differentiated manner (*change*). Although there are still many negative labels such as *lying*, *telling nonsense/rubbish*, *claiming*, *mocking*, or *swearing*, 27% of these are afterward called into question or put into perspective. For example, the statement "She lied" (ibid., p. 107) is invalidated a short time later by "On the other hand. . ." (ibid.) after the apparent lie has been linked to new knowledge and thus has been proven to be the truth. Another example is "The elder was not just talking nonsense" (ibid., p. 127). This makes it clear that Samaa cannot yet accept the entirety of the knowledge transfer as truth, but based on her findings, she has to acknowledge that some of it is true. Instead of formulating this positively, however, the derogatory formulation makes clear that this does not yet mean a rapprochement with the elder. This is then reinforced in terms of content by the following statement, in which the death of the elder is presented as an event worth longing for: "I imagine that she has been in the belly of a predator since the day I left. Or in its feces. In any case, that is where she belongs" (ibid., p. 108). The statement also

denigrates the older woman by linking her to animal excrement and thus demoting her again. When Samaa surmises the connection between trees and water sources and is thus reminded that the elder has already explained that the roots hold back water, Samaa shouts angrily: "Get out of my head, elder! Finally get away!" (ibid., p. 122). Overall, Samaa wants to preserve her old belief system (*agency* of the hunter) but has to accept that it is flawed in some respects. The resulting gaps are then filled with the attempts at persuasion and thus knowledge of the elder (*agency* of the elder). Early on, Samaa resorts to terms used by the elder to describe her surroundings: "They are insects, I assume. In any case, I believe that this was the word that the elder used, this old know-it-all" (ibid., p. 77) and thus partially approximates her. However, the subsequent insult immediately takes distance from this approach. Despite strong counterarguments, the reluctance to change long-held beliefs highlights a fundamental aspect of human nature. When Samaa, representing humanity as a whole, begins to acknowledge that some of the assumptions underlying her opinions are incorrect, it raises the possibility that she may have been mistaken in other areas as well. Clinging to beliefs that have already been identified as false can provide a sense of security, as it allows one to avoid the need to reevaluate the subject completely. However, Samaa would not be a good role model for the recipients if she continued to be in denial: The knowledge of the elder is repeatedly compared to that of the hunters to reach an actual truth. The two different bases of knowledge are presented by way of statements such as "The elder told [. . .]" (ibid., p. 102) and the substantive comparison of "My father said that [. . .]" (ibid.). This is then followed by "But what about [. . .]" (ibid.), which shows that Samaa now gives equal weight to the statements of both groups when it comes to finding out the actual truth.

At another point, Samaa first postulates: "My father and all the hunters said that the felled trees enable us to survive. But that is not true" (ibid., p. 121), and thus indicates an initial differentiation from the hunters (first approach to *difference*). At the same time, the knowledge-transferring position of the hunters is questioned several times: "But they never talk about animals" (ibid., p. 128) or "Do the hunters know that?" (ibid., p. 127). Since the elder talked about large animals and Samaa finds proof of their existence in the form of a skull, these quotes show that Samaa is slowly coming to terms with the limits of the hunters' knowledge, which is a first step towards calling them into question in general (*change*). Immediately afterward, she returns to the stories of the elder and accordingly blames humanity for the extinction of the animals: "How could people let them die? Why did they do that?" (ibid., p. 128). This shows a first attempt to confront the injustice caused by humans, which can be understood as a further step towards Samaa's own agenda, now also in the sense of being an eco-rebel. The utility assessment of nature is no longer used in the same way as that of hunters: "My father always said that the bushes were worthless, but I discovered one whose branches would make perfect splints for my ankle" (ibid., p. 80). Adopting an anthropocentric view, nature is evaluated by the hunters—here represented by the father—only in terms of its immediate usefulness for humans (Feine 1995, p. 68). Since they do not see bushes as a monetary asset, the bushes are generally judged to be worthless. Although Samaa also adopts an anthropocentric perspective, she includes other aspects of utility, which can be analyzed as ecological rethinking. Although this does not yet show any accommodation of the ecological perspective of the elder, it does show a difference in how the hunters and the main character view nature (*difference*). Samaa's perspective becomes more differentiated overall, which is also evident in other passages of the text (*change*). For example, as Samaa examines and fascinatedly plays with the water source, she wonders whether her father did the same during his tree hunts, or if he was merely "wasting no time in getting to know the water at the bottom of a sinkhole better" (Pavlenko 2021, p. 81) while filling canisters with it. So, she questions whether

her role model shared her more nature-oriented view or whether this distances her from him. In addition, Samaa's desire to become/be a hunter is reframed in this section of the text. Ultimately, the dream seems to have arisen from the desire to be connected to her father, who died while tree hunting: "That was the best, the only way to be close to him" (ibid., p. 119). For her, being a hunter stands for freedom, camaraderie, and adventure, not primarily for finding and felling trees.

There is an apparent change in this section of the work: Samaa slowly turns away from the hunters' belief system and begins to call it into question. Initially defined by their purpose, the hunters are now seen more from a social–emotional perspective. Meanwhile, Samaa is growing closer to the elder without fully adopting her belief system. In terms of percentages, the knowledge of the elder is used much more frequently in this section of the text than that of the hunters. Initially, the elder's teachings were directly opposed to Samaa's beliefs. However, a change occurs as Samaa gains knowledge through her own experiences with trees. This symbolizes the first step towards change in Samaa, which is shown in an explicatively framed first distantiation from the agency of the hunters and a first rapprochement with the agency of the eldest. This transition is linguistically reflected in the speech markings and in terms of content, calling into question, and demarcation from and confrontation with the belief systems presented.

During this transition phase, Samaa finds herself detached from both groups. This text section can be seen as a phase of ecological self-discovery, a pivotal moment in Samaa's journey.

3.3. Third Part: Conclusion

In the final phase, Samaa's belief system changes by her confronting her environment and fact-checking previously imparted knowledge. She is friendly towards nature—she even gives names to the tree and an animal in the sinkhole[4], and she talks to them—and wants to protect it. The arrival of the hunters, who have a diametrically opposed agenda, triggers a conflict of significant proportions, which is both lexically and semantically framed and leads to a profound change in Samaa's positioning. Samaa, as an eco-rebel, opposes the nature-destroying hunters. These disagreements over different environmental ideas and the resulting rift between those responsible for environmental destruction and the environmentalists represent a defining plot element in CYL. This is often implemented using a good–evil scheme, with the young protagonist as an ecological bearer of hope who confronts the unecological antagonists (Mikota 2017, pp. 11, 22 f.).

Since Samaa first encounters the hunters towards the end of the story, Samaa's positioning in relation to this group is first addressed in this section. When she first meets the hunters, Samaa is relieved and feels like she belongs with them, as shown in the following quote: "My people" (Pavlenko 2021, p. 157). However, after the hunters cut down her tree—despite verbal and physical resistance from Samaa—the relationship changes: "I should be happy to be with my people again. But their stupidity killed Naia" (ibid., p. 164). The positioning changes suddenly, and the hunters are seen as different—especially regarding their beliefs and agenda—which can be easily identified on a lexical level. Samaa no longer supports the hunters' purpose in life; she evaluates their work negatively and tries to dissuade them from doing it based on her newly formed ecological agenda (*agency*). Thus, the purposeful act of felling a tree is emotionally framed by Samaa as "killing Naia" (ibid., p. 159), who has become a "mother" (ibid., p. 150) for Samaa. This cannot be understood by the uncomprehending hunters, who call it "felling a tree" (ibid, p. 159) and objectify the tree as a source for timber. This objectification of nature by the hunters is a key factor in the environmental disconnect between Samaa and them. According to Trampe (2017, p. 328), using euphemisms to conceal undesirable connotations—in this case, the fact that a

tree dies when it is felled—makes connecting such content with more pleasant associations possible. Therefore, a clear distinction is manifest in the evaluation of nature by Samaa and the hunters, as reflected in the act's linguistic realization. While Samaa uses *killing*, an affectively charged, anthropomorphic lexeme, the hunters use *felling*, an anthropocentric one, which excludes the emotional component. These lexical differences in the first and second designations mark the different positions linguistically. The circumstance appears in a different light, for which "the entire range of stylistic powers of lexical units in their embedding in the text structure" (Feine 1995, p. 75) is utilized to highlight people's environmentally destructive behavior. The narrative's structure plays a crucial role in this, as it guides the reader's attention: while the hunters gain Oltz (= timber), Samaa only sees "Naia's remains" (Pavlenko 2021, p. 165) in the "dismembered trunk" (ibid). This divergence in the perception of the world is semantically underpinned by Samaa accusing the leader of the hunters: "Kalo if you knew, you wouldn't do that. If only you knew…" (ibid., p. 163). Samaa thus blames the hunters' lack of knowledge for the horrific act they commit. This clearly shows that Samaa's belief base has changed drastically: In the final phase, a confrontation occurs between the hunters and Samaa, similar to the one between Samaa and the elder at the beginning of the work. One party advocates protecting the trees for ecological and emotional reasons, while the other cannot comprehend this. While Samaa initially supported the unecological decisions, she ultimately becomes an eco-rebel and stands up for the opposite course of action. She tries to stop the hunters because she now has a robust belief system of her own (*agency*), but she cannot. Samaa condemns the hunters' actions and their raison d'être because her agenda (protecting nature) runs counter to that of the hunters (cutting down trees as a source of money). For Samaa, the hunters are transformed into animal abusers and murderers who "kill trees" (ibid., p. 165), and she is angry with them and therefore initially stays "away from them" (ibid.), although she "does not want to hate" (ibid.) them. Over the course of the story, she has developed into an ecological individual who can be classified as an eco-rebel by virtue of rebelling against the hunters. Accordingly, she has undergone a change that the hunters (initially) cannot follow, creating a difference between the eco-rebel Samaa and the environmentally destructive hunters. This demarcation from the hunters is also evident in the speech markings. Overall, 64% of them are now negative and harmful, such as *telling untruths*, *screaming*, *shouting*, *growling*, and *cursing*. The words *shouting* and *screaming*, which initially symbolized strength, are now inverted and become expressions of violence against helpless nature and Samaa. "He holds my hands behind my back, with force, the pain increases, if he continues like this, he will break my shoulders" (ibid., p. 163). Samaa's plant friend is then "murdered" (ibid.) with the same raw force—linguistically framed as a fight for the survival of the tree. The hunters' violent nature is thus made perceptible on an acoustic level, intensifying the narrative's impact. The explicit depictions of violence and their assessment further heighten the intensity of the sensory perception of violence.

The elder is also framed very differently in the conclusion. Her speech markings are those that one would expect from a teacher: the elder "is right" (ibid., p. 167), "asks" (ibid., p. 170), and "says" (ibid.). They are consistently neutral or positive, which expresses a change in the perception of the elder on a lexical level. This change in speech markings could indicate a shift in the power dynamics, with the elder assuming a more authoritative role than the hunters. Semantical differences as compared to the beginning are also apparent. The possible death of the elder becomes a terrible thought in the end, and Samaa is "so happy" (ibid., p. 170) that she has survived the time of her absence since she "would not achieve anything without her" (ibid., p. 168). Moreover, when she returns, she first goes to the tent of the elder to see her again and even ignores her mother on the way, although she has missed her the whole time. This contradicts Samaa's wish for the elder's death at the

beginning of the story and highlights her closeness to the elder and the emotional bond that has grown out of a shared value system.

In the end, the positioning relationships are inverted: Samaa feels that she belongs with the elder (*sameness*) and distances herself from the hunters (*difference*). Through this change in the work, the actual theme of the story can unfold: the transformation of an individual who is not thinking ecologically into an ecologically acting person. The main character is no longer a passive recipient of external forces (*passivity*) but an active agent who shapes the narrative through her actions (*change*); Samaa develops into a true eco-rebel (*agency*). She is responsible for her own actions and bases them on a system of values she has developed, thus influencing the world. It is through her actions that the utopian world in the epilogue can first come into being.

4. Discussion

In this article, we were able to confirm the working hypothesis that identity dilemmatic spaces, supplemented by linguistic markers such as specific vocabulary choices, narrative structures or character descriptions, can be used to analyze the development and characteristics of eco-rebels in ecological CYL. As illustrated by way of examples, the classification of the dilemmatic spaces can be made more precise through these lexical and semantic markers. Using this extended analytical method, the positioning in relation to other characters and thus to their standpoints (difference/sameness), the formation of an ecological agenda (passivity → agency), and a change in these parameters (continuity → change) can be determined linguistically.

In this work, for example, the transformation of the main character from an unecological individual to an active eco-rebel can be shown by the formation an ecological agenda and the change in her positioning in relation to other characters in the narrative, which is reflected both lexically and semantically. Portraying a character or group as an antagonist or, more generally, as good or evil can also mean a specific positioning towards their values. If, for example, the positioning towards these people or groups (*sameness/difference*) changes, which can be determined, for example, by a change in the linguistic markers, this usually also indicates a change (*continuity/change*) in the agenda of the protagonist (*agency/passivity*). Accordingly, the dilemmatic spaces *sameness/difference*, *agency/passivity*, and *continuity/change* are connected and interact with each other—as do their linguistic specifications.

The introduction of an eco-rebel like Samaa, who, through an externally motivated learning process, undertakes a transformative journey to become an ecologically thinking and acting individual, can inspire readers to think about ecological issues (Mikota 2017, p. 13). Since such an ecological development of the young protagonist is a common feature in ecological CYL, it can be used as a prototypical object of analysis to evaluate the identificatory potential of CYL books and, thus, in a further step, possibly to assess the ecological potential of explicitly ecological CYL. This change, which can only fully unfold through the characters surrounding Samaa, the engagement with their knowledge and beliefs, and thus also through the positioning towards them, is a testament to the power of eco-rebellion. Eco-rebels are fighters who oppose the prevailing narrative with an ecological agenda and who are characterized by distancing themselves from the norm. Through Samaa, readers can understand the cognitive and motivational change involved in becoming an eco-rebel. Twelve-year-old Samaa can become a role model due to the age-related proximity and similar development level of the presumptive readership. The role model function can evoke an adoption of ecological values so that the readers want to campaign for nature conservation in their real everyday lives like Samaa does (Mikota 2017, p. 9). The eco-rebel's experience, as depicted by way of the protagonist, can become a

surrogate experience for the readers. The book facilitates the audience's understanding and implementation of the ecological transition without requiring them to have a direct natural experience like Samaa's.

A change in attachment and thus positioning can have a significant influence, especially in ecological CYL. Showing the change from an individual who thinks and acts unecologically to an individual who acts sustainably can serve as a kind of blueprint for the recipients (Hollerweger 2017, p. 98). Readers who have previously had little ecological education can thus also identify with Samaa and accompany her ecological learning-process while reading, feeling a strong sense of connection and engagement. The readers' identification with the protagonist and, thus, the quasi-authentic co-experience are essential and integral to gaining ecological knowledge and understanding, which thus underscores the significance of the new analytical methodology.

The interdisciplinary methodology presented here serves to systematize and compare analyses in ecological CYL and can therefore be supplemented by further methods of character analysis and other linguistic methods, such as aestheticization in the works, to make the representation of ecological change and sustainable awareness in ecological fiction for young readers even more linguistically tangible. This article is a pilot study in this direction and can be extended and enriched in the long-term.[5] The potential impact of this research on future studies is significant, as it opens up new avenues for exploring the linguistic representation of ecological themes in literature and can inspire further research in this area.

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Notes

1 "Als ausschlaggebend dafür, dass die im Rahmen einer Fiktion gewonnenen Erfahrungen reale Bewusstseins- und Entwicklungsprozesse beeinflussen, sind die Identifikationsangebote zu betrachten, die ein Text für seinen Leser bereithält."

2 A related classification and analysis of the book as ecological CYL can be found in Lüdicke (2024).

3 For clarity, all excerpts from the analysis have been translated by the author.This is a note example.

4 Proper names, inherently defined by mono-referentiality, have a unidirectional reference to the named object (Nübling et al. 2015, p. 17 f.). By giving reference objects, which were previously only known according to their nomenclature, a proper name, they are individualized (ibid., p. 20). This individualization, facilitated by personal names, enables the development of a personal relationship with a reference object that is treated as agentable by the proper name (ibid., p. 22). Changes in naming in literature are often motivated and play a crucial role in explicitly interpreting the text (ibid., p. 48). It can be assumed that the assignment of proper names in the analyzed work serves to acknowledge the individuality of nature, thereby bestowing a new status upon it and making it as a potential identification figure or an object connected to emotional bonds.

5 See here for example:

- Lüdicke. 2024. Green Speech und Figurenzeichnung. Ebenen der ökologischen Identitätsförderung in KJL. *In Ökologische Kinder- und Jugendliteratur. Grundlagen—Themen—Didaktik*. Edited by Mikota, J., Sippl, C. Innsbruck: Pädagogik für Niederösterreich, vol. 15, pp. 112–21.
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Article

Allying with Beasts: Rebellious Readings of the Animal as Bridegroom (ATU 425)

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Abstract: This article analyzes the French fairy tale "La Belle et la Bête" ("Beauty and the Beast"), the German folk tale "Das singende springende Löweneckerchen" ("The Singing Springing Lark"), and the Spanish folk tale "El lagarto de las siete camisas" ("The Lizard with the Seven Shirts") from the vantage point of feminist fairy tale studies and posthumanism. In particular, the article discusses the ways in which the female protagonists and their enchanted, beastly husbands become-with-each-other. The relationships between the female protagonists and their husbands are here taken as indicative of a recognition of the necessary, but often complex and disharmonic, allyship between the human and the nonhuman. The tales showcase different degrees of feminist potential and different ways of acknowledging such transcorporeal interrelations. Moreover, while they arguably transmit patriarchal and aristocratic lessons, their potential for challenging anthropocentric thinking emerges in an affirmative reading. Hence, this article seeks to demonstrate the eco-activist potential of the Western fairy tale tradition.

Keywords: posthumanism; ecofeminism; fairy tales; rebellious reading; ATU 425; human–nonhuman assemblage; cyborgs

1. Introduction

A young girl, more beautiful and valorous than any of her siblings, is forced into an intimate relation with an anthropomorphized, frightening animal. Courageously accepting her destiny, the girl learns that her beastly companion is a bewitched prince whose spell her love can break. However, when one or more other women attempt to force the happy couple apart, it is only with intelligence—and some magic helpers—that the girl succeeds in saving her husband, ensuring their everlasting matrimonial bliss.

Such is the basic plot structure of the three fairy tales to be studied in this article, the French "La Belle et la Bête" ("Beauty and the Beast" (de Beaumont [1757] 1806)), the Grimm tale "Das singende springende Löweneckerchen" ("The Singing Springing Lark" (Grimm et al. [1837] 2015)), and the Spanish "El lagarto de las siete camisas"[1] ("The Lizard with the Seven Shirts" (Espinosa 1946)).[2] The tales belong to type 425 in the Aarne–Thompson–Uther (ATU) index: "The Animal as Bridegroom/The Vanished Husband." While they are often read as didactic accounts of virtue rewarded or as symbolical accounts of the psychosexual development of girls, this article focuses on their central trope of human–nonhuman relations. My main research question is as follows: how are ideas of gender and animality constructed in interplay in ATU 425 tales?

With a contextual, feminist approach to fairy tale studies as foundation, I argue that posthumanist notions of relational becoming help identify an ecological content in these stories. By performing what I call "rebellious readings", I emphasize how the female

protagonist relates to her animal bridegroom and other nonhuman actors. The stories are selected with the intention of showcasing different degrees of acknowledgment of the value of the nonhuman. Thus, I claim that the Western fairy tale tradition has potential to challenge the patriarchal and anthropocentric value system often assigned to it.

2. Fairy Tales and Feminism

In psychoanalytic approaches to the genre, folk and fairy tales are regarded as expressions of a common human essence, with little attention to their culture- or gender-specific aspects. The extremely influential Bruno Bettelheim ([1976] 1991) regarded fairy tales as instruments of psychosexual development, with the trials and triumphs of the young hero standing in allegorically for an Oedipal process of maturation. For example, in Bettelheim's analysis, "Beauty and the Beast" "foreshadows by centuries the Freudian view that sex must be experienced by the child as disgusting as long as his sexual longings are attached to his parent, because only through such a negative attitude toward sex can the incest taboo, and with it the stability of the human family, remain secure" (Bettelheim [1976] 1991, p. 308). Here, the trope of shapeshifting is considered a culture-independent narrative element, based in an alleged common human process of psychosexual development.

However, feminist scholars have problematized this viewpoint. Marina Warner (1995) argues that fairy tales should be considered to be anchored in sociocultural contexts where women play a key role. One of her examples is a reinterpretation of the character of the wicked stepmother who protects her own children while acting cruelly to the point of murdering the offspring of her spouse. Rather than an Oedipal allegory representing a transcendental feminine evil defeated by the unconscious, Warner argues that this trope reflects gender and power struggles in Early Modern Europe (Warner 1995, p. 213). It is well known that laws of male primogeniture incentivized women of high birth to cause the deaths of stepchildren who might else dispute the social rank of their biological children.

In a similar vein, Maria Tatar (1992, p. xxi) argues that many scholars are drawn to psychoanalytic readings exactly because they allow readers to disregard the fact that much fairy tale content is real. Tatar goes on to point out that Bettelheim's analyses depend on a very specific view of gender roles, showing a rather accusatory attitude towards women and children even when they are victims within the fairy tale storyworld (Tatar 1992, p. xxiii). A crucial matter in feminist fairy tale scholarship is to highlight how these texts—and the ways in which they have been rewritten and reinterpreted—speak to palpable ethical dilemmas on the sociocultural as well as on a personal level.

Furthermore, these stories have to a large extent been narrated by women, from the bedside tales of mothers and wetnurses to the salon fairy tales of the 17th century French *précieuses* (Zipes 1994, p. 18). As Warner remarks, "if you accept Mother Goose tales as the testimony of women, as old wives' tales, you can hear vibrating in them the tensions, the insecurity, jealousy and rage of both mothers-in-law against their daughters-in-law and vice versa, as well as the vulnerability of children from different marriages" (Warner 1995, p. 238). This also applies to what Jack Zipes (1994, p. 32) has defined as the first literary fairy tale for children: Madame Leprince de Beaumont's version of "Beauty and the Beast".[3] The basic elements of this and other ATU 425 stories are known from ancient sources such as Apuleius' "Cupid and Psyche" in *The Golden Ass*, "the earliest extant literary version of the tale" (Tatar 1992, p. 141). Madame Leprince de Beaumont may thus have drawn on several intertexts, with her most immediate inspiration being a version of the fairy tale published by the novelist Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve in 1740.

Importantly, "Beauty and the Beast" "originated as a sex-specific tale intended to inculcate a sense of good manners in little girls" (Zipes 1994, p. 32). Comparing this tale to later, orally transmitted, versions of the same type thus enables a study of how the genre

negotiates gender in tandem with ideas of the nonhuman. In addition, Zipes underlines that although Madame de Beaumont's fairy tale was written to instruct young women in humility and patience when it comes to accepting their allotted husband, the story also suggests that women may be furnished with an innate good moral sense (Zipes 1994, p. 34). This represents a novelty at the time, indicating how fiction allows for differing and ideologically complex readings.

3. Rebellious Reading

Fairy tales demonstrate how societal attitudes to children and the process of becoming an adult shift and change (Tatar 1992, p. 20). Indeed, they register the anxieties and norms of the society in which they are transmitted, often conveying ethical pronouncements in both allegorical and direct ways. However, as Tatar remarks, "[f]airy tale figures rarely possess the moral stability with which they are invested through high-minded judgments and pronouncements (mainly for the benefit of children) inserted into the tale itself" (Zipes 1994, pp. 153–54). Indeed, as folklorist Kay Stone has shown, many women reinterpret female characters arguably depicted in a demeaning or misogynist way (Stone 2008, p. 43). This productivity inherent in all reader reception provides a key point of departure for the following analysis. Reading a fairy tale anew and making it matter is an important aspect of how these stories are remembered and transmitted. Thus, asking how they can be made to matter in a time when humans are becoming acutely aware of their troubled interrelation with the nonhuman world constitutes a rebellious act in parallel to how misogynist fairy tales have been repurposed for female identity development.

In order to understand the fluidity of fairy tales' interpretive potential, I build on posthumanist and new materialist theories of affect. These attempt to bridge the materialist foundation of the environmental humanities and the constructivist viewpoints of gender studies. Affects are here defined, with reference to theorist Rosi Braidotti (2002, p. 104), as the capacity of a body to enter into relations. Furthermore, I understand the term "body", following ecofeminist Astrida Neimanis, as any temporarily stable assemblage of parts, always subject to change in its continuous entering into new relations with other bodies (Neimanis 2019, p. 44). This theoretical framework moves the focus from beings to becomings, asking how bodies transform, relate and create possibilities for the unexpected and unthought.

Importantly, while feminists and other activism-inclined scholars have found fault with the supposed fixity and political weaponization of categories like "nature" and "matter" (cf. Gaard 2011), posthumanism allows us to regard matter as changing. While the ecofeminist attention to how nature is oppressed in structural parallel with the female has been charged with representing a limiting form of essentialism, Greta Gaard refers to the posthumanist scholars Stacy Alaimo and Susan Heckman's comment that "the more feminist theories distance themselves from 'nature,' the more that very nature is implicitly or explicitly reconfirmed as the treacherous quicksand of misogyny" (Gaard 2011, p. 42). Posthumanism thus aims to take an affirmative view of the interconnections between what is traditionally considered human and nonhuman, without essentializing these categories. Cecilia Åsberg and Braidotti (2018, p. 3) show how feminist posthumanists build on feminist critiques that question the figure of the human and the idea that it is separate from nature. In this context, Haraway's "feminist notion of all earthlings as 'companions' who 'become with' one another in mutual reciprocity offers respect for diversity and speciation processes without romanticizing hybridity" (Åsberg and Braidotti 2018, p. 9). Following these scholars, one might thus talk of a posthumanist ecofeminism.

Fundamentally, taking a posthuman perspective means acknowledging how the limits we draw around the "human" are dynamic and culturally conditioned. Similarly, instead

of attempting to fix a text in a final interpretation, posthumanist theorists like Braidotti are concerned with the text as a body in *becoming*; a text is a "connection-making device" (Braidotti 2002, pp. 95–96). This is an important point in an affirmative approach: we are not primarily looking for ideologically problematic elements to "expose" or criticize in the fairy tales; what interests us is what they can become and how they can realize the fullness of their potential as rebellious texts.

Thus, in the words of Neimanis, I regard stories as amplifiers and sensitizers that "can be avenues for de-sedimenting our human-scaled perspective" (Neimanis 2019, p. 55). With this background, I define a rebellious reading as one that seeks to reinterpret texts in ways that go against the grain of their didactic, hierarchical normativity. These fairy tales are commonly criticized for depicting female self-sacrifice and for transmitting a limiting idea of women's task of patiently working to change a brutal husband (Bacchilega 1997, p. 78). As ecofeminists and posthumanist scholars have underlined, the oppression of animals is interconnected with the oppression of women (Gaard 2004, p. 23; Birke and Holmberg 2018, p. 118), suggesting that the need to suppress animality in these stories is not just a metaphor for taming a pre-civilized form of sex but is also an expression of skepticism towards the animal and of patriarchal efforts to subjugate it. In this way, posthumanism allows us to acknowledge how the interplay between gender and animality in these tales can create new and unexpected interpretations. Here, the awareness of global ecological degradation and its roots in a parallel oppression of the non-masculine and nonhuman constitutes a new context with which these texts can be connected in order to become something else. Thus, I will argue that these tales also provide an opportunity to question what constitutes a "rebellious" act.

4. Affirming the Animal

Far from the harmonious viewpoint of a Romantic integration between the human and the nonhuman, posthumanism acknowledges the affirmative potential of discord, fright and violence that may also be part of relational becomings. Timothy Morton's concept of a "strange stranger", i.e., "the stranger whose strangeness is forever strange—it cannot be tamed or rationalized away" (Morton 2013, p. 123), is a useful analytical concept in this respect. In fairy tales, the act of shapeshifting between human and animal states is an occurrence that is usually accepted within the storyworld, acting as plot engine. An affirmative view of such hybrid creatures, then, does not suppose a Disneyfied ideology of harmony between humans and animals. Rather, it means acknowledging the potential inherent in the animal to trouble human habits of thought by virtue of its strangeness or perceived danger.

As ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant (1990) has demonstrated, the scientific revolution heavily builds on gendered tropes. From the Early Modern period through the Enlightenment all the way to modern high-tech science, nature has been conceived as a pristine object to be mapped and explored by the male gaze, in parallel with the virginal, female body. Furthermore, the male gaze is one of Olympic rationality, considering itself as outside and independent of the nature it studies—in the words of Donna Haraway (1988, p. 582), science performs a "god trick". From this perspective, it is relevant to bear in mind Zipes' remark on the utopian function of fairy tales: "there is a secret humane and imaginative world, the realm of the faerie, that is threatened by powermongers, rationalists, materialists, scientists, and the like. Without this world, i.e., without imagination, life would become drab and monotonous, and people would become like automatons" (Zipes 1994, p. 153). In other words, the genre embodies a science-critical tendency, not in flat-out rejecting the value of scientific findings—an absurd proposition in environmentalist contexts—but in providing a counter-image to the dominant rationalist and anthropocentric images of

nature (cf. Stobbe 2017, p. 149). Indeed, the fairy tale was institutionalized in the same early modern era that modern science was developed, making many fairy tales describe, in Zipes' words "the problems we have caused by trying to dominate nature and at the same time deny our very own nature" (Zipes 2006, p. 26). Therefore, as Braidotti (2019, p. 109) notes, "the empathic bond to non-human, including monstrous and alien others, has become a posthuman feminist topos." Morton's abovementioned concept of the strange stranger is a case in point.

By adopting a posthumanist, ecofeminist framework, this study belongs to a growing field of ecological re-evaluation of the Western fairy tale tradition (see Greenhill and Allen 2018; Stobbe 2017). For example, Pablo a Marca (2020) uses a posthumanist approach in studying Italo Calvino's fairy tale adaptations. However, while a Marca uses the Deleuzian concept of *becoming-animal*, I will argue that the three fairy tales to be discussed below depict a *becoming-with-each-other* involving both human and nonhuman characters. The conceptual link between women, children, and nature, as well as the oppositional potential of this linkage, is a common trope in modern children's literature and popular culture, which these media have borrowed from the Western fairy tale tradition (cf. Stobbe 2017, pp. 154–57). A rebellious reading of the fairy tales in question provides insight into how these links are constructed.

5. The Aristocratic Morality of "Beauty and the Beast"

In Madame Leprince de Beaumont's fairy tale, the heroine, Beauty, grows up as the youngest daughter in a family consisting of her rich merchant father and her three brothers and two sisters. Beauty earns her nickname because of her outstanding looks. In keeping with 18th century ideas of physiognomy, the tale implies that they are linked to her good moral sense. Both her sisters are haughty and arrogant because of their father's wealth: "They went to dances, to the theatre, on walks, and made fun of their younger sister who spent all her time reading good books".[4] The tale reveals itself as couched in a modern world of expanding international trade routes when Beauty's father, having lost all his money, receives news that a ship with some of his merchandise has arrived. Hopeful that he will regain some of his fortune, he embarks on a journey. While Beauty's sisters demand that he brings back gowns, Beauty only asks for a rose. Heading back home, their father picks a rose from the garden of an enchanted castle. Its master, the Beast, threatens to kill him, but allows him to exchange his life for that of one of his daughters. Taking the place of her father, Beauty gradually falls in love with the Beast. He reveals that he has awaited the love of a woman to be freed from his enchantment and turn back to the prince he once was. In the end, Beauty is rewarded with a happy marriage, whereas her sisters are punished for their wickedness by being turned into statues.

The central, celebrated concepts on the normative level of the narrative are beauty, intellect, and virtue. As long as he is enchanted, the Beast only possesses the latter trait, which turns out, in the end, to be enough to convince Beauty of his aptitude as a husband. Typical of the folk tale tradition on which the fairy tale is based, Beauty is contrasted with her older siblings. The value of her virtues in contrast to her arrogant, jealous and conceited sisters is transmitted in a strongly didactic tone. We are taught, for example, how Beauty is not only meek but also strives not to put her sisters in a worse light than necessary. When she asks for a rose, "it was not that Beauty cared for a rose, but she did not want to denounce the behavior of her sisters by her example, as they would have said that it was in order to stand out from them that she asked for nothing".[5] Thus, the good fairy tells her in the end, because she has known to value virtue over beauty and intellect, she deserves to find them all united in one person (de Beaumont [1757] 1806, pp. 30–31). This expresses an

acknowledgment of identity as processual assemblage; these character traits are magically composed in the transformed prince thanks to Beauty's patience and hard work.

In contrast to its German and Spanish parallels, Madame de Beaumont's tale is a highly literary tale, characterized by its psychological commentary. It is interesting to note that Beauty's high morals are amplified in her encounter with the Beast as a nonhuman being. Hence, her acceptance of the beast could be read as an acceptance of the brutality of men, embodied in an animal character which, following the establishment of the scientific worldview, is conceived as radically different from, and non-integrable with, the human.

In a rebellious reading, the fact that the chosen symbol for this brutality is a man-turned-beast is exactly the interesting point. On the level of the moral message, the Beast is clearly an allegory for the unwanted husband—the rich and aristocratic but old and ugly widower to which many young women of the period were wed. As Cristina Bacchilega notes, the ATU 425 type of story "repeatedly reenacts the patriarchal exchange of women, and affirms women's collusion with the system" (Bacchilega 1997, p. 76). But, by acknowledging and daring to approach the bestial, women also counteract the patriarchy which is skeptical to and wishes to kill nonhuman disturbances—"strange strangers". Indeed, Beauty avows to the Beast that "—There are many men who are more monstrous than you [. . .] and I like you better with your appearance than those who, with the appearance of men, disguise a false, corrupted, ungrateful heart."[6] The moral message of the story depends on a redefinition of the concept of beauty as a question of perception: beauty depends on an assessment of a person's moral stature. This stands in marked contrast to how Beauty's sisters marry men who seem to be superficially attractive by their looks and manners, but who, in the end, make them unhappy.

Beauty's relationship with the Beast, on the one hand, expresses the importance of approaching the nonhuman as valuable in and of itself. From the perspective of the Anthropocene, it is interesting to note that the trigger for Beauty's confinement and her process of freeing the Beast is her father's attempt at regaining his wealth by traveling to his recently embarked trading vessel. Not only does it suggest a yearning for monetary wealth; it also contrasts the risk of trading routes—the successful arrival of the vessel is a surprise—with a safe domesticity of toil and patience. The capitalist trade network on which Beauty's family relies is one of the prime causes of the Anthropocene (cf. Malm 2016). Beauty's frugality and meekness implies a rejection of this. In one sense, this can be taken as rewarding female self-sacrifice while sanctioning the girl's need for satisfying her curiosity, a standard element in ATU 425 tales (Tatar 1992, p. 158). In a rebellious reading, however, it comes across as emphasizing the potential destructivity of capitalism.

Nevertheless, here the rebellious reading meets its limits. The plot of the fairy tale suggests that the nonhuman is valuable to the extent it can be tamed. Beauty's reward for her morality, meekness, and patience is the Beast's final transformation back into the prince he really was. As such, the tale would seem to represent an anthropocentric worldview in which humanity is the model of high virtue. "Beauty and the Beast" prioritizes aristocratic values and a subjugation of the bestial with the goal of its transformation into intellectual and moral aristocracy. Thus, while the tendency of Madame de Beaumont's tale is anthropocentric, a rebellious reading helps us notice ecofeminist "leakages," i.e., the critique of capitalism and its quest for immediate material satisfaction which the ideal aristocratic woman embodies.

6. Female Courage in "The Singing Springing Lark"

In "The Singing Springing Lark", the conflict between arrogance and humility is absent, and the tale starts with the father's quest. As in "Beauty and the Beast", he asks his daughters what they want him to bring back. While the two older ones request pearls and

diamonds, in parallel to Beauty's sisters, the youngest, her father's favorite, asks him to bring back a lark, suggesting a love for living, organic nature. When he tries to capture one, however, a lion appears and threatens to eat him for stealing his lark, lest the man offer the lion whatever comes first to meet him upon his return. As this tragically proves to be the youngest daughter, she is sent to marry the lion. An enchanted prince, he regains his human form at night, transforming into a lion in the morning.

In another plot twist, the enchanted prince is turned into a dove who has to roam about for seven years. Like Beauty, the girl follows him faithfully, although this is never coupled to aristocratic virtues, rendering the didacticism of the Grimm tale less apparent. The prince is transformed into a dove after his wife persuades him to join her for her sister's wedding. He hesitates, as a ray of burning light would bring about his metamorphosis. She promises to protect him and encloses him in a specially built room where the panel cracks, letting in torchlight from the wedding procession. Thus, the female protagonist is torn between different bonds of loyalty, forcing her to pay a dear price but ultimately being rewarded. Again, this can be read as a praise of female self-sacrifice and virtue rewarded.

In the end, the prince is taken to a palace where he is to marry the princess, a sorcerer's daughter. His rightful wife, however, has received helpful gifts from the south wind which allow her to trick the bride: she gives away her gifts in order to be allowed to sleep with the prince three nights in a row, trying to make her presence known. The bride makes him drink sleeping potion for the first two nights, but on the third he avoids it. As she makes her presence and identity known, the faithful wife helps the prince escape the palace of enchantment, and they live happily ever after. Where the confrontation between the father and the monster in such tales relies on a logic of power and "the law that might makes right" (Tatar 1992, p. 147), the princess' choice of negotiating between different relations of loyalty arguably shows the value of seeking alternatives to a logic of power.

Indeed, "The Singing Springing Lark" demonstrates the need for a more fluid negotiation of human–animal relationships than what male authority figures are capable of, providing a different account of the value of the strange stranger than "Beauty and the Beast." Already from the title, the changeable, hybrid ontology of the lion prince is suggested. The word "Löweneckerchen" is a *hapax legomenon*, formed from the word "Löwe" (lion), denoting the particular kind of lark the girl requests from her father—but which is never mentioned after the appearance of the lion. This may be read as a strange conflation of the delicate lark and the savage lion, indicating that both extremes can form part of the same body but only be actualized, or amplified, in particular assemblages.

When the lion presents the unfortunate father with his ultimatum, he clearly expects to be given one of his daughters in marriage: "then I will gift you your life and the bird to top it off in exchange for your daughter."[7] The man is understandably reluctant, but his servant convinces him by arguing: "'does it necessarily have to be your daughter who meets you, it might as well be a cat or a dog'."[8] The servant's attempt at avoiding the situation exemplifies Zipes' remark that "[w]hat the fairy tale does [. . .] is represent basic human dilemmas in tangible metaphorical forms that reflect how difficult it is for us to curb basic instincts" (Zipes 2006, p. 131). Crucially, the servant's suggestion for a solution suggests how nonhuman life is expendable. This attitude will not only be punished by the loss of his master's favorite daughter in what turns out to be a risky, although ultimately rewarding, marriage. It also contrasts with the daughter's active form of allyship with her animal bridegroom and other nonhuman actors.

In this way, the female protagonist represents a different level of industry and problem-solving ability than the male characters. Indeed, when it comes to the father's initial dilemma, one might wonder why he did not take more pains to ensure that someone other than his daughter would come to meet him on his return. (Why did he not dispatch the

servant in advance and order him to send out a pig, for instance?) The obvious point that this would put the plot to a halt begs the question of why the servant is present in the first place; in orally transmitted fairy tales, characters are generally not introduced without any function, as it is difficult to keep several characters in mind at the same time (Olrik 1908, p. 23). One might argue that this detail underlines the anti-anthropocentric tendency of the story. By "sacrificing" the daughter, it is as if the text insists that the (female) human is no more valuable than animals.

> Tatar notes that heroines in versions of ATU 425 like this Grimm tale give us a double display of courage, first in their determination to reason with the enemies, even when they take the form of ferocious animals and horrifying monsters, then in their unraveling of paternal authority. To the confrontational policies of father and beast, which give rise to violence by affirming the law that might makes right, the daughters respond with a diplomacy of negotiation. (Tatar 1992, p. 147)

This could be regarded as a stereotypical way of highlighting soft feminine values as an antidote to violence, thus charging women with the responsibility of counteracting a violence over which they have no authority. But from a rebellious viewpoint, it may also be interpreted as acknowledging the need for a more fluid negotiation of human–animal relationships than what male authority figures are capable of. Thus, the tale seems to suggest that the relationship between human and nonhuman should not be one of avoiding danger, but of meeting it creatively and head-on.

7. Cyborgian Violence in "The Lizard with the Seven Shirts"

The heroines in the French and the German tales are both handed over to their enchanted husband because they ask their father for an element of natural beauty—a rose or a lark—for which the father is punished. In the Spanish folk tale "The Lizard with the Seven Shirts," the encounter with the nonhuman world is violent and disharmonious from the outset, and there are few acknowledgments of natural beauty. Of the three tales discussed in the present study, this tale displays the strongest preoccupation with the often violent encounters between human and nonhuman actors.

Frustrated with her lack of children, a queen asks God to give her a son, even if it has to be a lizard. God punishes her by granting her wish. As an adult, the lizard prince marries his former wet nurse, Mariquita ["little María"]. On their wedding night, the prince takes off his seven shirts of lizard skin, appearing in a disenchanted state as a beautiful prince. However, after a period of marital happiness, the prince's mother hides the shirts and the enchantment turns stronger than before. To save her husband, Mariquita and her son must go on a long journey. Where the Grimm heroine must walk for seven years, the wife and son in the Spanish tale have to wear out seven pairs of iron shoes before reaching their goal (Espinosa 1946, p. 296). As in "The Singing Springing Lark", the heroine manages to win back the prince by tricking his new bride into allowing her to sleep with him for three nights.

"The Lizard with the Seven Shirts" stands out for its female agency as the prime mover in the unfolding of the plot. In "Beauty and the Beast", the Beast is enchanted by a wicked, female fairy (de Beaumont [1757] 1806, p. 30). Here, however, the queen is punished by God for wishing to have a lizard as a son. As such, it can be understood in terms of early modern beliefs concerning women's ability to influence the physical appearance of their offspring and avoid "monstrous" children (cf. Braidotti 1996, p. 292). This sheds light on the perceived lack of autonomy among the female characters in ATU 425-type stories, which "ceaselessly turn on the question of retargeting the object of the woman's devotion" (Tatar 1992, p. 151). Reading this story in the historicizing manner suggested by Tatar and Warner, we might say that it is unlikely that the queen would

have survived had she failed to bear children. Her, and Mariquita's, constant efforts to enter into new affective relations constitute a becoming-rebellious in the sense that this is how women can improve their lives. This is likely their only opportunity to outweigh patriarchal dominance, emblematically represented by a punishing God.

In this tale, women's affects of loyalty also benefit nonhuman others. Indeed, this fairy tale stands out from "Beauty and the Beast" and "The Singing Springing Lark" in that it is not the young girl's loyalty to her father which makes her marry the beast. Rather, it is Mariquita's mother who assures her daughter that this is the right choice, as the heroine is destined to break the spell: "her mother implored her to marry him in order to disenchant him."[9] As such, this tale arguably places more emphasis on female ingenuity, with the plot being driven forward by the schemes of the women surrounding the prince.

As indicated above, the gendered violence at the beginning of the story is one of its most striking tropes. The lizard prince eats the breasts of its first two nurses, an act that might be read as a forceful instauration of patriarchal order and a rejection of the vitality of the female. From the vantage point of posthumanist ecofeminism, moreover, it is no coincidence that this violence takes the form of a stop to the flow of breast milk. Citing breastfeeding as a transcorporeal practice, Neimanis (2019, pp. 32–33) discusses how it has historically been the subject of colonialism while at the same time emblematic of a female gift economy in opposition to the industrialized "Big Dairy." Lactation, then, has the power to show how "sexual difference is indeed biologically marked [. . .] but always within sociocultural valences of power" (Neimanis 2019, p. 164). The overdetermination of breastfeeding is crucial in "The Lizard with the Seven Shirts." The infant lizard prince's destructive behavior could be interpreted as a bestial thwarting of the attempt of patriarchy—the royal family—to harness the ever-flowing nurture of the female body. In performing this, however, the transcorporeal, relational flow of breast milk is interrupted, with the possible risk that the lizard dies of malnutrition, and thus never develops. From the point of view of the king and queen, the hope is likely that he will be tamed into a future heir to the kingdom. Here too, then, the beastly bridegroom might be said to represent male brutality. However, at the end of the day this brutality threatens the patriarchal organization of society as much as it threatens women, in a forceful allegory of the autodestructive forces of a patriarchy myopically oriented towards its own reproduction.

Mariquita is the third and final woman asked to serve as wetnurse and ingeniously agrees on one condition: "and she ordered that they make her two breasts of iron and that they fill them with milk from the back. And thus she breastfed the lizard until it was grown up".[10] Womanhood here surpasses biology and a facile harmony with the natural. Instead, it is helped into becoming by how the milk-filled breasts, a time-worn emblem of the female, are constructed and added to Mariquita's body as a prosthesis. In a further allegorical reading, this could be taken as symbolic of how human technology is a necessary means of mastering the natural world, with the iron serving as protection from bestiality, while the externally delivered milk illustrates how the need for nutrition can be decoupled from the organic body in a technologized world.

Far from a tale of the *estrangement* between the human and the nonhuman, however, I claim that this is instead another tale of their affective, processual entanglement. Mariquita could be characterized as a transversal subject, temporarily assembled (cf. Marca 2020, p. 3), or, in the words of Haraway (2006, p. 120), a "cyborg [who] appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed." The concept of the cyborg—a human/machinic assemblage—resembles Neimanis's concept of a body in that it is a "frozen moment", while the technologies constituting it "should also be viewed as instruments for enforcing meanings" (cf. Haraway 2006, p. 130). Mariquita demonstrates an inventiveness transcending mere organismic provisions. Her and the lizard prince's

transcorporeal becoming-with-each-other is dependent on organic as well as inorganic assemblages. Of course, this is symbolic of the cyborgian, assembled nature of *all* bodies, with the iron breast trope coming across as an emphatic reminder of the arbitrarily drawn lines between organism and technology.

This sensual relationship foreshadows their subsequent becoming-royal-family through a successful act of patriarchal reproduction. In this respect, it is significant that the reptilic form of the prince alludes to an idea of the tempting-yet-dangerous phallic snake. In a more graphic manner than either of the previously discussed tales, then, "The Lizard with the Seven Shirts" depicts the heroine's sexual awakening through a posthuman assemblage with a strange stranger.

The patriarchal violence of the lizard prince is also apparent in his brief relation to Mariquita's two older sisters, whom he marries and murders, one after the other. His commandment of loyalty, in parallel to that of the enchanted prince in many other instantiations of this tale type, is that his wife must go to bed before him and stay awake while waiting. Their failure to carry this out makes him kill them on their wedding night (Espinosa 1946, p. 295). As third in line, Mariquita initially refuses, but her mother provides her with chili peppers to rub in her eyes in order to stay awake (Espinosa 1946, p. 295). The chili peppers, an important ingredient in cooking, might be said to allude to the domestic role of women. In contrast to the iron breasts, this fairy tale showcases an arguably more conventionally feminine kind of inventiveness. The same applies to the ways in which Mariquita tricks the princess using objects she obtains through three magical nuts, which she gifts the princess in order to be allowed to share the bed of her husband. In keeping with this version's stronger emphasis on a Christian worldview, Mariquita receives the nuts not from natural forces but from "la Virgen", i.e., the Virgin Mary (Espinosa 1946, p. 296).

Nevertheless, having worn out her seven iron shoes, she needs help to reach the final destination, the Palace of No Return.[11] She calls out at the door of the palace of the eagles, where the golden eagle ("águila real", literally "royal eagle") tells her that he has just been to her husband's wedding. He mentions another act of violence: "I have been to the party and by throwing me a bone they made me lame."[12] This somewhat elliptic tale might mean that the human party guests threw a bone of food at the eagle which broke his feet, in a curious actualization of the murder of animal companions inherent in the bone. The eagle transports Mariquita to the palace by flying, underlining her cooperative attitude to animals in contrast to the violence effected by the royal party guests. Mariquita's affective assemblage with the eagle is reminiscent of that in the Grimm tale, but again, the Spanish version stands out by virtue of its emphasis on violence.

On arrival at the Palace of No Return, Mariquita tricks her husband's new wife in a similar way to that of the protagonist of "The Singing Springing Lark". It is hardly a coincidence that all the items Mariquita offers the queen in exchange for three nights with her husband—a spinning wheel, a spindle, and a golden ball of yarn—are typically domestic items. The one-upmanship of cunning between Mariquita and the queen suggests that this tale, too, reflects women's experiences of fighting to win the man that will ensure economic security and social status in a society where this is the prime possibility for female assertion (cf. Warner 1995, p. 238). Indeed, there are several notable metaphors drawn from the sphere of common household objects in this version of the tale. At the end, the lizard prince pronounces the moral of the story by asking his subjects the following questions:

> – If you had a key and lost it and were unable to find it, and you made another key, and then after a while you found the lost key—which one would you settle for, the first or the second?
>
> And they all answered:
>
> – For the first one [13]

The prince develops this into a simile by explaining that the same thing happened to him, as he was married to one woman whom he lost, but has now found. As for the princess, he gives her back to her father, "since I have not touched her."[14] In one sense, then, the tale restores the patriarchal order of things, to the point of exchanging women back and forth between father and bridegroom. However, the metaphor of the key deconstructs gender hierarchies by suggesting that Mariquita "opens the door" to the lizard prince's ascent to power.

Moreover, the "The Lizard with the Seven Shirts" features a strong religious undercurrent. Not only does the Virgin appear; the religious overtones of the protagonist's name stand in clear contrast to the superficial name "Beauty" or the anonymity of the heroine in the Grimm tale. This indicates that this tale seeks to convey a mythical allegory to a stronger extent than the others. Moreover, it demonstrates how fairy tales often explain events that escape human control and suggest alternatives to an anthropocentric world order (cf. Zipes 2006, pp. 50–51).

In keeping with the often-alleged anthropocentrism of Christianity, the tale would seem to depict a vindication of human, especially female, ingenuity over a threatening, enchanted nonhuman world. Such a reading, however, would have to be balanced against Mariquita's fearlessness with respect to the brutality of the lizard and her allyship with the injured royal eagle.[15] As Tatar (1992, p. 12) has argued, while violence in fairy tales has a didactic, admonishing purpose, this sometimes crosses the line to a humorous fascination with gore. In this Spanish tale, the baby lizard prince's maiming of his wet nurses' breasts, as well as Mariquita's solution, are far-fetched to a degree that makes it difficult to read them as warnings regarding matters of family life, e.g., as representations of the toil of childrearing. The relevant symbolic interpretation lies elsewhere: the nonhuman is depicted as dangerous and perhaps untameable but still necessary to relate to. Even though here, as in "Beauty and the Beast", the princess is rewarded for her patience and hard work, the fact that the tale emphasizes violence and hybridity to a larger degree suggests that there are difficult yet feasible ways of relating to the strange stranger. Mariquita's ability to seize the opportunity to work *with*, and thus become-princess in bodily assemblage with, the nonhuman world might be paradoxically necessitated by patriarchal forces.

8. Concluding Discussion

Feminist scholars have rightly noted how fairy tales reflect and convey patriarchal norms, leaving female characters with little opportunity for autonomous, rational action. Comparing ATU 425 tales with parallel tales featuring a male protagonist and a bewitched bride, Tatar argues that these tales underline stereotypes of women as ruled by emotion and men as able to act rationally (Tatar 1992, p. 160). However, this is problematic only to the extent that acting from passion is regarded as a liability. What I suggest is that male logic instead comes across as a damaging attitude that only leads to violence and destruction. From an affirmative point of view, the female characters' orientation towards relationships, passions, and self-deprecation can be seen as a rebellious act against a patriarchal logic of force. Crucially, the heroines' acts are, to different degrees, linked to an acknowledgment of the eternally transforming nature of the nonhuman world. As stated repeatedly, this does not imply a "harmonious" relationship between the human and the nonhuman. Haraway's figure of the cyborg, depicted in Mariquita, implies a rejection of Oedipal and Marxist fantasies of an original unity that needs to be restored (cf. Haraway 2006, pp. 118–19). Rather, what especially the German and the Spanish folk tale arguably demonstrate is exactly the fundamental "disharmony" that may arise between the two, but which is negotiable and manageable by other strategies than that of patriarchal subjugation.

Thus, these tales also question what constitutes a rebellious act. It is not necessarily a question of fighting on the barricades. It can also mean, as in the case of the Grimms' and the Spanish heroine, to take the full account of the potential for relating to the human–social world and to the nonhuman world, facing different sets of challenges along the way. Finally, the stories convey an ethical message of the value of persistence, patience, and hard work rather than seeking immediate satisfaction. This, too, is an interesting moral lesson in the context of the Anthropocene, where the satisfaction of immediate pleasures competes with, and often triumphs over, working for a higher goal in the long term. As such, the heroines might be said to rebel against a predicament tragically characteristic of our time: that of losing sight of the goal because one prioritizes pleasure in the present. Patiently striving in order to become-with an animal is not necessarily a way of succumbing to patriarchal expectations of marriage. It can also constitute a rebellious act against a reductive, patriarchal worldview which suffers from a lack of acknowledgement of both human and nonhuman bodies.

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Notes

1 The tale is sometimes referred to as "La joven María y el príncipe lagarto" ("Young Lady Maria and the Lizard Prince") or simply "El príncipe lagarto" ("The Lizard Prince").

2 I will henceforth refer to the tales by their English titles. All translations are my own.

3 Where, e.g., Charles Perrault's 1697 *Contes de ma mère l'oie* featured didactic verses at the conclusion of each tale, his adaptations of the salon tales were aimed at young women rather than children: "In other words, it is absurd to date the origin of the literary fairy tale for children with the publication of Perrault's tales" (Zipes 1994, p. 23).

4 "Elles allaient tous les jours au bal, à la comédie, à la promenade, et se moquaient de leur cadette, qui employait la plus grande partie de son temps à lire de bons livres" (de Beaumont [1757] 1806, p. 2).

5 "Ce n'est pas que la Belle se souciât d'une rose; mais elle ne voulait pas condamner, par son exemple, la conduite de ses sœurs, qui auraient dit, que c'était pour se distinguer qu'elle ne demandait rien" (de Beaumont [1757] 1806, pp. 6–7).

6 "– Il y a bien des hommes qui sont plus monstres que vous [. . .] et je vous aime mieux avec votre figure que ceux qui, avec la figure d'hommes, cachent un cœur faux, corrompu, ingrat" (de Beaumont [1757] 1806, p. 21).

7 "so schenke ich dir das Leben und den Vogel für deine Tochter obendrein" (Grimm et al. [1837] 2015, p. 380).

8 "'muβ euch denn gerade eure Tochter begegnen, es könnte ja auch eine Katze oder ein Hund sein'" (Grimm et al. [1837] 2015, p. 380).

9 "la madre le rogó que se casara con él pa que lo desencantara" (Espinosa 1946, p. 295). Note that this fairy tale is written down with an extensive use of dialectical forms from Cuenca.

10 "y mandó que le hicieran dos pechos de hierro y que se los llenaran de leche por la espalda. Y así crió al lagarto hasta que ya fué grande" (Espinosa 1946, pp. 294–95).

11 "El Castillo de Irás y no Volverás" (Espinosa 1946, p. 296).

12 "He estao en la fiesta y de un güeso que me han tirao me han cojeao" (Espinosa 1946, p. 296). I am grateful to Anne Karine Kleveland for help in interpreting this quote.

13 "–Si ustedes tuvieran una llave y se les perdiera y no la podían hallar y hacían otra llave, y después de algún tiempo encontraban la llave perdida, ¿con cuál se quedaban ustedes, con la primera o con la segunda? Y todos contestaron: –Con la primera" (Espinosa 1946, pp. 298–99).

14 "que no se la he tocao" (Espinosa 1946, p. 299).

15 As such, the tale arguably confirms biosemiotician Wendy Wheeler's point that traditional Catholicism assumed an affirmative view of nature as a model to learn from, while the split between "human" and "nature" only arrived with Protestantism, which in turn informed the dualism of the scientific revolution (cf. Wheeler 2016, p. 119).

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Article

An Emergent Rebellion: Activist Engagement with Ann-Helén Laestadius' Coming-of-Age Novel *Stöld* (*Stolen: A Novel*)

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Abstract: This article is about how Elsa, a young Sámi girl in Ann-Helén Laestadius' *Stolen*, learns to resist hate crimes that seek to sever her roots in traditional Indigenous herding practices. The nine-year old Elsa witnesses the killing of her personal reindeer and is threatened into a decade-long silence by the killer. There are more attacks which we read as the violent enforcement of western linear time on traditional seasonal herding cycles. The novel charts Elsa's coming-of-age as a rebel able to seek retribution not just for herself and her reindeer but also to fight for a vital future for her culture. We read *Stolen* together with "revolutionary theory" to show how imposed settler temporality is harmful to sustainable modes of living. We emphasise a range of eco-activist responses to the novel, among them rebel reading itself as one of several forms of political engagement available for the eco-rebel. We consider teaching *Stolen* at secondary school level focusing on how readers can practice risk-taking engagement with a text while learning "how to read our world now" in solidarity with Elsa's struggle for her people's survival within an ecologically and socially just future for all. Ultimately, Elsa's emergent rebellion suggests forms of activism based on a commitment to ancestry, especially its future.

Keywords: Indigeneity; Sámi culture; YA literature; literature pedagogy

1. Introduction

This article focuses on the much acclaimed coming-of-age novel *Stolen*: *A Novel*, translated in 2023 from Sámi author Ann-Helén Laestadius' original Swedish *Stöld* (2021). It has also been adapted for the screen, released by Netflix in 2024 and directed by Sámi artist, composer and producer Elle Márjá Eira. In our reading, *Stolen* is a scene of instruction for teaching what Diné poet Jake Skeets calls "radical remembering", a way of being in the past, present and future simultaneously. In *Stolen*, Elsa, a young Sámi girl, witnesses the killing of her personal reindeer and is threatened into a decade-long silence by the killer. The novel charts Elsa's coming-of-age as an eco-rebel able to seek retribution not just for herself and her reindeer but also to fight for a vital future for her culture and its traditional land. Throughout this dormant time of enforced silence, Elsa maintains a radical commitment to hold fast to the violent event by keeping an ear that was cut off from her dead reindeer.

For Western readers, reading in solidarity with Elsa's struggle can mean becoming aware of their own cultural biases embedded in narrative conventions such as linear storytelling. We provide concrete examples of how to incorporate creativity, reflection and collaboration as a method for what we call "rebel reading" in times of climate crisis. We are inspired by Elaine Castillo's cry in *How to Read Now* for a different reading practice that makes a break with business as usual: "If we don't figure out a different way to

read our world, we'll be doomed to keep living in it" (Castillo 2022, p. 4). The collective "we" pronoun used in this article signals a collaboration between supervisor and PhD student working in the intersection between literary studies and literature pedagogy. When we use the collective term Sámi, we follow the Sámi Information Centre (Samiskt informationscentrum) definition of a Sámi person as someone legally eligible to vote in Sámi Parliament, which is a person "who has or has had Sámi as a language at home and who considers themselves to be Sámi" ("Vem är same?" n.d.—our translation). At the same time, we acknowledge the diversity and richness of Sámi history, culture, languages and practices (Hornberger and Outakoski 2015, p. 10). Neither of us is Sámi, and it may be that some readers feel we have made assumptions that do not reflect their circumstances or experiences. This was not our intention.

Instead, our hope is that this article may serve as one of many departure points for collective and collaborative thinking around eco-rebellion, the Indigenous novel and the literature classroom. With this, we build on Madelen Brovold's claim that *Stolen* is an instance of "literary activism" (Brovold 2023, p. 192). Brovold makes this claim based in part on the inclusion of Sámi language as chapter headings and words scattered throughout a novel written primarily in Swedish—something that has also been retained in Rachel Willson-Broyles' 2023 translation of the novel to English. This, Brovold argues, draws attention to the erasure of Indigenous languages through colonisation. Brovold also considers the fact that the novel is "written from a Sámi perspective by a . . . Sámi female author" as a potential source of inspiration for readers to take action in the world beyond the novel (ibid.). Her focus on gender equality highlights an important issue that *Stolen* engages with and through which it can prompt active responses from readers.

In this article, we take a slightly different focus. We want to learn about time and how to step away from linearity through a focus on Elsa's radical remembering and her conception of plural temporalities, including a commitment to an ecologically just future. She gains strength, especially from her resolution to honour the dead, including her friend and mentor Lasse. A constant source of support for the young Elsa while he is alive, Lasse continues to guide her after he takes his own life as a result of the precarity of his situation as a reindeer herder in an oppressive settler society. In a key passage towards the end of the novel, Elsa explains to her brother, Mattias, that she decided not to shoot Robert, the man behind the killing and torturing of her community's reindeer, and Elsa's tormentor, when she found him trapped beneath his overturned snowmobile, because "Lasse told me not to" (Laestadius [2021] 2023, p. 359). Here, Lasse shows Elsa a path towards a future that is rooted in continuing practices of care rather than in the violence and hatred that Robert and his allies have introduced to her life.

From her ongoing relations with the wider community, the living and the dead, Elsa's despair is thus coupled with hope that there is a future for the herders in spite of all the death and violence. The cut off ear from her beloved reindeer, who was killed by Robert, becomes a token of radical remembering that insists on traditional, cyclical, Sámi time as a refusal of the linear structure of settler time. We read this as an activist intervention into the narrative of colonialism as an event that is now over. It is, in other words, an example of Indigenous resistance as described by Nick Estes: one that "draws from a long history, projecting itself backward and forward in time" (Estes 2019, p. 27). Elsa keeps the ear all through her childhood and eventually passes it on to Lasse's nephew. It symbolises her refusal to move on and away from her people's roots as conventional Western history buries its crimes. Holding on to the remains of her reindeer helps Elsa keep faith in continuity with traditions upheld by the passing on of Indigenous knowledge in the form of stories to be heard and told again.

We argue that its particular combination of genre and content means that *Stolen* can be considered a didactic novel for non-Sámi readers. This is because it informs these readers about the urgent need to respond to the problem of continuing colonial violence towards Sámi communities and, through Elsa's own activist engagement, offers instruction on how to do this. Rupture plays an important part in this. Keskitalo describes the rupturing effect of "imperialist and colonialist time and rules" on the cyclic nature of time in Sámi epistemologies. For her, "controlling time separates people from a cosmological understanding" (Keskitalo 2019, pp. 566–67). Rejecting the strictures of Western generic form might seem an obvious way for an author to push back at this. Certainly, breaking form to question conventional understandings of the passage of time is nowadays a common Western literary practice (Kern [1983] 2003, p. 17). However, Laestadius' novel contrasts with this as it keeps with the generic conventions of the coming-of-age novel even while questioning linear concepts of time. The didactic potential of this is that, in the absence of a temporally disrupted form, readers are able to focus fully on the questions raised by the novel's content. The potential impact of this is profound. Understanding colonialism as vividly present today rather than a past event that we can all look back on invites attention to be paid to the ways that this continues to shape futures.

The reindeer that are central to *Stolen*'s narrative are key to this novel's particular engagement with time and colonial violence. Writing about a different story, Hornberger and Outakoski argue that "The reindeer corral" brings into focus the "complexity of time, space and place" in Sámi epistemologies. This is because it is a place "partly anchored in the present moment and partly in knowledge and actions reaching far back in time and into the future" (Hornberger and Outakoski 2015, p. 44). Here, Sámi cosmologies are entwined with Sámi practices and lives, making the reindeer corral "a site of overlapping, polycentric social and societal spaces" (ibid.). This resonates with Skeets' "memory field" as a site of "radical remembering" in which memory is intertwined with "time and land" (Skeets 2020). This is not the same as jumping back and forth between different points on a linear timeline—as is the case in the Western literary practice of fragmenting narratives. It is a form of memory that is embedded in the land, that "exists as a kind of spatiotemporal entity, because time, memory, and land are woven together" (ibid.). The practices and places of reindeer herding represented in Laestadius' novel connect Elsa's community to one another and to their past and future. The brutal attacks on reindeer and the relative lack of response by authorities to these crimes is a sharp reminder of the continued presence of colonial violence in Sweden's Sámi communities. Inaction in the face of this marks a belief in the passage of time that intrudes into Sámi communities and lives, rupturing these to the extent that it threatens their continuance.

We suggest that the reminder of the continuation of colonial mindsets and practices that *Stolen* serves for readers might prompt action to be taken to explore ways to bring an end to this violent system or to mitigate its effects. Here, we think of *Stolen* as supporting activism through working as a "call to action, a time and space for gathering, a message passed" (Levine 2023, p. 129). Further to this, realising that, for Indigenous peoples, the apocalypse that Western narratives routinely imagine in the future has already happened (Whyte 2018) can support the appreciation of Indigenous knowledges and practices outlined by the current climate scholarship.

2. The Reader Making a Crack in History

Stolen introduces the primarily Western YA reader to the precarity of traditional seasonal herding cycles impacted by the often-violent enforcement of Western linear time, for example, in schooling or higher education (Keskitalo 2019, pp. 566–67; Kuokkanen 2007). This tension between traditional perceptions of cyclical time and linear time has come

into focus when considering efforts to address or mitigate the climate crisis. Linear temporality is associated with continual economic growth and progress, which are known to be direct contributors to environmental harm. Indigenous knowledge and practices, on the other hand, are increasingly recognised as invaluable for developing adaptation strategies in response to climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports underscore the role of Indigenous knowledge since the fourth report in 2007. However, Sámi people and their activities continue to be under pressure by mainstream society seeking to exercise "more strict management and control" of remote and arctic communities in Nordic regions (Helander-Renvall and Markkula 2017, p. 113). Lakota community organiser and author Nick Estes writes that Indigenous knowledge is often erroneously defined as "static" or "trapped in the past" (Estes 2019, p. 29), a view that is increasingly challenged precisely due to Indigenous contributions to climate change research. Echoing this objection for arctic communities, Sámi author and academic Elina Helander-Renvall and Inkeri Markkula have written about the present-day responsiveness to rapidly changing living conditions as a key feature of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK):

> TEK is living and evolving knowledge. When TEK is documented, it easily becomes "frozen" in time. However, TEK includes both old and new knowledge and its continuity is rooted in the past. [...] Today, in Arctic regions, the temporality of TEK is partly determined by the climate warming: Arctic nature is changing fast and therefore knowledge founded on it changes at the same rate. In the era of climate change, it might even be that indigenous knowledge, which is based on constant observations, changes faster than scientific knowledge.
>
> (Helander-Renvall and Markkula 2017, p. 116)

Within this context, it must be noted that Laestadius' novel is a coming-of-age novel that adheres to a more conventional Western narrative form as it responds to changing perspectives on history and the future. Traditionally, the *Bildungsroman* genre stems from an Enlightenment conception of *Bildung* (education, development, even progress) that often overlooked the sometimes violent and traumatic social development of marginal or less privileged people (Castle 2012, p. 369) whose exploitation or oppression is routinely a feature of that development. This has given way to narratives that reflect systemic injustice and oppression as these conditions impact identity, social relationships and so on. The contemporary *Bildungsroman*, consequently, is sometimes apocalyptic, often with an explicitly ecological lesson addressed to a young adult readership (Matz 2015, p. 270). *Stolen*, while being a coming-of-age novel, nevertheless challenges ideas of progress as moving beyond past events and of distance from apocalyptic events seen as located in the future by providing readers with a Sámi perspective on these.

Rather than a future threat of violent forces impacting lives, readers of *Stolen* encounter the lived realities of this violence in the continuous theft, murder and torture of reindeer, the numerous threats to the lives and wellbeing of Elsa and others in her community and the impacts of already-altered weather systems on the livelihood of the reindeer herders. Here, the future that readers might fear for themselves is revealed as being already present. Furthermore, it is shown to be rooted in colonialism in a way that exposes this as an ongoing event, still very much part of the present rather than having been left behind in the past (Whyte 2017, p. 154; Wolfe 2006, p. 389). In this way, the novel challenges the Western concept of time as linear and, at the same time, foregrounds the implications of this for Indigenous and other lives.

While we refer to *Stolen*: *A Novel* as a text from which we and our students learn, we simultaneously wish to dispel a common misperception of didactic literature as an overly emphatic expression of the author's desire to instruct. Even though the novel comes with an explicit political message, it does not lack nuance or complexity. Helpful here is to recall

the many essays published in *World Literature Today*'s autumn 2019 issue guest-edited by Allison Hedge Coke. This issue is in part devoted to literary activism to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Alcatraz occupation when Native Americans took back Alcatraz Island as Indigenous land from 1969 to 1971. The poems, essays and prose are intended to "present ways of being present, engaged, active, and completely alive despite maneuvers to oppress and terminate" (Coke 2019, p. 54). In that same issue, Skeets thinks through the question of how words can stabilise a field of enquiry or a practice of attentiveness and, in that way, be a form of activism. He suggests that, for him, poetry is "the field, bringing function back to art [. . .] with its connection to deep time and ancestral time" (Skeets 2019). Skeets begins with a creation story about how language "created worlds", and from there, "time builds and leads to an open field". His contribution to literary activism, the topic of the special issue, is in regard to fighting against colonial oppression through this alternative field:

> These worlds built with time and language are an act against conquest. Their existence contradicts the existence of conquest. The more they are told, the more they are moving against what is told against us.
>
> (Skeets 2019)

Non-Indigenous poets will not be able to produce work with a similar function as Skeets describes. However, one way to practice eco-rebellion in the literature classroom is to resist reading in such a way that evokes or endorses the passage of time as linear and other narratives of conquest. This is important because unquestioned acceptance of linear time supports the kind of settler conquest that sees colonialism as an event that happened in the past and is now over and done with (Estes 2019, p. 24). Thus, along with its function to gather together and be that field of attentiveness, literary activism is also about rupture, the refusal to be absorbed, as Estes puts it in another context: "The revolutionary potential of these colonized peoples had to do with the inability of the settler state to seamlessly 'absorb' them into mainstream political and social life as individuals" (Estes 2019, p. 154).

In *Stolen*, Elsa refuses to accept the lack of attention to the ongoing violence of settler-colonialism in her community. As the local police make light of the thefts and abuse of reindeer, relegating ongoing violence to the past, Elsa's persistence acts as a force against this, disrupting the passage of linear time and the fading of each occurrence of violence with it. As such, she joins a movement of Indigenous resistance concerned with both righting the wrongs of the past while noting ongoing abuse in the present. Estes writes the following:

> Indigenous resistance draws from a long history, projecting itself backward and forward in time. While traditional historians merely interpret the past, radical Indigenous historians and Indigenous knowledge-keepers aim to change the colonial present, and to imagine a decolonial future by reconnecting to Indigenous places and histories. For this to occur, those suppressed practices must make a crack in history.
>
> (Estes 2019, p. 27)

An awareness of the entanglement of the past with the present and, thus, also the future is not exclusive to Indigenous peoples today. Nevertheless, active engagement is needed to move away from the mindsets and behaviours rooted in linear conceptions of time. As *Stolen* reminds us, these permit dismissive attitudes to the very real issue of colonial violence towards Indigenous peoples. In line with this, we think of the readers themselves as emergent, as coming-of-age by coming into the age in which we live, through the metaphor of the crack. In other words, they are themselves these cracks revealed or provoked during reading, when a new appreciation of the acute ongoing presence of

past violence and injustice opens up in them. Through being the crack in history, they learn to distance themselves from Western assumptions about the past and future. In other words, rather than assuming that reading can bring about change in the world, we focus on reading as supporting changes in readers. We also think of this as in line with Coke's hope that reading can provide ways of being "engaged, active, and completely alive" (Coke 2019, p. 54).

Specifically, we are inspired by the many pedagogical activities proposed by collaborators in the network Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures (GTDF), activities which aim at supporting individuals in revealing themselves *to themselves*. One such activity is "the bus", which invites individuals to think of themselves as a bus filled with many passengers, some of whom occupy more controlling, dominant positions (such as the driver), while others take a back seat. This thought experiment and many more like it are designed to help individuals see themselves as complex and indeterminate: to acknowledge and accept their "internal complexity, diversity or contradictions" in a way that allows for them to reflect on the multiple, sometimes conflicting responses and resistances to the uncomfortable insights GTDF teaches (Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures n.d.). We are suggesting that reading approaches that do this have the potential to elicit readings from individuals that they might otherwise neglect to see or attend to—that is, to bring forth stories created between readers and texts that would otherwise continue to lie dormant.

The implications for readers coming to know themselves as cracks in history are that they might be better equipped to accept the world as complex, indeterminate and messy. The GTDF network sees a need for individuals to undergo this work on the understanding that "if we cannot sit with our own complexity and indeterminacy, we will not be able to sit with the complexity and indeterminacy of the world around us" (Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures n.d.). This acknowledgement of the self as crack, then, is an important step towards learning to live and work within a world in crisis. In *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety: How to Keep Your Cool on a Warming Planet* (2020), Sarah Jaquette Ray speaks of Generation Z's dual response to our times. She refers to their eco-grief and trauma, but she also emphasises their unprecedented show of strength and resourcefulness to "face an existential crisis with resilience and solidarity" (Ray 2020, p. 7).

We suggest a reading activity that we call "Reading on the Bus", which specifically encourages young readers to think of themselves as split in two. The key here is that both reader 'selves' adopt a different stance in relation to a text. One of these 'selves' should be closely aligned with the person the reader considers themselves to be. They then create a second 'self' with qualities they do not presently admire or feel comfortable with. In GTDF's account of the bus, individuals are encouraged to acknowledge the complexity of their responses to uncomfortable aspects of their accountability for global crises traceable to the colonial period. GTDF recommends they "check their bus" (Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures n.d.) when responding to uncomfortable or unpleasant information, meaning that each reader is understood to contain multiple, conflicting, sometimes productive sometimes resistant responses to what they are reading. Students are then instructed to read twice from the same text for each of these selves. The reading of the first self will of course be the one most aligned with who they think of themselves as being. The other reading will identify a less prominent aspect of themselves (perhaps someone on the GTDF network's bus who "want[s] to hide from you" (Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures n.d.)). By comparing these two possible readings, individuals can be encouraged to ask themselves what they feel lies behind them and which they think is the most desirable given the current state of the world. Reflecting on this might lead readers to identify aspects of their own lifestyles that need to be attended to, for example, patterns of consumption.

Thinking back to the stories that we compose with texts, this awakening of dormant stories in readers means that they have more options to choose from, more flexibility as readers and storytellers in the broader work of storying the world for more ecologically just futures. It can mean the difference between inaction brought about by anxiety and the feeling of being overwhelmed and action buoyed up by a sense of agency even in the face of wicked problems that cannot be solved. Vanessa Machado de Oliveira considers this capacity to distinguish between stories that have "expired" and those "that are dancing or getting ready to dance" (Machado de Oliveira 2021, pp. 15, 16) to be crucial to the work needed if we are to contribute to much-needed change in the world. The potential for teachers in the classroom is to support young eco-rebels towards a different way of belonging in the world that involves care, obligation and close attention.

3. The Reader as Making Topographical Readings

Plural temporalities serve a purpose in Laestadius' novel, enabling Elsa to mature into an adult without leaving behind the powerful events that will motivate her eco-rebellion. Having witnessed Robert in the act of killing her reindeer, this knowledge lies dormant within Elsa after he threatens her to silence. This effectively arrests the progress of her narrative towards justice and reparation. And yet, the ear from her dead reindeer helps keep the event present to Elsa even as she grows into adulthood. While keeping sight of the perennial nature of the yearly cycle, the narrative perspective in *Stolen* is also keenly aware of the violent impact of climate change on seasonal changes as they become increasingly erratic. Readers learn of how Elsa's community was frightened by the "Rain in the middle of winter" and had "raised the alarm" only to find that "as always, their voices were too weak" and their warnings were consequently ignored (Laestadius [2021] 2023, p. 167). Together with this, the hatred and racism of the non-Indigenous population also grow at an accelerating rate. Repeated theft and, in some cases, torture of reindeers belonging to Elsa's family and other Sámi people contribute to the feeling of profound insecurity already caused by the extreme weather. When their herds can no longer graze because of the rain that uncharacteristically falls in winter and freezes to ice, herders have to apply for emergency feed for their animals (p. 178). The plural temporalities that Elsa is committed to facilitate in her the crack in history that Estes considers essential for rebellion.

Thinking of each and every reader as a potential crack comprised of the stories they have been committed to as well as new ways of seeing the world means also thinking of each and every reading of each and every text as emerging from this. That is, reading as coming-of-age is a product of the reader and a reckoning with the past in their encounter with text. Rebel reading is when the reader rebels against their own privileged condition in which they are always positioned as the "*expected reader*" (Castillo 2022, p. 35). We are inspired by what Castillo says about the potential of a togetherness with difference:

> Committing to being an unexpected reader means committing to the knowledge that what bonds us together is neither the sham empathy that comes from predigested ethnographic sound bites passing as art in late capitalism, nor the vague gestures at free speech that flatter the tenured powerful and scold their freelance critics—but the visceral shock, and ultimate relief, of our own interwoven togetherness and connection.
>
> (Castillo 2022, p. 35)

The unexpected reader becomes the reader who can encounter unexpectedness in themselves and the world. Reading, thought of in this way, is not a smooth passage through the text from point A to point B, to C, then D, and so on. It is the creation of an individual journey through and with the text that we think of as more closely resembling a

three-dimensional topography or what Skeets refers to as "field". In a more recent article, Skeets expands on this by noting that the field in question is composed of memory that can unfold through language and storytelling. He refers again to time and now also more explicitly to land: "I call this terra-temporal matrix the 'memory field' because of memory's unique engagement with time and land" (Skeets 2020). In what follows, we want to explore the possibility of text as a memory field, when the reader becoming a crack engages with it. Further to this, we ask the following: what kind of field does rebel reading accompanied by the reader's reckonings with their past turn the text into? What rifts and ridges happen to the text after its encounter with eco-rebels making or becoming a crack in history?

The terrain forming we have in mind is produced by reading as the making of a memory field. The resulting topography, as we will show, is a feature and artefact of a reader's new rebel reading practices. As such, it serves as a record of readers' own experiences of and with a text, foregrounding the knowledge, expectations and biases that they bring to it. For example, any impasse or obstacle encountered by the reader in the text can be thought of as that which makes a gap, rupture or disjunction from familiar or habitual reading. A ravine created of and with a text might be a section marked by a reader as a point in which confusion saw them coming out of the text or skipping lightly over a section in order not to become stuck. This can serve as a call for another reader to return to this particular site of rupture with them to help shed light on it or for a teacher to support slow and gentle exploration of the passage by posing specific questions or referring readers to carefully selected secondary materials. Some parts of a reading might look more like stepping stones, where readers have been able to move along by grasping fragments and skipping over parts of a text. Studying their own reading topographies and those of their classmates is a way for readers to be alerted to the polyvalency of texts and to understand individual readings as relating to what individual readers bring to them: their memories, expectations and experiences.

Importantly, readers need to be encouraged to practice rebel reading in an individualised manner. This means not setting passages for them to read against the clock (for example, a set passage to be read in the second half of a lesson). Rather, it means giving readers leave and support to set their own pace and to map their own journey through a text. This is not the same as giving them free rein to stop after a single sentence or the first page. It does mean expecting the time of reading to be visible in some way. Perhaps one reader will not make it past the first sentence in a given amount of reading time, but here, teachers can expect the reading to have built a 'mountain'—that is, a thickening of the text at this precise point. What exactly this will look like can be adjusted by readers themselves or by teachers. It might be a set of reflections in response to the sentence or a list of hyperlinks that take other readers down the path of the associations the individual has in response to this. It might be a creative rewriting of this sentence or even a short critical analysis of it. Perhaps it is a chain of mountains, where several readers have responded differently to this same sentence, or a single, towering peak built of collaborative work.

If readers are encouraged to keep track of the topographies of their reading, noting either by sketching or writing in a separate document the mountains, ravines, mires, stepping stones and so on of their own readings, a second activity is to share these with other readers, comparing the maps that they have made. Doing so allows for individuals to learn from the reading experiences of others, and they can be encouraged to learn about themselves by comparing these concrete records of different readings and reflecting on why they might have responded in ways different to others. Building on this collaborative approach, readers can be invited to work together to produce new topographical records shaped by the multiple readings and also the reflections that follow from the comparative work. For example, if the insights of a classmate help one reader find a route through a

mire in their reading topography, the relevant section might need to be altered, perhaps by replacing the mire with stepping stones. Where there was an open plain indicating little to no pausing in a reading, a mountain might rise up following a new concentration of readerly attention brought about by questions raised by another reader.

4. Conclusions

Elsa's emergent rebellion amounts to a refusal to let herself and her people's way of life be relegated to the past in order to make room for others, such as Robert. Through what Skeets calls "radical remembering", she insists that the past is not 'over' as it would be according to a linear approach to time. Her insistence helps to assure an Indigenous future as well as a past and a present. As such, we argue that Elsa is what Estes calls a "crack in history" but so are potentially those YA readers of her story. What we are calling rebel reading is a coming-of-age for the reader appropriate to these times of climate crisis. Here, coming-of-age of readers/of reading is growth that occurs in the same place through repetitions, revisitings, etc., rather than the classic 'journey' or moving on trope. Elsa's ten-year silence is an incubation period that takes her as far as any conventional *Bildungsroman* journey. The approach of rebel readers, as we see it, constitutes a thickening of responses to texts or understanding of them, often in collaboration with others. The eco-rebellion, as in the action itself, the response, takes place in the classroom, the wider world and in the readers themselves. Thus, we see the novel as a site for coming together as if for a demonstration. In this case, it is both a demonstration calling for change and one that proclaims that social change is already underway in every reader of this novel.

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Eco-Rebels in Contemporary Ukrainian Children's Literature as a Tool for Forming Readers' Eco-Activity

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Abstract: The issue of environmental protection and nature conservation has gained global importance, and its solution requires not only scientific and technological efforts but also the education of an environmentally conscious and active young generation. Children's literature serves as an effective means for this task. The article analyzes the eco-pedagogical potential of contemporary Ukrainian children's literature through the prism of young eco-rebels. These characters inspire readers with their emotional power, eco-centric worldview, and bold resistance to environmental injustice. They contribute to the formation of ecological values in readers through emotional impact. Based on the ecocritical interpretation and typological comparison of *Ghosts of Black Oak Wood* by Bachynskyi and *Taming of Kychera* by Polyanko, we observe that the components of representation of the ecological topic are problematic eco-situation; behavior models, young eco-rebels' actions and deeds; and eco-initiatives. The article further presents the results of ecocritical dialogues on environmental topics with 26 readers aged 14–15 (Ukraine). The methodology included interactive tools (e.g., Padlet) and surveys, which revealed that literary engagement promoted critical thinking, empathy, and personal eco-involvement. The findings confirm that children's literature, when integrated with dialogic and participatory teaching methods, can serve as a powerful tool for shaping environmental literacy and civic responsibility in youth.

Keywords: eco-rebels; children's literature; environmental topics; eco-activity; ecocritical dialogues

1. Introduction

The modern world faces various environmental challenges, crises, and disasters. The issue of environmental protection and nature conservation has gained global importance, and its solution requires not only scientific and technological efforts but also the education of an environmentally conscious and active young generation. As noted by N. Goga, L. Guanio-Uluru, B. O. Hallås, S. M. Høisæter, A. Nyrnes, and H. E. Rimmereide, "working to reconfigure the cultural and social environment remains important, since the cultural and social environment holds our potential collective respond-ability" (2023, p. 1430). Particular attention is given to family education, the education system, social culture, and other tools of influence on cognition, development, and personality formation of the child. Children's literature, which has always responded to the child's requests and needs, reflecting public views and problems, is also considered to be such a means: "These environmental texts for children can contribute to the ecopedagogical project and provide children with the

information and the language that are necessary to become conscious ecocitizens" (van der Beek and Lehmann 2022, p. 141).

This study highlights the significant eco-pedagogical potential of children's literature through the analysis of the novels *Ghosts of Black Oak Wood* (2022) by Andrii Bachynskyi and *Taming of Kychera* (2022) by Viktor Polyanko. By employing ecocritical, narrative, and receptive–aesthetic approaches, we define key components of ecological representation in these texts. We analyze the impact of reading and discussing literature on environmental topics on the development of readers' environmental awareness and evaluate the effectiveness of ecocritical dialogues as a pedagogical method for developing empathy and active eco-engagement.

Ukrainian children's environmental literature has its own tradition of development: "the discourse of nature in the literature for children of the 20th century demonstrates the path from the theme of nature to environmental issues" (Kumanska 2021, p. 11). This is illustrated, for example, by works about the Chernobyl disaster and its consequences for man and nature, which occurred after 1986 and became the object of an ecocritical interpretation (Vardanian 2022). In the 21st century, the depiction of eco-disasters and the promotion of the need to raise the level of environmental culture and awareness, as well as social responsibility, has deepened (the dystopia novels *MOX NOX* by T. Malyarchuk, the trilogy *Through the Forest. By the sky, by the water* by S. Oksenyk).

Goga et al., referring to the works of Garrard and Gifford, writes about two concepts of the image of nature (idyllic and problematic) and the need to identify them in the analysis "Nature might be considered a pure and harmonious place, as in the pastoral tradition", or it can be "considered as problematic, a place where ecological imbalance, climate change, and the loss of species and plants reveal crises" (Goga et al. 2023, p. 1433). In contemporary Ukrainian children's literature, the second concept of the image of nature prevails. Eco-situations related to the consumer attitude of man to nature or the consequences of political influence have become urgent plot-creating elements. Writers raise real environmental issues of modern Ukraine—cutting down forests, clogging rivers, building up mountains, and air, water, and soil pollution. The readers are urged to fight for the preservation of nature, to imitate the behavior of the main characters, who are often eco-rebels, and to encourage children to take responsible actions.

With the beginning of the Russian war in Ukraine, due to constant bombing and shelling of populated areas, environmental problems took on a significant scale, because a large number of toxic chemicals constantly enter the environment. The land is mined, fires in the forests and steppes, war crimes, such as the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam and the Kinburn Spit, etc., destroy the natural environment and cause terrible consequences for the ecosystem. The Ecodia Center for Environmental Initiatives monitors and records all ecocides, describes the impact of war on the climate of the planet (The Impact of the Russian War in Ukraine on the Climate 2024), and prepares interactive maps with cases of environmental damage (Cases of Potential Environmental Damage Caused by Russian Aggression. Interactive Map 2022). Environmental problems are briefly mentioned by writers who published works for children about the war during 2022–2024: *My Forced Vacation* by K. Yegorushkina, *Oak Tree from War* by H. Osadko, *Saved Pets* by N. Muzychenko, and *Gerard the Partisan* by I. Andrusyak, etc. (Kachak and Blyznyuk 2024).

The UGCC Bureau for Ecology, established in 2007, has published a series of illustrated prose and verse eco-tales for children aged 3–9, aiming at the formation of children's responsible attitude towards the environment and its preservation, promotion of ecological–ecumenical dialogue, and initiation and development of environmental activities. Among them are O. Kobel's stories about the hedgehog Gachok (*Saved Forest*, *Defender of Purity*

(2023), *Primroses* (2020), *Hedgehog-Rescuer* (2019)), K. Yegorushkina's *Archie* (2019), O. Skuldovatov's *Firefly and Windmill* (2024), O. Rublyova's *Old Forest* (2021), and I. Dzul's *Blue Treasure* (2018).

Depending on the content emphasis and genre of the work and the recipients' age, the authors highlight problematic eco-situations in different ways, demonstrate models of behavior of the heroes, and offer eco-initiatives and eco-perspectives. The ecological problem of saving nature is reinterpreted in the fairy tale *Escape of Animals*, or *New Bestiary* (2006) by Galyna Pagutyak. *Ghosts of Black Oak Wood* and *Taming of Kychera* are outlined against the background of the aforementioned eco-fairy tales and realistic adventure stories on environmental themes for children and teenagers. Here, the actions of the main characters, their ecological position, and eco-initiative are more clearly depicted, and the plots reveal environmental problems more deeply.

In this study, we analyze the eco-pedagogical potential of modern Ukrainian children's literature through the prism of images of young eco-rebels. Similar to the experience of scientists who choose children's literature on environmental topics of different countries as the object of analysis, justifying the specificity of the object by various geographical and geopolitical factors of influence on ecosituations (Aslam and Ashfaq 2023; Doughty et al. 2025; Gaard 2009; Goga 2018), we find it important to ensure the presence of the Ukrainian voice in the context of global research on children's literature on environmental topics. Through our contribution, we hope to overcome the marginalization of the Ukrainian experience in the context of "recent post-colonial turn—in children's literature studies as well as in Slavic studies". As "if Ukraine has been long missing in the terrain of children's literature studies, this is in part because its rich literary outpourings have been conventionally regarded as expressions of a 'minor' or 'post Soviet' nation of little relevance to Western scholarship" (Świetlicki and Ulanowicz 2025, p. 4)

The two novels in question, *Ghosts of Black Oak Wood* and *Taming of Kychera*, were selected based on their prominence and widespread recognition within Ukrainian literature for their exploration of ecological topics. In particular, they address such issues as deforestation, consumerist attitudes towards nature, and the overexploitation of natural resources. They reveal ecological problems in different ways, and more importantly, demonstrate vivid images of eco-rebels, and despite their popularity, have not yet been considered in the scientific discourse.

2. Theoretical Background: Ecocriticism and Environmental Literacy

The analysis of children's literature, in which ecological themes and problems are raised, is usually carried out by scholars with the involvement of an ecocritical approach based on the research on "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty 1996, p. XXXVII). Ecocriticism, as "a wide range of interdisciplinary literary and cultural research methods to study the global environmental crisis through the intersection of literature, culture, and the physical environment" (Gladwin 2017), is actively used in theoretical and practical studies of children's literature. This is testified in the collections *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism* (Dobrin and Kidd 2004); *Ecocritical Perspectives on Children's Texts and Cultures* (Goga et al. 2018); and *Children's Literatures, Cultures, and Pedagogies in the Anthropocene: Multidisciplinary Entanglements* (Doughty et al. 2025). Together, the three books offer conceptual, pedagogical, and theoretical frameworks that help interpret Ukrainian eco-rebel characters not only as agents of resistance but as catalysts for readers' eco-activity and as symbols of new, ethical modes of coexistence with the environment.

Key tasks of ecocriticism include rereading works from an eco-centric position. Particular attention is paid to writers in whose work nature plays the main role, to advocacy of eco-centric values, and to determining the significance of ecologically oriented text (Barry 1995). Ecocriticism is used as an ethical criticism and pedagogy that explores and finds the connection between the individual, society, nature, and the text. "Ecocriticism is the critical and pedagogical broadening of literary studies to include texts that deal with the nonhuman world and our relationship to it" (Cocinos 1994). Increasingly, the ecocritical approach is associated with consideration of children's literature from the point of view of eco-pedagogical potential (Gaard 2009; Massey and Bradford 2011; Goga et al. 2023; Moriarty 2021; van der Beek and Lehmann 2022).

The results of studies of fiction and non-fiction books for children on environmental topics, published in different countries of the world, give an idea of "inclusion" and "exclusion" (van der Beek and Lehmann 2022, p. 145) of young readers into or from environmental situations and problems. These studies examine the influence of textual and visual representations of nature, as well as models of human interaction with it, on the development of eco-oriented values. They also explore how such literature fosters love and care for nature and motivates children to act in its preservation. Gaard, defining the functions of socially conscious ecological children's literature, singles out three levels of the interaction model: unity and inclusion, hierarchy, and dominance (Gaard 2009). Van der Beek and Lehmann also consider this model. Their work provides valuable insights into how children's environmental literature can shape young readers' understanding of self and others in relation to ecological issues. In their analysis of children's non-fiction books of the Netherlands, they "take into account depictions of the perceived self and the other in environmental texts for children and explore the representation of hierarchies between these categories" (van der Beek and Lehmann 2022, p. 145). The researchers discover that in "the selected books contrasting methods that push the reader away from the already abstract concept of climate change are used. They encourage the reader to see themselves as possible 'eco-heroes' and offer different strategies to help the immediate victims of climate change" (van der Beek and Lehmann 2022, p. 141). This approach not only fosters critical reflection but also empowers children by positioning them as active agents capable of making a difference, even within a global and often overwhelming environmental crisis.

Researchers Hints and Ostry (Hintz and Ostry 2003) emphasize the special impact on readers of utopian and dystopian works, which are considered political in nature. Such works, on the one hand, describe and problematize the ecological crisis, and on the other hand, popularize the images of "eco-rebels".

Given this, children's literature is a means of forming the young readers' environmental literacy. In this context, we define the concept of environmental literacy as "a broad understanding of how people and societies relate to each other and to natural systems, and how they might do so sustainably" (Orr 1992, p. 92). Such a perspective emphasizes not only the interconnectedness between humans and nature but also the moral responsibility to preserve ecological balance, cultivate sustainable habits from an early age, and recognize one's role as a participant in shaping the planet's future. Furthermore, Orr expands the notion of ecological literacy by highlighting the importance of understanding the immediacy and scale of environmental challenges. As he asserts, another aspect of ecological literacy is "to know something of the speed of the crisis that is upon us. It is to know magnitudes, rates, and trends of population growth, species extinction, soil loss, deforestation, desertification, climate change, ozone depletion, resource exhaustion, air and water pollution, toxic and radioactive contamination, resource and energy use—in short, the vital signs of the planet and its ecosystems" (1992, p. 93). From this perspective, ecological literacy becomes

not merely a matter of factual knowledge but a critical awareness that enables responsible action in the face of global environmental collapse.

3. *Ghosts of Black Oak Wood* and *Taming of Kychera*: Eco-Rebels and Eco-Pedagogical Potential

Andrii Bachynskyi and Viktor Polyanko are contemporary Ukrainian writers who write for children mainly in the adventure genre. Bachynskyi's literary output includes more than ten books, among them *The Incredible Adventures of Ostap and Darynka* (2010), *140 Decibels of Silence* (2015), *Detectives from Artek. Secrets of the Stone Graves* (2017), *A Bunch of Cheerful Tramps* (2014), *With Einstein in a Backpack* (2019), *Triangle of Zeus* (2020), and *Ghosts of Black Oak Wood* (2022). His works are informative, in which reality is often intertwined with fiction, fairy tales, myths, and legends. The author uses motifs of travel in time and space as well as historical ones (Kachak and Blyznyuk 2025, p. 186), raises the question of usefulness of sciences (physics, geometry), and actualizes the problems of modern Ukrainian society in realistic adventure stories (ecological, social, moral, and ethical). *Ghosts of Black Oak Wood* is an adventure story on an environmental theme, which won the BBC Book of the Year 2022 literary award in the "Children's Book of the Year category BBC".

Polyanko is a mathematician by education and an IT specialist who travels around Ukraine, goes on mountain hikes with his family, takes photos, and writes about it on his blog. He is the author of adventure books for children such as *Taming of Kychera* (2022), *Slobozhansk Atlantis* (2024), and the short story collection *Hrytsko Trabljuk' trouble* (2024). He raised the environmental theme in the story *Taming of Kychera*, which was awarded the prize for the competition "Children's Coronation of the Word".

The adventure stories *Ghosts of Black Oak Wood* and *Taming of Kychera* (Figure 1) engage the reader with a dynamic plot full of danger, mysteries, and brave actions of the heroes. The environmental theme here is naturally combined with the elements of the adventure genre. The characters join in the fight for the preservation of nature, facing challenges that force them to show ingenuity, courage, and perseverance. However, if the plot of the first work is built on the solution of the environmental issue by the young heroes, then in the second work, the environmental problem is not the basis of the adventure quest, but is just slightly unfolded.

Figure 1. *Ghosts of Black Oak Wood* by A. Bachynskyi and *Taming of Kychera* by V. Polyanko.

3.1. Ecological Topics and Images of Eco-Rebels in the Adventure Novels Ghosts of Black Oak Wood by Andrii Bachynskyi and Taming of Kychera by Viktor Polyanko

The ecological problem of deforestation and the destruction of nature is the basis of *Ghosts of Black Oak Wood*. The traditional "summer holidays" story, which should have been about rural recreation and Roman's vacation, turns into a real struggle of teenagers against the cutting down of the Black Oak Wood. Foreigners want to cut down the forest near the village and destroy the river, promising the local residents swimming pools and water parks. In order to realize their plans, they use political leverage and intimidation and offer material benefits to those who will facilitate illegal logging. Local residents keep silent because they do not believe that they have enough power to resist this. Only Roman and his friends show the courage to stand up and begin to act in order to stop the big felling. They are supported by Roman's grandfather, who returned to his native land after many years of travelling around the world. He talks about Sun Tzu's art of war strategy and teaches children how to act correctly to defeat a stronger enemy.

Roman is an eco-rebel who fights for the preservation of nature and demonstrates responsibility for the environment. He does not immediately believe that "some bandits decided to cut down the forest, and the whole village is silent and cannot give them advice" (Bachynskyi 2022, p. 30). He seeks to change society's attitude towards nature, often acts contrary to established norms, and, together with his friends, even breaks the rules for the sake of saving the environment. The boy has a strong sense of justice, seeks to protect nature, even if it means confronting adults who are indifferent to environmental pollution ("If we don't at least try, then who will save the forest?" (Bachynskyi 2022, p. 57)). He perceives the protection of nature as a personal mission and is ready to act radically in order to draw attention to the environmental problem and solve it.

His beliefs, life position, and behavior form the role-model type of character—an eco-rebel who is characterized by the following traits:

- Plays an active role in solving environmental problems.
- Opposition to the established social order and rebellion against environmental crimes.

- Willingness to risk one's own well-being for the sake of nature.
- Formation of one's own worldview and value system based on eco-centrism.

Roman's eco-centric ideas fascinate his friends. The protagonist talks about school eco-camps and eco-initiatives. The activities of eco-rebels are manifested in organizing protests, using methods available to them (scaring loggers with ghosts, spoiling their tools, and digging up the road so that trees cannot be removed). They try to draw attention to the problem of the destruction of the Black Oak Wood to other members of the community and to convince them that the preservation of nature is far more important than the promised short-term material benefits. They rebel against the illegal actions of loggers and the clogging of the river, and independently (without the permission of adults) send an official request to the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources to check the legality of this felling. The children understand that it is dangerous to deal with criminals, but they do not give up their struggle.

Bachynskyi raises the topic of environmental awareness, civic activity, and responsibility for the environment. It shows how the young generation, through its activity, can be an example for others to stand up for the protection of nature, teach them to appreciate what they have, and fight for their future. For the inhabitants of the village, Black Oak Wood is not only nature, but also culture and historical memory, a connection to the past and ecological security in the future.

However, the author admitted that he was surprised by the success of his book (BBC-2022 award) in the midst of the war, and said that he would write it differently now, because the war brought devastating harm to nature. He claimed: "... but after the victory, when there is an assessment of everything lost and damaged, I think that the consequences for the ecology—we will simply be scared to count all that. And what is happening in the sea, how thousands of Black Sea dolphins are dying, and what is being done to forests and fields that are mined. It is unknown how many of them need demining, and in general, with this ecosystem, fauna, flora of Ukraine—this is for decades . . . " (Petsa 2022).

Another example of eco-activity is Polyanko's story *Taming of Kychera* (Kychera is the name of a mountain peak). Its plot unfolds on the basis of a series of adventures of a young family that goes to the mountains for the tenth birthday of their son Myroslav. As N. Marchenko rightly noted, the adventurous character of the work ensures the dynamic development of the plot, where an everyday journey "turns into a real cinematic quest in which history and mysticism, political and personal secrets, ecology of the environment and spirit are intertwined" (Marchenko 2023). The story is told by Myroslav himself. He responds negatively to the news about going on a camping trip, but when his dad provides him with a map and a compass, he becomes interested.

Even more appealing for readers is the USSR underground city—Uzhhorod 61, built in the mountain as a secret military base and evacuated in 1991, when Ukraine regained its independence. During the campaign, the family also discovers the hiding place of UPA (Ukrainian Partisan Army, which fought for independence). The author touches on historical issues related to the totalitarian regime, a country in which ecology was neglected, chemical and nuclear weapons were manufactured, aimed at the destruction of man and nature. It is Kateryna, a descendant of a Russian KGB agent (*Committee for State Security*—the main security agency of the Soviet Union from 1954 to 1991), who hires loggers to illegally cut down the forest and destroy the Carpathians. She is trying to take revenge on the Ukrainians for taking the Carpathians from the Russians. She is sure that soon everyone will read "Obituary of the Carpathian Forests" (Polyanko 2022, p. 191) because local residents are ready to carry out criminal orders for a penny, destroying the nature in which they live. This indicates a low level of ecological culture; the author tries to

show this against the background of the lack of material goods and financial opportunities in the community.

Myroslav does not reveal his own eco-initiatives, but together with his father, they support the mother's position to investigate illegal logging. The work describes the ecological disaster caused by cutting down forests in the mountains: "a wasteland that at first seemed small, opened up on the mountainside in all its glory: it seemed as if a large sloping stadium had been erected in the middle of the forest, and it was filled with immeasurably already dried long trees" (Polyanko 2022, p. 109); "these sawmill maniacs bare the slopes and then the rains wash away the unprotected soil and part of the surrounding forest dies" (Polyanko 2022, p. 109). Thus, Myroslav becomes worried, as on a hike, he realizes not only the beauty, but the importance of preserving nature.

With the image of Myroslav, the writer shows the change in the child's attitude towards the surrounding world, nature, and value priorities. During the hike, the boy begins to admire the beauty of the mountains and states, "It is here where I received the greatest gift. Not even that I received it, but exchanged—a piece of my heart remained in the Carpathians, and a tiny piece of the mountains settled deeply inside of me" (Polyanko 2022, p. 224).

The two novels follow the tradition of children's literature in being "optimistic, with happy endings" (Nodelman 2000, p. 1). Although such positive finals are now less prevalent in contemporary children's fiction than they once were (Meek 2004, p. 8), they retain the same structure. In Bachynskyi's narrative, the local community takes responsibility for environmental restoration: "The Black Oak Wood was preserved. At the community meeting in the cultural center, the residents agreed that immediately after the harvest they would gather in the forest to clear it up after those poachers, and later plant young trees in the place of the felled ones" (Bachynskyi 2022, p. 168). Eventually, "The Black Oak Wood was declared a nature reserve and from now on it is under the protection of the state" (Bachynskyi 2022, p. 171). This resolution emphasizes the affirmation of ecological values and conveys a hopeful message of change and renewal.

A similar solution to the ecoproblem is also found in Polyanko's story. Kateryna's sister, who works in a state organization for reforestation, promises to plant new trees at the site of felled trees on Mount Kychera in the Carpathians. However, all these do not happen as quickly in reality, because not only are trees cut down, but the entire ecosystem is destroyed. It is in the happy ending that Bradford (2003) sees the problem and the impossibility of truthfully covering certain environmental issues in children's fiction books, for example, telling a story about climate change that ends happily. Fiction books are good at describing environmental crises, but "weak on promoting political agendas or collective action" (Bradford 2003, p. 116). The researcher argues that, in fact, as evidenced by the metanarratives circulating in Western culture, environmental themes very rarely have happy endings and are often apocalyptic in their depictions of environmental consequences (Bradford 2003). Van der Beek and Lehmann also doubt the ideality of fictitious narratives as a means of ecological progress (van der Beek and Lehmann 2022, p. 146).

Comparing these two adventure stories, we note that in the work by Bachynskyi, the eco-initiative comes from children. It is supported and completed by adults, while in the work by Polyanko, the eco-initiative comes from adults—parents—who then involve their own children. These are two models of eco-rebellion and the involvement of children in eco-activities. Considering the fact that adults are involved in both stories, we conclude that children can be involved in solving environmental problems. They are eco-active, but at this stage of their lives, they are not independent. However, using the example of the actions of the eco-rebel Roman and his friends in Bachynskyi's novel, we can see that not all

eco-activities of children are "too marginal to be effective", as stated by van der Beek and Lehmann (2022). However, we agree that children are involved in eco-initiatives, but the main agents of change are still adults because "a child needs the mediation of an adult so that other adults can hear him" (van der Beek and Lehmann 2022, p. 159). Such narratives are a reflection of social reality. A realistic type of plot cannot ignore this fact, even if the work is written in the adventure genre using elements of fiction, while in the works of the fantasy genre, dystopias, young heroes can be left alone with an eco-problem or fight together with their peers without adults' involvement.

3.2. Works on Ecological Topics as an Eco-Pedagogical Means

The images of eco-rebels become one of the key receptive codes through which the eco-pedagogical potential of ecological children's literature, in particular adventure and dystopian novels, is realized. Protagonists who are imagined and identified with by different types of readers, including hero readers and critical thinkers (according to Appleyard's theory) (Appleyard 1991), are a source of new ecological experiences of the child, emotionally affect ideas about eco-activity, and often become a motivational factor for environmental behavior.

Through analysis of the works by Bachynskyi and Polyanko, we highlight other plot elements, techniques, and expressive means of receptive poetics, which help the author to not only transform into the consciousness of the recipient artistic meanings that generate certain aesthetic emotions and call for eco-activity, but also form children-readers' ecological literacy.

The text components have an eco-pedagogical impact on the reader. Firstly, this information forms knowledge about environmental problems (situations, crises, disasters) and their consequences. Despite the fact that this component is much stronger and more widely represented in non-fiction texts (van der Beek and Lehmann 2022), in adventure and dystopian works, it has no less impact on readers, and perhaps even more, because it often encourages them to find more information on their own. These are those logical arguments, "factual knowledge about the world" (van der Beek and Lehmann 2022, p. 146) that are reinforced in works of art by emotional arguments (figurative language, an example of eco-activity of others, stories about ecoculture in other nations, "arguments to fear" in dystopias) and become a powerful tool of persuasion (according to the laws of rhetoric) in the communication between the writer and the reader through the text. "Stimulating stories in fiction books"—whose eco-pedagogical potential has not received significant attention from R. Monhard and L. Monhard (Monhardt and Monhardt 2000) and van der Beek and Lehmann (2022)—should be an integral part of the educational model for developing children's ecological literacy, alongside the common knowledge about the world provided in non-fiction books. Moreover, as the analysis of the works proves, there is a lot of scientifically confirmed, factual information about nature, ecosystems, eco-crises, their causes, and consequences, etc., in adventure stories and in dystopian novels.

Bachynskyi writes about the harmfulness of burning grass, the consequences of the destruction of the ecosystem as a result of the felling of timber, and about environmental problems as a result of corruption schemes. Polyanko raises the issue of the destruction of nature by poachers. Under the guise of sanitary cleaning of the forest, a large number of healthy trees are destroyed. Myroslav's mother calls loggers poachers, "cold-blooded killers of the lungs of the planet" (Polyanko 2022, p. 112). She ignores their words about the availability of all permits, and is going to call the police, demonstrating not tolerance, but a conscious environmental and civil position.

In Bachynskyi's story, grandfather Andrii talks about the eco-culture of other peoples: "The Chinese don't have such forests, that's why they respect every tree" (Bachynskyi 2022, p. 34). Grandfather shares with his grandson the knowledge that "one mature oak produces oxygen for eight people in a year (Bachynskyi 2022, p. 35)". He speaks about the growth of the tree and the formation of the rings, emphasizing that the oaks from the Black Oak Wood are 300 years old, and various family memories are also associated with them (Bachynskyi 2022, p. 35).

Polyanko delves into history, uses political subtext, and writes about the town "Uzhhorod 61". In the underground city, Myroslav is interested in the lighting and ventilation system, the effect of psychotropic substances that were injected into the ventilation system "to block the emotions of people who had to live in the underground city" (Polyanko 2022, p. 139). Myroslav knows that the totalitarian system made these people the "living dead", real zombies, and perceives the creation of chemical weapons as a threat to the entire planet. He explains this on the example of a virtual game: "If our planet is a giant toy, then a cheat virus was made in this laboratory" (Polyanko 2022, p. 100).

Therefore, it is worth highlighting eco-initiatives and examples of eco-active behavior, values of the main characters, eco-rebels, which can be both a role model for readers of the same age, and factors for the development of their own eco-ideas and eco-initiatives. Writers show that children can also influence the ecological situation and be drivers of progress in the development of social ecological culture.

Roman is involved in an environmental group, whose members, under the influence of volunteer activists of the environmental movement from Austria, organize an ecocamp to clean the banks of mountain rivers of garbage and show local residents a good example (Bachynskyi 2022, p. 24). He urges friends to resist the loggers and prevent them from using the tractor for digging the road on which the lumber trucks transport wood (Bachynskyi 2022, p. 59).

Involving children in collecting cones for seeds to plant a new forest is mentioned in the story (Bachynskyi 2022, p. 65). Children collected fruits to get money, cleaned up the river to make it suitable for swimming, and built a sports ground next to it (Bachynskyi 2022, p. 169).

The impact of the images of eco-rebels on readers occurs through the possibility of self-identification of the recipient, involvement in solving eco-situations similar to those described in the texts, awareness of the importance of active interaction with nature, and practicing eco-centric behavior. The level of eco-activity and involvement of the reader in the problem described in children's literature depends not only on the content, genre parameters of the work, images of characters, "on the inner textual projection, the author's intentions, ability to predict the model reader and 'create competence'" (Kachak et al. 2022, p. 81), but also on the type of the narrative. It is believed that the child narrator helps children-readers to better position themselves in relation to the text, because the reader is on the same level as the peer-hero (Skjønsberg 1985). Moriarty (2021) writes about the effectiveness of the form of the hero's story as an eco-pedagogical tool. This theory also works with regard to the reading of Polyanko's work. Myroslav is the narrator. He does not show eco-rebellious behavior, but changes his attitude towards nature, supports the eco-initiatives of adults, and realizes the importance of eco-centric behavior. He is fascinated by adventure. Similarly, readers identifying themselves with narrators of the same age are more concerned with their adventure quests, while environmental issues appear secondary and do not actually receive the dynamics of development. This indicates that both the type of narrative and the position and model of the hero's behavior are criteria for attracting readers. Bachynskyi tells the story in the third person, but the eco-activism

and eco-rebellious behavior of Roman and his friends are, in our opinion, the best means of engaging readers in environmental issues and contributing to their self-identification in this context as eco-conscious citizens ready to actively act to preserve nature and prevent an eco-crisis. In addition, Bachynskyi's story emphasizes the importance of collective actions in this process, changes in public thinking, and attitudes towards ecology.

As evidenced, although children do not act as narrators, the reader's level of interest and trust in these texts is determined by the narrator's position and point of view (the way of speaking about the subject), from which the events and situations in the artistic work are presented. Readers see the events that are happening with Roman and his friends precisely from their perspective. The dialogues and thoughts of the characters reinforce this point of view. Reflecting on the narrative, M. Nikolajeva (2004) claims that a text for children is built in a dialogic tension between two unequal subjectivities: an adult author and a child character. Narratology distinguishes between narrative voice and point of view. In children's literature, they rarely coincide, even if the narrator is a child and the story is told in the first person. The voice, as a rule, belongs to the adult, and the perspective to the child. After all, "reading the content, imagining and emotionally experiencing the depicted events, the child-reader takes a special position in relation to the hero of the work" (Kachak 2018); characters become authoritative in the text.

4. Methodology

We proposed reading the adventure novels *Ghosts of Black Oak Wood* and *Taming of Kychera* to school children to assess how these texts impact the development of students' environmental competence and eco-activity. To discuss the works with readers, we chose the method of ecocritical dialogues proposed by Goga et al. "Ecocritical dialogues respond to the calls of educationally oriented political documents and combine the theoretical concepts of ecocriticism and dialogic teaching for the development of ecocritical dialogue within the framework of pedagogical education" (Goga et al. 2023, p. 1432). We also tried to use the Nature in Culture Matrix, which works as a schematic overview of main positions within ecocritical discourses (Goga et al. 2018).

In order to determine the eco-pedagogical potential of literature and its influence on the formation of children's ecological literacy through the transmission of facts about nature, human interaction with the environment, knowledge about ecological problems, eco-crises, eco-catastrophes, their causes and consequences, as well as the description of eco-initiatives and eco-active behavior of the heroes, a survey was conducted and books on environmental topics were read and discussed with readers. The survey was conducted in Google Forms, and prior approval for using the data in generalizations of the research and publication of the results was received from parents and the students themselves.

A total of 26 student readers aged 14–15 from schools in Ivano-Frankivsk city, who attend the local library, took part in the book discussion. Before the beginning of the process, the children were given a survey "Books and the environmental topic". Two meetings were arranged, each of which was devoted to discussing a book by a particular author, and eventually, the final survey "Eco-rebels, environmental literature and my eco-position" was conducted. The surveys were specifically designed for this project to explore students' attitudes toward environmental literature and their personal ecological views.

The first survey contained questions that allowed us to determine how often school children come across environmental topics in the literature, which eco-situations interest them, and how these affect their behaviors.

1. Have you ever read books that deal with environmental issues?
2. What eco-situations have you encountered in the books you read?

3. How do texts and conversations on environmental topics affect you?
4. Do you discuss environmental issues as part of studying school subjects?
5. Name the books you have read which raised environmental problems.

The questions included in the initial survey were carefully selected to align with the study's objectives, which aimed to explore students' engagement with environmental themes in the literature, their emotional and behavioral responses, and the integration of ecological issues in the educational process.

In conclusion, reading and discussion of works on ecological themes were carried out using ecocritical dialogues (Goga et al. 2023). Young readers were invited to discuss the novels they had read before *Ghosts of Black Oak Wood* and *Taming of Kychera*, and guiding questions were provided for this purpose (Appendix A). Building up a conversation about each novel, we created a chain of dialogues, at first working in three microgroups, and then collectively; in this way, we provided the "dialogic space of experience that includes different perspectives and voices" envisioned by Goga et al. Together, using interactive methods of brainstorming and critical, associative, and creative thinking, we created a dialogic space for reflection on the read piece of work, studied the actions and deeds of eco-heroes, and projected them onto our own life experiences.

The analysis focused on the depiction of environmental disasters in the selected texts, the protagonists' responses to these events, and their relevance to real-world ecological issues. During the ecocritical dialogues, participants were encouraged to reflect on these topics, propose potential eco-initiatives, and voice their views on the importance of active environmental engagement and personal responsibility. They continued to think about solving environmental problems in order to understand which position in the ecological discourse is taken by everyone. In the process of critical understanding of the read text, readers not only acquire new eco-knowledge and search for their own eco-initiatives, but also realize individual and collective eco-responsibility that is formed, and thus, the level of eco-awareness increases.

A particular emphasis of such a dialogical understanding of texts is the implementation of an activity approach, which provides for the involvement of students in active participation in the learning process through practical tasks and projects. This contributes to the development of critical thinking, cooperation skills, and the ability to apply knowledge in practice. Therefore, at the end of the meetings devoted to the discussion of each book, the readers jointly came up with ideas for a project aimed at solving or preventing eco-crises similar to the ones described at the local level, taking into account the specifics of the region and current times.

Recommendations proposed by Goga et al. related to the place of ecocritical dialogues, participants, approaches, and topics were taken into account. The meetings were held in the library, where students from different schools had memberships. Before the beginning of each discussion, the readers were reminded that "the dialogic form presupposes that participants' utterances are linked together in chains of answers and new utterances" (Goga et al. 2023, p. 1438). To capture the participants' opinions, we used a tool, Padlet, in which each microgroup recorded the key components of their communication chains.

At the last meeting with the readers, we surveyed them to find out how the books they read influenced them and whether the actions of eco-rebels motivated them to get involved in eco-activities. The survey "Eco-rebels, environmental literature and my eco-position" contained several closed and open-ended questions:

1. Which eco-situations have you encountered in the books you read?
2. Name the books you have read which raised environmental problems.
3. Are you aware of the consequences of ecosystem destruction caused by human activities?

4. Do you approve of the eco-rebellious behavior of the characters in the books you have read?
5. Which eco-rebel character's behavior appeals to you the most? Do you identify yourself with any of them?
6. Do you have any ideas for eco-initiatives inspired by the characters in environmental fiction?
7. If so, write down these ideas.
8. Have the books and the eco-dialogues you read changed your attitude towards nature?
9. What is your position on the environment?
10. Was the experience of the ecodialogues positive for you?

Closed-ended questions 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10 offered predefined response options (including multiple-choice and Likert-type scales), enabling the identification of trends in students' awareness, attitudes, and behavioral intentions regarding environmental issues. Questions 2 and 7 were open-ended, allowing students to list environmental books they have read and suggest eco-initiatives inspired by fictional characters. The open responses provided deeper insights into readers' literary experiences and personal reflections on ecological engagement.

5. Results and Discussion

The images of young eco-rebels are fascinating, with eco-initiatives and models of active eco-positioning, examples of manifestations of eco-awareness. These are real stories about growing up, responsibility, and protecting the environment, which, although they contain fictional elements, clearly convey the importance of people's eco-awareness and eco-activity. Such stories not only captivate but also make you think about current environmental issues, combining entertaining reading with critical reading and awareness of an important social message.

In the first survey "Books and the environmental topic", 15 of the 26 respondents (57.7%) said they did not often encounter such books, 5 (19.2%) mentioned that they did not find these topics in the books they read, and 6 (23.1%) answered that they often encountered environmental issues in the literature. This indicates a low level of inclusion of environmental topics in the works that students learn in the course of their studies (Figure 2).

Among the most common environmental situations students read about in books were climate change and its consequences for nature and people (17; 65.4%), rivers, seas and ocean pollution (18; 69.2%), deforestation and destruction of natural resources (13; 50%), eco-catastrophes due to social actions, such as war (10; 38.5%), and apocalypse due to environmental problems (mainly in fantastic, dystopian texts) (8; 30.8%).

Analyzing the results on the influence of environmental literature on children, 14 respondents (53.8%) noted that environmental issues motivate them to find solutions and to show eco-initiatives, particularly in the context of the need to preserve nature and actively search for solutions to eliminate environmental issues; six respondents (23.1%) claimed that environmental topics inspire them to talk with others and make mutual efforts to find solutions; and six students (23.1%) mentioned that works on environmental topics raise their interest in environmental issues. However, no one chose the option for motivation to emulate the behaviors of eco-rebels (Figure 3).

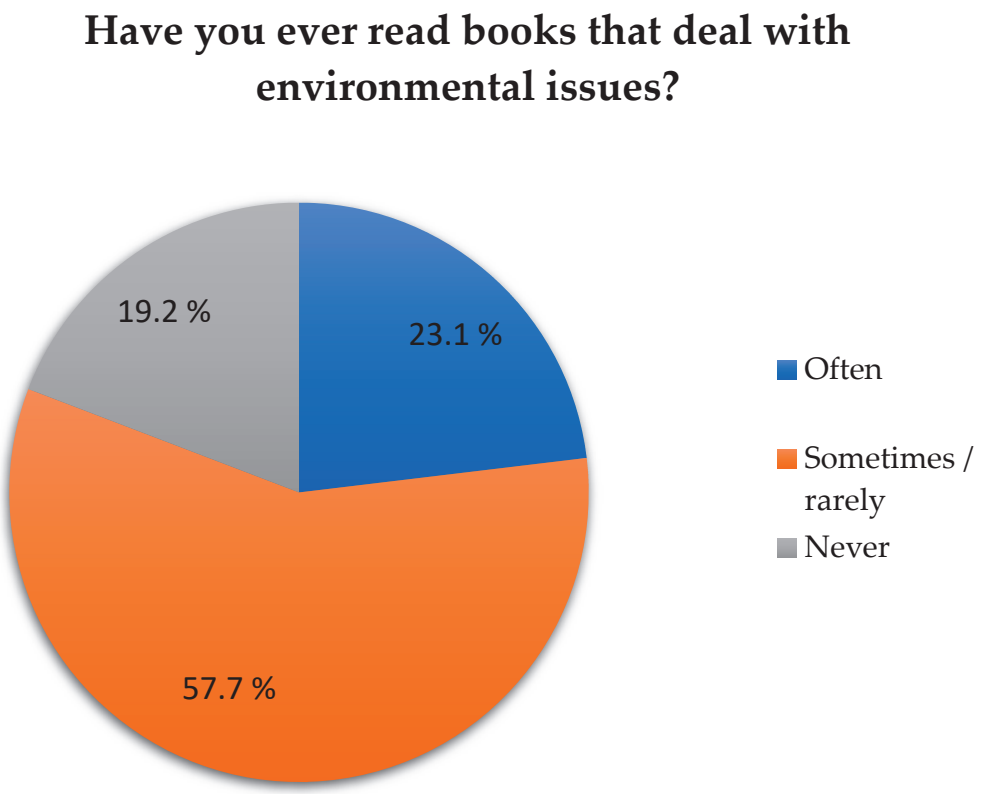

Figure 2. Inclusion of environmental themes in students' study materials.

The answers showed that environmental issues are often discussed in various school subjects. A total of 22 respondents (84.6%) confirmed that such discussions take place on a regular basis, especially during natural science and geography lessons; 4 respondents (15.4%) answered that topics are not often raised during the study of school subjects.

Many respondents could not list the exact names of books in which environmental issues were raised, but claimed they often noticed those topics in the literature, such as fairy tales and short stories. Some respondents mentioned specific works that were important to them in the context of ecology. For instance, *Ghosts of Black Oak Wood* by Bachynskyi and *Real Monsters—Threat to the Planet* by G. Rode. Others mentioned titles such as *How to help a hedgehog and protect a polar bear* by J. French and A. Kogan, and *Kosia the Bunny's Adventures* by L. Kravchenko. These books use natural images to foster compassion for animals and nature in children. Mentions of the books *Oak from War* by H. Osadko and *Tiny Creatures* by E. Barzotti also testify to the presence of fiction and non-fiction for children on the topics of ecology and human interaction with nature. Such books can be useful for expanding children's horizons and developing responsibility for the future of the planet.

Overall, it can be concluded that environmental topics are important and interesting for most students, which is confirmed not only by the high frequency of their mention in the literature but also by their influence on children's behavior. At the same time, there remains potential for in-depth discussion of environmental issues in lessons and activation of eco-initiatives among students, which will contribute to the development of environmental literacy and social responsibility in the younger generation. As stated in UNESCO's "Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives", "education for sustainable development aims to "empower learners to take informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society, for present and future generations "(Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives 2017, p. 7).

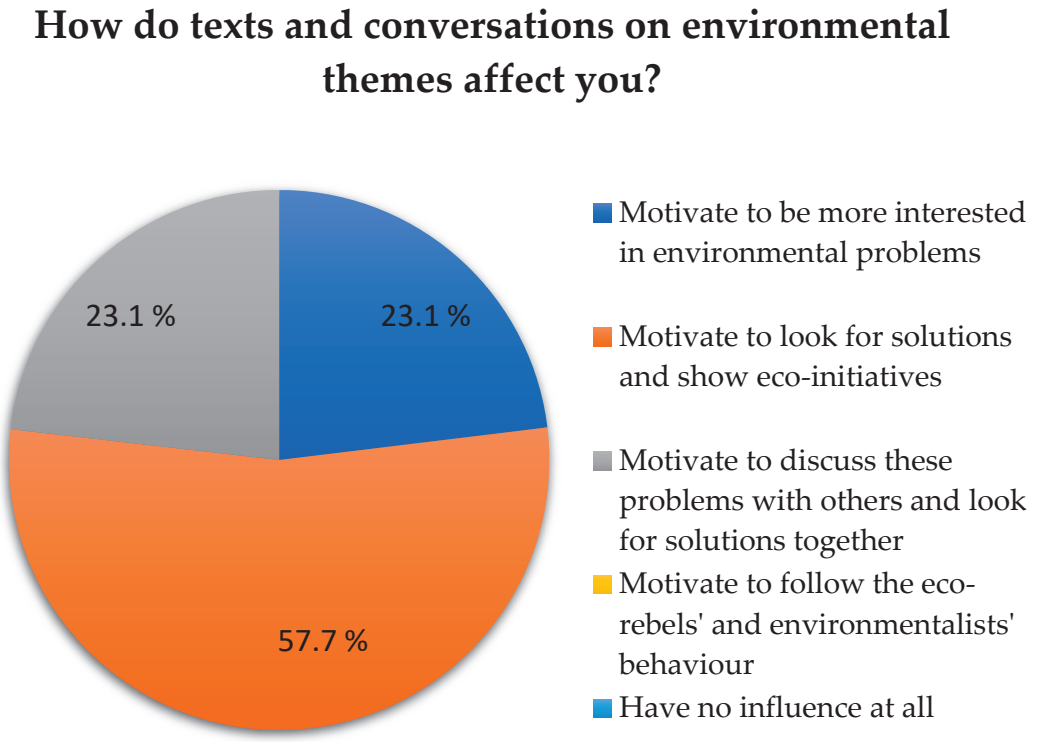

Figure 3. Influence of environmental literature on children.

Ecodialogues based on the suggested books allowed the participants to understand the impact of human actions on the environment and to think about how attitudes towards nature reflect the inner beliefs of the individual. The discussion focused on the analysis of the actions of the heroes, who demonstrate a responsible or irresponsible attitude towards nature. Children were asked how they themselves would act in similar situations. Special attention was paid to environmental problems, ecocatastrophes depicted in the works, and the main characters' reactions to them. Points related to nature conservation and saving the environment were discussed, and parallels with current environmental problems in the modern world were drawn. The readers reflected on possible eco-initiatives and measures to solve such problems, emphasizing the need for action and environmental awareness.

The discussion included the issue of eco-rebellion as a form of active environmental position. The participants shared their opinions about which of the heroes could be called an eco-rebel, and which actions and motives distinguished such behavior from the usual attitude towards nature. Questions were raised about the willingness of people to go against the usual norms for the sake of protecting the environment. This helped them to think more deeply about the possibilities of active actions in one's own life and to find examples of such manifestations in the community. The final parts of the discussion touched on the personal views of the participants regarding nature protection and the inspiration that the works might provide for specific eco-initiatives. Some of the ecocritical dialogues generated during the discussion of the books were posted on Padlet boards (Ecodialogues 1. 2024; Ecodialogues 2. 2024).

Analysis of the responses of the 26 readers on the survey "Eco-rebels, environmental literature and my eco-position" shows a significant interest in and understanding of environmental issues, as well as an increase in environmental awareness among the survey participants. All the respondents mentioned that they encountered various environmental situations in the books, including climate change, deforestation, water pollution, biodiversity loss, and other environmental disasters caused by human activities. In particular, such

works as *Taming of Kychera*, *Ghosts of Black Oak Wood*, and *Through the Forest. By the Sky, by the Water* were mentioned as raising important environmental issues and showing the impact of human activity on the environment.

The respondents stated that they were familiar with the consequences of the destruction of ecosystems due to human activities. The answers showed support for the eco-rebellious behavior of the characters in the books; they approved of the main characters' actions in *Taming of Kychera*, as well as those in *Ghosts of Black Oak Wood*. This suggests that heroes fighting for the preservation of nature are sympathetic and provide role models for readers.

As for identification with eco-rebel heroes, many respondents noted that they associated themselves with those characters who actively protected nature. Roman, who fights injustice and protects nature, has become a model of eco-activism for many. Moreover, characters in *Ghosts of Black Oak Wood* have been named as those whose behavior reflects a desire to change the situation for the better.

Regarding the idea of eco-initiatives, the respondents named several directions in which they would like to focus, following examples from the works they read. Responses included organizing actions to clean up forests and water bodies, planting trees, landscaping, reducing pollution, and recycling waste.

The students were asked to determine their position on the environment. The following answer options were offered: eco-active (I do everything possible to preserve the environment); pragmatic-ecological (A responsible attitude towards the environment begins with daily decisions, there is a balance between comfort and ecology); observer position (I understand the need for change and take interest in ecological situations, but I am not yet involved in preventing or solving them); eco-passive (Although I do not make big difference here yet, I consider the possibility of doing something more to preserve nature in the future); eco-skeptical (I believe that large corporations bear more responsibility for changes than separate individuals); other.

According to the analysis of the answers about the participants' position regarding the environment, the majority (14; 53.8%) took a pragmatic environmental vision, which indicates a tendency to combine ecological principles with comfort in everyday life; six respondents (23.1%) were ready to demonstrate eco-activity by caring for the environment. However, five students (19.2%) were considering the possibility of impacting environmental issues in the future. Only one person (3.8%) showed a passive view or was an observer (Figure 4).

Reading books and participating in ecodialogues significantly expanded the participants' ecological knowledge, helping them to better understand current environmental problems and form new attitudes toward nature. The answers indicate that most respondents felt more responsible for the environment and are ready for changes in everyday life. Students also noted that their views have become more pragmatic and balanced, particularly regarding small but important steps towards a caring attitude towards the environment.

Concerning the evaluation of ecodialogues as a method of discussing environmental issues based on books read on ecological topics, the majority of respondents gave the highest rating. This indicates that ecodialogues have become an effective tool for the participants to gain a deeper understanding of environmental topics and discuss problems and initiatives. Overall, the experiences from such discussions were positive, as they helped the participants to raise environmental awareness and get involved in eco-activism.

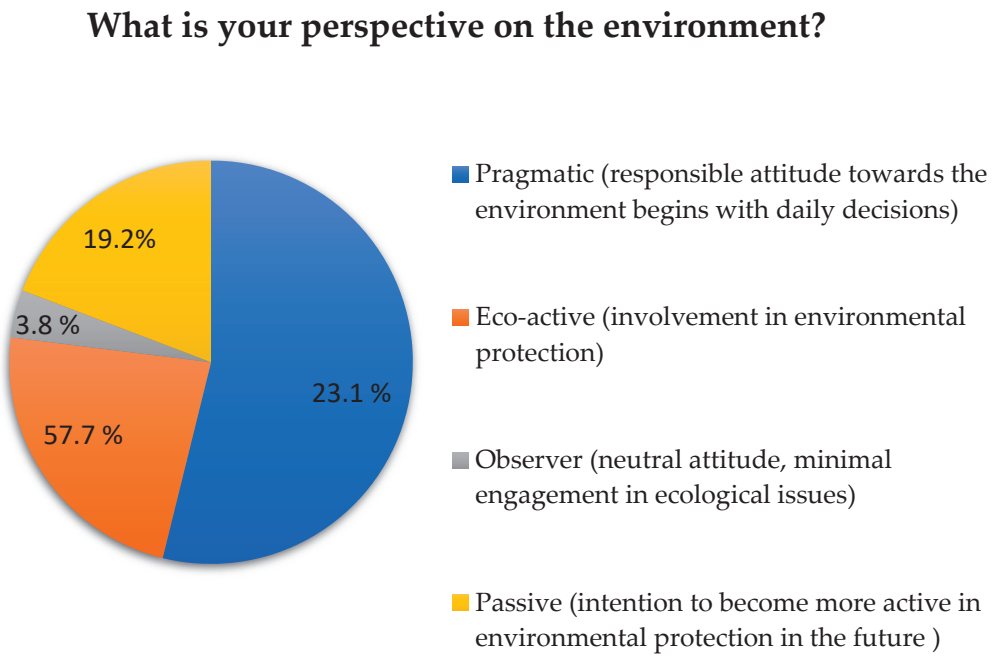

Figure 4. Participants' attitude regarding the environment.

The study showed that the environmental theme, which unfolds in contemporary Ukrainian children's literature, not only diversifies the content of the works but also has a significant potential for education on socially significant values; in particular, readers' awareness of the need to preserve nature and protect the environment. An important role is played by the heroes of eco-rebel children, who catch readers' attention with their behavior and life position, and encourage eco-activity.

Ecocritical analysis of the novels *Ghosts of Black Oak Wood* and *Taming of Kychera* demonstrates how Ukrainian authors, through the prism of the adventure genre, illuminate problematic eco-situations, the consumer attitudes of man toward nature, create models of behavior of young eco-rebels, and involve children-readers in understanding environmental problems, supporting eco-initiatives. A typological comparison of these works indicates that the eco-pedagogical potential of the text depends on many factors: which hero is central in the story, how the plot unfolds, whether it is built on solving an ecological problem or whether the ecological issue is secondary, who the narrator is, what narrative view the author chooses, which eco-initiatives are shown by the heroes and how relevant they are in the modern world.

In accordance with previous studies (Goga et al. 2023; Massey and Bradford 2011; van der Beek and Lehmann 2022), the results of this study proved that works on environmental topics are effective pedagogical tools for the formation of children's eco-activity and environmental literacy. The overview of plot development and the analysis of the characters' behavior demonstrate that these works offer environmental knowledge, are a source of new ecological experience for children, and help form eco-activity and ecoculture skills necessary to respond to environmental challenges and prevent eco-crises.

The method of ecocritical dialogues proposed by Goga et al. was efficient when discussing books on environmental topics with young readers. This is confirmed by the results of the survey.

Considering the obvious advantages of using literature in general and the image of eco-rebels in particular as an eco-pedagogical tool, and taking into account the results of the study, we emphasize the need to include other methods of developing environ-

mental literacy and forming eco-activity among young readers. We consider the methods such as role-playing games, storytelling, and project activities based on reading to be highly promising.

6. Conclusions

Contemporary Ukrainian children's literature on environmental topics employs various content and genre-based approaches to depicting eco-situations and eco-crises, as well as models of eco-rebel behavior and eco-initiatives. This research emphasizes the eco-pedagogical value of children's literature by examining the novels *Ghosts of Black Oak Wood* and *Taming of Kychera*, which efficiently depict young protagonists who take on active roles as environmental changemakers They embody the ideals of an eco-centric worldview, an active position in solving eco-problems, opposition to the established social order and rebellion against environmental crimes, a responsible attitude towards nature, and contribute to the formation of ecological values in readers through emotional influence.

The key components of ecological representation in these texts are problematic eco-situations, behavioral models of young eco-heroes, eco-initiatives, and eco-perspectives, which together contribute to shaping readers' environmental awareness and ethical stance. In line with the global trend of studying children's literature within the framework of eco-criticism and the postcolonial turn, this research amplifies the Ukrainian voice, often marginalized in international discourse.

This research demonstrates the efficiency of ecocritical dialogues as a pedagogical method that fosters not only readers' in-depth literary analysis but also their personal reflection and ecological engagement. The dialogues were offered to students aged 14–15, using *Ghosts of Black Oak Wood* by Bachynskyi and *Taming of Kychera* by Polyanko as core texts. The issues were related to interaction between a person and the environment, perception of nature, understanding of environmental problems and human activity that can prevent or solve them, eco-rebellion as manifestations of environmental awareness, and positioning oneself in the environment.

Particular attention was paid to environmental disasters portrayed in the texts, the characters' responses, and parallels with real-world ecological challenges. The participants shared possible eco-initiatives and emphasized the need for active engagement and environmental responsibility.

The interactive discussions and ecocritical dialogues enabled teenagers to analyze environmental literature through reflection, creative thinking, and personal engagement. The process, supported by surveys and collaborative tools like Padlet, encouraged the participants to connect the actions of eco-heroes to their own eco-conscious perspectives and behaviors.

This approach encourages participants to think about their own views on nature and ways of preserving it. It also helps them to understand the connection between literature and the real environmental challenges of today. In addition, ecocritical dialogues contribute to fostering empathy and responsibility for the environment, which is an important step towards changes in behavior and attitudes towards the surrounding world.

Thus, the research confirms that children's literature, when thoughtfully integrated into dialogic and interactive educational practices, becomes a powerful means for forming environmental literacy and civic responsibility among young readers.

It would be of particular significance to focus on integrating literary works with other forms of eco-pedagogy in future research, as well as examining their impact on the long-term environmental beliefs and behaviors of young recipients.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article and are openly available: Ecodialogues 1. Ghosts of Black Oak Wood by A. Bachynskyi. 2024. *Padlet*. Available online: https://padlet.com/tetianakachak1/padlet-jemwiq771hcy5d0n (accessed on 25 January 2025). Ecodialogues 2. Taming of Kychera by V. Polyanko. (2024). *Padlet*. Available online: https://padlet.com/tetianakachak1/padlet-iaksxh27i8jr9u6e (accessed on 25 January 2025).

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Appendix A

Ecodialogues 1. Ghosts of Black Oak Wood by A. Bachynskyi

1. Human Interaction with the Environment

- How do the protagonists perceive the Black Oak Wood and its inhabitants? What does their interaction with nature reveal about their character and values?
- Which actions of the protagonists, in your opinion, demonstrate a responsible or irresponsible attitude towards nature? How would you act in a similar situation?
- What does the Black Oak Wood symbolize for you in this novel? Can it be considered an integral part of the protagonists' lives?

2. Perception of Nature

- What emotions did the depiction of nature in the book evoke in you? Has your attitude towards nature changed after reading it?
- In your opinion, how does the author convey the significance of nature? What influences our perception of the environment—the description, the characters' emotions, or their actions?
- Do you agree that nature in the novel serves as a character rather than merely a backdrop for events? How does this influence your perception of the forest?

3. Understanding Environmental Issues and the Impact of Human Activity

- What environmental issues are depicted in the novel? How do the characters respond to them, and what does this reveal about their attitude towards the environment?
- Are there any references in the novel to nature conservation or environmental protection? How do these moments reflect real-world ecological problems we face today?
- How can we prevent or address similar issues in our own lives? In your opinion, what measures should be prioritized?

4. Eco-Rebellion as an Expression of Environmental Awareness

- Can any of the characters be considered an "eco-rebel"? What actions and motivations distinguish eco-rebellion from ordinary attitudes toward nature?

- How do you evaluate acts of environmental resistance or activism both in real life and in the novel? Should people be willing to challenge established norms to protect nature?
- What factors can motivate individuals to take responsibility for the environment and adopt an active stance? Do you observe similar behaviors in your own community?

5. Positioning Oneself in the Environment

- What role would you take in the situation described in the novel? How would you position yourself in relation to nature and its protection?
- Has the novel helped you better understand your role in the environment? How would you describe your contribution to nature conservation?
- How can you demonstrate eco-activism in your daily life? Has the novel inspired you to take specific actions or initiatives?
- Think of ideas for a project aimed at addressing or preventing environmental crises similar to those described in the novel at the local level. Consider the regional specifics and contemporary environmental challenges.

Ecodialogues 2. ***Taming of Kychera*** **by V. Polyanko**

1. Human Interaction with the Environment

- How is the interaction between humans and nature depicted in the story? How do the characters' actions impact the environment, and how are the characters themselves transformed in response to nature?
- In your opinion, why does the forest hold such significance for the protagonists? How does their attitude toward the forest reflect the general state of ecological awareness?

2. Perception of Nature

- Through what colors and descriptions does the author portray the natural environment of Kychera? How does this influence your perception of the environment and the value of natural resources?
- In your view, how should society perceive natural treasures like Kychera? Can this perception influence our actions in everyday life?

3. Understanding Environmental Issues and the Impact of Human Activity

- What environmental problems are highlighted in the novel? Do you agree that the main causes of these issues stem from human activity? In what ways?
- Are there any suggestions in the novel for preserving nature? If you were in the characters' place, how would you act to prevent environmental damage?

4. Eco-Rebellion as a Manifestation of Environmental Awareness and Responsibility

- Do any of the characters exhibit an eco-rebellious stance? Through which actions or words is this demonstrated?
- Do you believe that contemporary society needs eco-rebels? How can such individuals contribute to solving environmental problems? Are you ready to take an active position?

5. Positioning Oneself in the Environment

- What is your position regarding nature after reading this story? Has your perspective changed, and if so, why?
- How can your personal actions contribute to environmental protection? Do you plan to implement any changes in your daily life?

- What eco-initiatives could be beneficial in your school or community? Do you see yourself as part of these changes?
- Think of ideas for a project aimed at addressing or preventing ecological crises similar to those described in the novel, at the local level. Be sure to take into account the specific characteristics of your region and the challenges of the present time.

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