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Children and the Non-human World Bearing Witness to Ecological Loss in 20th-Century Children's Literature

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ABSTRACT

The nonhuman world and perspective in children's literature are by necessity created by human narrators, which makes human perspectives an inseparable part of the narrative. However, while being human constructions, these narratives have the potential to eliminate the centrality of human perspectives and foreground nonhuman voices, as they are intended to align with the worldview of their target audiences. In this sense, this article analyzes how children's and nonhuman viewpoints converge in children's literature from the 20th-century through an ecocritical framework. A significant part of this article is devoted to analyzing Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902) and Theodor Seuss Geisel's *The Lorax* (1971) in how narratives dominated by nonhuman perspectives challenge the Anthropocene and thereby promote environmental consciousness and ethical engagement with the nonhuman realm among young readers. Methodologically, the study employs close textual and multimodal analysis to examine how anthropomorphic figures, nonhuman narrative voice, and visual–verbal storytelling techniques contribute to ecocentric representation and portray the more-than-human world as an eyewitness to and victim of human destruction of nature. By studying the verbal and visual representations of the natural world through the perspectives of beings most deeply affected by destructive human activities, this study explores the exclusionary aspect of human-centered narratives and stresses the significance of inclusive environmental perspectives.

KEYWORDS

Anthropomorphism, children's literature, ecocriticism, nonhuman perspectives

Introduction

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary area of literary and cultural studies that gained prominence in the latter half of the 20th century. It analyzes "the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature" (Glotfelty & Fromm xix), shedding light on how literary works affect the way we perceive the natural world and interact with it. Ecocriticism allows for the examination of the effects of cultural norms and anthropogenic activities on the environment and ecosystems through a novel approach that eliminates the boundaries between humans and other life forms. In this respect, ecocritics seek to uncover the root cause of the global ecological crises and encourage humans to reduce the effects of destructive human activity on the environment by highlighting the importance of a balanced and respectful coexistence between humanity and the more-than-human world. In doing so, ecocriticism challenges anthropocentric approaches embedded in traditional humanist thought, which often places humans above all other beings, and alternatively argues that nature possesses inherent value regardless of its usefulness to mankind.

Throughout history, literature has predominantly focused on human experience, reducing nature and the nonhuman domain to simple backgrounds or resources. The widespread presence in literary works of a world where human superiority is the norm has often led to the marginalization of non-human voices and, consequently, to the dominance of human-oriented perspectives. Since works addressing the natural world through human centrality tend to disregard the pain endured by non-humans, an ecocentric narrative that recognizes the inherent value of nature is essential to restore the long-lost balance between humans and the natural environment. In this sense, as Greg Garrard highlights in *Ecocriticism*, ecocriticism's focus on the more-than-human world necessitates a redefinition of the term "human."

In *When Species Meet*, Donna J. Haraway further questions the traditional concept of what it means to be human and whether humans can truly exist without other species. She rejects the anthropocentric hierarchy that places humans above all other life forms:

> I am a creature of the mud, not the sky… I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such… (3-4)

Her alternative approach highlights the deep entanglement of human life with the more-than-human world by revealing that the human body is largely made up of nonhuman organisms.

In this regard, she dismantles artificial barriers between species, portraying humans not as a solitary species but as interconnected ecosystems whose survival is contingent upon other life forms.

In literature, the emphasis on human experience reinforces the human-dominated perception of other forms of life. Conversely, in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Jacques Derrida develops a distinctive approach that removes the human eye from its privileged role as the observer of the animal domain. Accordingly, he challenges the human-centered inclinations of philosophers such as Descartes, Kant, and Heidegger by foregrounding the nonhuman perspective, which is often marginalized in conventional philosophical discourse. In his work, Derrida recalls a moment when his eyes meet the questioning gaze of his cat as he stands naked in his bathroom. His interpretation of his nonhuman companion's gaze suggests that, similar to humans, animals possess a type of consciousness caused by the act of observing and being observed. "They [philosophers] have taken no account of the fact that what they call 'animal' could *look at* them, and *address* them from down there, from a wholly other origin" (13). His view of the human realm through the eyes of an animal disputes the principles of humanistic thought and provides a distinctive framework for exploring the nonhuman world. This perspective is the hallmark of children's literature, where the distinction between fantasy and reality often becomes blurred.

Recent ecocritical analyses of children's literature have underscored the significant role that environmental themes and anthropomorphized animals play in influencing children's ethical interactions with the nonhuman world. Dobrin and Kidd's *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism* is the first major collection to connect ecocriticism and children's culture studies. It highlights how children's literature can challenge prevalent anthropocentric narratives and foster ecological awareness among young readers. Another influential perspective is offered by Stacy Alaimo, who, through her concept of "trans-corporeality," argues that human bodies are materially interconnected with nonhuman beings and environments. This approach questions Western humanist assumptions of the individual as self-contained and autonomous. It has also shaped recent readings of children's literature by demonstrating how destructive human activities transcend the human realm and permeate the wider ecosystems to which all bodies belong.

Other ecocritical studies on children's literature analyze texts from various perspectives, such as deep ecology, environmental ethics, and eco-pedagogy. Makwanya and Dick assert that promoting children's involvement in climate adaptation activities elevates their ecological awareness and fosters a sense of stewardship in them. They propose encouraging youngsters to articulate their experiences and environmental concerns through writing. Kübra and Çelik study *The Lorax* alongside its Turkish translation through the lens of deep ecology and highlight that

ecological elements are prevalent in both versions, reinforced through literary devices including repetition, rhyming, hyperbole, and neologism. Furthermore, in his article "Ecocriticism and Children's Literature: Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* as an Example," Ismail underscores the didactic dimension of *The Lorax* by examining the detrimental consequences of industrialization and environmental exploitation. He argues that Seuss places the responsibility on future generations to repair the environmental damage caused by adults, highlighting the crucial role of education in this process.

In her work "Environmental Imagination and Wonder in Beatrix Potter," Kerslake argues that Potter's anthropomorphism functions as a pedagogical tool that conveys moral lessons through "dark humor" and "sophisticated irony" (73). According to her, Potter's portrayal of Peter Rabbit as a disobedient child is intentional, because she believes that children's sense of wonder cannot be satisfied unless they explore nature and become a part of it, even at the cost of disobeying parental authority. Similarly, Allani highlights Potter's emphasis on the essential role of participation and experimentation in discovering and connecting with nature, which didactic learning does not provide. Considering the adult-centered aspect of Victorian children's literature, "Potter emerges as a forerunner in contesting anthropocentric views that place man at the center of the universe, dominating rather than coexisting with nature" (Allani 178).

Building on these ecocritical discussions, this article contributes to ecocritical discourse by analyzing how nonhuman perspectives, multimodal storytelling, and anthropomorphic figures raise ecological consciousness and nurture a sense of responsibility toward the nonhuman world among children. Unlike prior research that often examines *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and *The Lorax* in isolation, this study brings both texts into dialogue, exploring how they depict the natural world and portray children as witnesses to ecological degradation, while highlighting the ecocentric dimension of presenting natural elements as active participants in the narrative.

Ecocentric Aspects of Anthropomorphism and Children's Unconditioned Perspective

For centuries, human societies have marginalized individuals who deviated from the cultural norms and practices of their societies. They were often labeled as *other* and in certain cases exposed to discrimination, exclusion, and dehumanizing practices. Humans' inclination to regard differences as *threats* extends beyond human communities and permeates into many aspects of human life, including their interaction with the natural world and ecosystems. Similarly, humans have perceived nature as a commodity to take control of and exploit rather than as a living system that holds an intrinsic value.

Literary works designed for adult readers usually adopt a human-centered outlook on life in

contrast to works that target children. Such texts, whether intentionally or not, often possess an anthropocentric perspective. Therefore, due to the absence of a mindset free from the profit-driven justifications of human cognition, they may fail to illustrate the consequences of human activity on the natural environment in an objective manner. In contrast, anthropomorphism in children's literature serves as a literary tool that encourages children to perceive the human realm from nonhuman eyes and thereby foster empathy towards the injustices they experience. By presenting humans and nonhuman beings with human qualities as parts of the same natural environment, anthropomorphism highlights the importance of a harmonious coexistence between human beings and other species. Furthermore, since animals endowed with human traits align with children's world, where the line between reality and fantasy is blurred, the anthropomorphic dimension of children's literature eliminates the human exceptionalism that characterizes works intended for adults.

In comparison to adults, children are regarded as more "nature-associated, both because they seem more overtly to display organic embeddedness than do adults, and because they are commonly attributed with an affinity with nature-associated, indigenous peoples pursuing traditional lifestyles" (Stephens 40). Children's intimate bond with nature is nurtured by their vivid imagination, which bridges the gap between reality and fantasy, allowing them to attribute human traits to animals and plants. As Yanar suggests, since children "possess a unique capacity to embrace and get pleasure from the potentiality of many consequences, while simultaneously rejecting rigid absolutes" (860), they are naturally intrigued by differences and resist predefined boundaries established by society. Therefore, the hierarchical order between humans and other life forms, commonly observed in the adult world, is absent in the world of children. Consequently, it can be argued that children's worldview that does not regard differences as markers of hierarchy allows them to approach environmental concerns with a deeper sense of sympathy and objectivity. In comparison to adults, contrasts serve children as sources of curiosity, which bring new opportunities for exploration and discovery.

The unconditioned nature of children's perspective is referred to by the 17th-century English philosopher John Locke in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, where he proposes that the human mind begins as a "tabula rasa," or blank slate, free from fixed notions and binary oppositions (45). According to this view, preconditions and dualistic thinking are not acquired innately but rather formed through experience and social impact. In the early years of their life, particularly during the stage of identity development, children perceive the world through the lens of equality, since their cognition is not yet shaped by dualities such as right and wrong. At this point, children usually see nature not as a resource they can benefit from, but more as a reassuring and secure presence.

As children reach maturity, the blank slate is filled with social norms, fixed notions, and dichotomous thinking. Adults with a pragmatic mindset tend to justify environmental degradation by viewing it as an inevitable outcome of technological advancement, economic growth, and urbanization. In contrast, children usually feel empathy and a deep sense of justice toward nature, as their minds are not governed by rational and practical reasoning. Consequently, their unconditioned worldview enables them to confront environmental issues with moral clarity, curiosity, and compassion. In this sense, children's sensitivity to nonhumans' predicament might be perceived as a counter-narrative to anthropocentric narratives. Furthermore, their readiness to accept diversity and embrace it with curiosity makes them natural innovators in how we might interact with the natural environment and cope with the global ecological crises.

Anthropomorphized Animals as Eco-Witnesses in Dr. Seuss's The Lorax and Beatrix Potter's The Tale of Peter Rabbit

Books designed for children frequently narrate events through nonhuman eyes while integrating vivid depictions of natural settings where humans and animals cohabit in harmony. Due to the active participation of the nonhuman world in its narrative, children's literature possesses an ecocentric dimension that strengthens children's connection with the world around them and thereby develops their affinity with beings outside of the human sphere. Furthermore, nonhuman figures with human attributes not only encourage children to utilize their imagination but also teach them vital moral lessons that would otherwise be challenging for them to comprehend. For example, the anthropomorphized animals in Aesop's tales, such as *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, *The Hare and the Tortoise*, and *The Fox and the Crow*, teach children ethical values such as respect, honesty, and fairness in ways that are simple and memorable.

In *The Lorax*, Dr. Seuss adopts a nonhuman standpoint to portray the extent of the destructive influences of unchecked industrial growth and human greed on the natural world. The protagonist, Lorax, who famously states, "I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues" (Seuss), brings up the moral dilemma of nature's incapability to protect itself against environmental damage, as it cannot speak for itself. However, the Lorax's unwavering advocacy for nature and its defenseless inhabitants highlights that lack of human speech is not an excuse to harm the innocent. In this respect, the Lorax is a strong emblem of moral duty since he speaks up for the parts of nature that are often disregarded.

Although the Lorax is depicted as an animal-like figure, his appearance blends features from different species, giving him a broad, inclusive quality. This reflects the core values of ecocriticism, which seeks to dissolve the strict boundaries between humans and other species.

Moreover, the Lorax's human side such as empathy, moral judgment, and reason, in addition to his linguistic ability, bridges the human and nonhuman worlds. This makes him a role model who fosters ethical responsibility toward defenseless beings in nature. Furthermore, his sudden emergence as a response to the Once-ler's chopping down of a Truffula tree, along with consciousness-raising warnings about environmental well-being, suggests that the environment is neither ownerless nor open to humans' arbitrary use.

As Aslan and Bas note, the Lorax's criticism of the Once-ler challenges the human-centered assumption that "due to the superiority of using the 'language' feature, human beings define 'other' entities outside of himself as unwise" (714) and therefore, insignificant. By speaking for those without a voice and defending nature, the Lorax challenges the belief that animals are less valuable or less intelligent simply because they cannot communicate in human language. By giving human qualities to nonhuman beings, characters like the Lorax help readers recognize the injustices inflicted upon the natural world—wrongs that might otherwise remain unnoticed. In this respect, assigning animals or nature a human voice is not meant to glorify human qualities but rather to encourage empathy towards nonhuman beings and dismantle human-centered hierarchies. A similar effect is achieved in Potter's works, where anthropomorphized animals convey the impacts of human intrusion on their habitats on a smaller, more intimate scale rather than through a large-scale ecological collapse.

In contrast to the ecologically sensitive Lorax, the Once-ler stands for unrestrained capitalism and its association with destructive human behavior. He embodies human greed to conquer the world and subjugate ecosystems for personal gain. His discovery of the Truffula Tree, which he transforms into a substance called Theneed, "a Fine-Something-That-All-People-Need" (Seuss), reveals humanity's profit-driven attitude toward the more-than-human world. The felling of these trees leads to inevitable ecological consequences such as the loss of entire ecosystems. For instance, the Brown Bar-ba-loots, who depend on Trufula to live, lose their main food supply. Consequently, they are forced to leave their natural habitat in search of food. The gloomy portrayal of the natural environment in *The Lorax*, thus, reflects the scope of the current global environmental crises and practices such as overfishing, which destroy marine ecosystems and deprive aquatic species of their food sources.

Canonical children's books by the Victorian writer and illustrator Beatrix Potter are notable for their lifelike descriptions of animals that coexist with humans in natural settings. As Kerslake states, "Her illustrations alternate between depictions of real animals and others of the same animal wearing clothes and adopting human postures with an interesting play on anthropomorphism" (79). They resemble actual animals when they are without clothing and behave like humans when dressed. Such behavior is evident in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* when

Peter puts his jacket off to escape from Mr. McGregor.

Potter has a distinctive approach to the animal domain, which is shaped by her curious personality and active role as an observer in nature. Her unique perspective reflects her scientific approach to anthropomorphism, which exhibits "no flicker of sentimentality or sympathy" (Kerslake 85). In her works, the lifelike depictions of animal characters with human qualities and their portrayals as models of good behavior encourage children to see animals as an integral part of nature. Squirrel Nutkin and Peter Rabbit are two examples of animal figures that teach children important moral lessons. Their mischievous behavior and the negative consequences that follow serve as a reminder of what occurs when youngsters disobey and treat parents and authorities disrespectfully. Furthermore, their anthropomorphic side plays a significant role in promoting the idea that animals have voices of their own to express joy, sorrow, fear, and annoyance, despite the limitations of human perception.

Potter's works adopt an ecocentric perspective in their portrayal of humans encroaching upon nature and the ensuing threats they pose to animals coexisting with humans. Due to the ever-present danger beyond their home, Peter and his family must constantly remain alert to the perils awaiting them where the human and nonhuman domains converge—namely, the garden. Potter depicts Mr. McGregor's garden as a dangerous place Peter is warned to stay away from, as its owner shows no mercy toward intruders: "… don't go into Mr. McGregor's garden. Your Father had an accident there; he was put in a pie by Mrs. McGregor" (7). In contrast, Peter experiences a deep sense of calm and security upon returning home, away from human interference. "He slipped underneath the gate and was safe at last in the wood outside the garden" (25).

Humans' ownership of nature is vividly illustrated by Potter, particularly when Peter ignores his mother's warnings and ventures into Mr. McGregor's garden. Ironically, after eating some of the vegetables in the garden, Mr. McGregor calls Peter "a thief" and chases him with a rake in his hand. In reality, it is the owner of the garden who intrudes upon the rabbits' natural habitat and consumes their main source of food instead of sharing what nature freely offers all species. As Peter escapes, he encounters several man-made obstacles, such as a gate, a gooseberry net, and a tool shed in the garden. "He found a door in a wall; but it was locked, and there was no room for a fat little rabbit to squeeze underneath" (22). All these objects restrict his movement and slow his escape. When he becomes stuck in the net, only sparrows come to his aid. Animals helping other animals, along with artificial barriers forged by humans reveal the hostile presence of humankind within the natural world. As demonstrated in the text, Peter's survival instincts and cautious behavior in his interactions with the human world, along with his mother's warning about how his father paid the price for intruding into the human domain, offer a portrayal of environmental vulnerability on a subtle, individualized level. On the other hand,

the Lorax's environmentally conscious warnings against large-scale industrial activities, which destroy various animal species and force them to migrate extend ecological loss from an individual level to a global level.

Multimodality's Role in Ecocentric Narratives in Children's Literature

Multimodal texts combine multiple modes of communication—words, images, sounds, or textures—that play a vital role in producing and interpreting meaning. Children's books usually draw on multimodality that helps young readers to get immersed in the material they read and arouses a sense of curiosity toward the text through vivid images and depictions. In this regard, the multimodal design of children's books enhances the effect of ecocentric portrayals of the more-than-human world by stirring emotional responses toward human-induced injustices and harmful environmental practices.

Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* portrays the dramatic shift in the natural world before and after the Once-ler family. It opens with a verbal and visual depiction of a dark and gloomy town where "the wind smells slow-and-sour when it blows and no birds ever sing excepting old crows" (Seuss). The visuals illustrating this scene evoke fear and anxiety in the reader, as the barren setting lacks any greenery and is dominated by a row of unattractive buildings illuminated by artificial lights. There is no indication that the story's darkness is connected to nighttime, which intensifies the story's bleak atmosphere and conveys a sense of irreversible destruction. The name of the street containing the word "Lifted" is symbolic of the environmental catastrophes following the disappearance of the Lorax.

After the young boy pays the Once-ler to hear the Lorax's story, the narrative shifts to beautiful imagery that vividly captures the untouched beauty of nature before the Once-ler and his family arrive. The colorful images bring the landscape to life, depicting a sunlit, flourishing environment where plants and animals coexist and thrive harmoniously. The colorful Truffula Trees fill the scene, and the animals appear peaceful and content. There is a bright, lively pond filled with fish, and Brown Bar-ba-loots play joyfully beneath the trees.

> Way back in the days when the grass was still green
> and the pond was still wet
> and the clouds were still clean,
> and the song of the Swomee-Swans rang out in space...
> one morning, I came to this glorious place.
> And I first saw the trees!

The Truffula Trees!
The bright-colored tufts of the Truffula Trees!
Mile after mile in the fresh morning breeze (Seuss)

The physical appearances of both characters match their personalities; the Lorax looks like an old wise man whose consciousness-raising warnings about the environment contast the fearsome appearance of the Once-ler. Although only a part of the Once-ler's body is visible throughout the story, he resembles a monster with his green skin and yellow eyes that align with his greed and moral corruption. At the beginning of the story, the boy's obligation to pay him to hear the Lorax's story and his meticulous calculation of the payment portray the Once-ler's materialistic nature and foreshadow his profit-driven interaction with nature later in the story.

When the Once-ler builds a small shop to produce Thneed, "a Fine-Something-That-All-People-Need" (Seuss) from Truffula trees, the narrative acquires an ecocentric dimension. As illustrated vividly, the Lorax's emergence from the stump of a felled Truffula tree and his reaction to environmental degradation dramatize nature's defenseless state in the face of destructive human activities. In contrast to the Lorax, who originates from nature, the Once-ler is depicted as an external force encroaching upon the natural world in pursuit of material gain.

As the Once-ler's business grows, the once serene and harmonious nature starts to deteriorate. As the Once-ler family cuts down more Truffula trees and builds factories for material growth, the pristine blue sky becomes obscured by smoke and pollution. As a result, the Brown Bar-ba-loots and Swomee-Swans are forced to leave their natural habitat in search of food and to escape the suffocating smog that covers the sky.

The visual representations of environmental degradation portray industrial growth and the ensuing ecological destruction that humanity faces today. The Once-ler's family company, with its employees knitting Thneeds day and night under artificial lights and operating machines to fell Truffula trees in large quantities, evokes in the reader's mind a vivid image of mass production in factories. All the beautiful elements of nature, from trees to animals depicted in vivid colors, gradually disappear as the Once-ler takes control of the natural world. The Swomee-Swans, choked by smoke, and the water pollution caused by the Once-ler factory picture the inevitable outcomes of human greed. Through the Once-ler, who experiences a moment of guilt, the author emphasizes that although humans are aware of the scope of their destructive deeds, they choose to justify them in the pursuit of industrial and technological advancement.

I, the Once-ler, felt sad
as I watched them all go.

BUT ...
business is business!
And business must grow
regardless of crummies in tummies, you know (Seuss)

After the last Truffula tree is cut down, the environment descends into permanent darkness and gloom, as portrayed by images that depict a landscape shrouded in silence. All these visual elements enhance the story's sense of loss and despair. The joy, energy, and light that once filled the environment disappear with its natural inhabitants. The environmental damage the Once-ler causes eventually leads him to total isolation, as everyone, including his family, abandons the area they now deem uninhabitable. This scenario exemplifies how humans cause their own destruction.

However, the author does not conclude the story with a sense of despair. Although the Once-ler's greed is the root cause of environmental destruction, he ultimately learns a lesson from this experience. The word "*UNLESS"* that the Lorax leaves behind means that there is still hope, which becomes tangible with the boy's arrival. It is the boy whom the Once-ler entrusts with the duty of planting the last Truffula Tree seed to compensate for the damage he has caused. The fact that a young boy is given this responsibility cultivates a sense of care and moral duty in children toward the natural environment.

Beatrix Potter's watercolor illustrations of the natural environment possess a photographic quality, making them appear as direct scenes from the real world. They reflect the aesthetic beauty of nature through the gaze of an observer who has a keen eye on details. Potter's sharp observational skills come to life especially when she portrays the contrast between the free, animal-inhabited world of nature and the human-controlled, domesticated one. In *The Tale of Peter Rabbit,* Peter's home is depicted as a wild, natural space where animals move freely, in contrast to Mr. McGregor's cultivated garden, which reflects human order with its hedges, flowerpots, nets, and other such artificial features. This duality reflects humanity's effort to tame nature, as is evident in the tension that arises when human intervention in nature restricts animals' freedom. In this regard, Potter portrays Mr. McGregor as a symbol of humanity's desire to claim ownership of nature and protect it from any perceived threats—animals in this case. He is described as a merciless man holding a rake and is ready to attack intruders. His attempt to trap and step on Peter enhances his hostile attitude, inviting readers to empathize with Peter. Peter's helplessness when he gets lost in the garden, crying out in fear, dramatizes the detrimental outcomes of human encroachment upon nature and animals.

Since readers perceive the human realm through the experiences of Peter and his family,

the natural elements assume an active role in the narration, endowing it with an ecocentric quality. The way Potter illustrates Peter's physical appearance along with his fears and hopes grants him an individuality, which amplifies the story's eco-conscious dimension. Like Seuss, Potter employs visuals to raise ecological awareness; however, her delicate watercolors and illustrations of animals expressing human emotions are highly detailed and invite close observation, whereas Seuss employs a more direct and dramatic portrayal of environmental threats that lack the photographic quality of Potter's images. *The Lorax* raises ecological consciousness through dark and gloomy images that depict the end result of environmental destruction, followed by flashbacks exhibiting the initial beauty of nature before human involvement. In contrast, Potter nurtures eco-consciousness through visually appealing depictions that capture the beauty of the natural environment where animals and humans coexist in tension.

Although Peter has human attributes such as wearing clothes and speaking like humans, his natural instincts remain intact, as Potter visibly portrays verbally and visually. For instance, when he must save himself from Mr. McGregor, Peter attempts to get rid of any barriers that restrict his movement, including his jacket and shoes. This is when he goes back to his authentic animal self, guided purely by nature. The sad expression on his face, his anxious quick steps, and defenseless look make Peter appear as a victim of humanity's menacing presence in nature. Ironically, Mr. McGregor's act of hanging Peter's jacket and shoes on a scarecrow to frighten the blackbirds symbolizes humanity's desire to dominate nature through fear and threat.

Peter's disobedient behavior and the resulting conflict between animal and human domains can be seen as a warning against the consequences of disrupting harmony in nature due to disregarding the boundaries of others. Although Potter vividly illustrates the detrimental effects of human invasion of nature through Mr. McGregor's cultivated garden, Peter's own intrusion into the human sphere is likewise portrayed as a source of tension that can only be resolved when both species respect the limits of one another. In this sense, Potter implicitly criticizes destructive human impact on nature through the mirrored disobedience of an animal. Thus, children learn about the negative consequences of disobedience and the transgression of boundaries through the actions of an animal possessing human traits. All the visuals in the story, infused with the aesthetic beauty of nature and the anthropomorphic emotions of animals conveyed through their gestures and expressions, reinforce this message.

Although *The Lorax* and *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* differ in tone and style and originate from different periods within the 20th century, a comparative reading reveals how each text employs anthropomorphism, nonhuman perspectives, and multimodality to challenge human-centered narratives. Seuss employs nonhuman speech as a tool of resistance to environmental

destruction through the Lorax, who openly confronts destructive human practices and questions the moral implications of human greed. Potter, on the other hand, uses intricate images and narrative tools such as facial expressions, gestures, and the contrast between wild and cultivated spaces to convey the everyday pressures animals face due to threatening human presence in their natural habitats. Additionally, while Seuss illustrates large-scale environmental degradation through vivid color shifts and striking imagery, Potter employs intricate and realistic watercolor images to depict ecological loss on a micro level. Furthermore, through animals' cautious actions and human-like expressions, Potter dramatizes how claiming ownership of land and boundary-making shape their everyday reality. Together, the two works demonstrate that 20th-century children's literature adopts multimodal storytelling and nonhuman points of view to question anthropocentrism and thereby encourage young readers to reconsider human dominance and perceive nature as a living, feeling presence.

Conclusion

Children's books are crafted in alignment with children's perception of life, free from polarities and the conditioned thinking of adulthood. Since their world is not governed by pragmaticism, children are inclined to see nature as a realm of living beings with whom they can form genuine emotional connections. In this regard, children's literature serves as a medium that allows children to develop empathy toward non-human entities and engage with the more-than-human world both emotionally and consciously.

By bringing the human and animal realms together, children's literature promotes the idea of interdependence between humans and other species. The multimodal and anthropomorphic figures contribute to its ecocentric dimension in how they dissolve the hierarchical order between humans and other species. The multimodality of children's books fosters eco-consciousness through their visual and linguistic modes that decenter human perspectives. As witnessed in both *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and *The Lorax*, the colorful illustrations and non-human voices allow children to learn moral lessons, unlike in adult literature, where human voice and experience are the lenses through which readers view the nonhuman world. In their unique ways, Potter and Seuss invite young readers to recognize that nature is not a passive background but a living, feeling participant in the shared web of existence.

Anthropomorphism in both works has a significant role in developing environmental consciousness in children. Animals and other natural elements endowed with human traits and depicted as coexisting with humans allow readers to see the human world through nonhuman eyes. This approach encourages children to understand the extent of harmful human activities on the more-than-human world, free from the profit-driven reasoning of the adult mind. In *The*

Lorax, Seuss employs anthropomorphism mainly through the Lorax, an environmentally conscious figure with human attributes, who speaks up for the defenseless parts of nature. His protests on behalf of nature against the harm inflicted on ecosystems portray environmental destruction on a global level. In *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, anthropomorphism serves as a tool to raise awareness of the pain and fear animals experience due to human intrusion into their natural habitats. Peter's facial expressions and emotions, as well as the aesthetic beauty of nature conveyed through Potter's detailed and colorful illustrations, enhance the ecocentric message of the text and portray the ecological crisis on a more individual level.

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