

Raising young eco-citizens: An eco critical approach to selected English fictions from children's literature

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In the 21st century, humans are eager to build a world with more sophisticated technology, focusing on many innovations to advance the human experience. This greedy mindset has slowly caused society to turn its back on biodiversity. The concept of 'give and take' between humans and the environment has become more like 'take and give nothing.' According to the WHO, climate change, one of the huge environmental issues of 2024, is severely impacting the world, "Between 2030 and 2050, climate change is expected to cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea, and heat stress alone." With a rise in the temperature, poverty, less clean water, damaged immune systems, and choosing between starvation and migration, the consequences will rob the next generation of having a fulfilling future. This calls for attention. An effort filled with motivation and attention, especially from children who hold the responsibility for our world tomorrow. To reclaim a greener world, they need to be taught at an early stage that green signifies much more than merely a colour. Eco-writing, in the form of children's literature can enhance environmental literacy. By collecting information from various sites, journals, and articles, the paper is an attempt to study the ecological concepts, crises, themes, and elements present in selected English-language fictions from children's literature: "The Lorax" by Dr. Seuss, "The Selfish Giant" by Oscar Wilde, and "The Secret Garden" by Frances Hodgson Burnett and examine how the unifying notion of environmental consciousness is clearly demonstrated in the texts. The paper, moreover, shows how an ecocritical approach to children's literature can foster environmental wisdom and awareness and motivate young children to grow responsible future eco-citizens.

Our attitude towards nature appears to be leading us down a path of destruction. To clarify further, William Rueckert, who coined the term ecocriticism in 1978, in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*, says that this attitude is what most ecologists call a "self-destructive or suicidal motive that is inherent" within our attitude towards nature. He furthermore says "The conceptual and practical problem is to find the grounds upon which the two communities- the human, the natural- can coexist, cooperate, and flourish in the biosphere." "If we agree with Barry Commoner's first law of ecology, "Everything is connected to everything else," (Evernden et al. 2–3). Literature offers the said ground in the form of ecocriticism, "a study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." (Evernden et al. 2–3). Emerged in the 20th century, one of the primary objectives of ecocriticism is to raise environmental awareness among the readers by investigating the relationship between humans and the environment through literary texts. Children who embody roles as future creators can learn about environmental consciousness by integrating children's literature with ecocriticism. "children's literature endorses environmental consciousness, appreciation, knowledge, and stewardship of the children. In addition, to inculcate a long-lasting imprint on environmental stewardship, it has been determined that catching them young is the best method" ((Makwanya 12). John Newbery, the "Father of Children's Literature," intended to provide rhymes, illustrations, stories, and games designed for children's pleasure. Therefore, picture books play a crucial role in creating an engaging and enriching learning experience for young readers. "Children's literature is funny, interesting, informative, and imaginative. Picture books are a very effective tool to promote environmental literacy." (Bhalla 4). Illustrations that carry the beauty of nature improves the visual thinking of child and sparks his or her curiosity, encouraging them to explore their surroundings and apply ecological concepts in real-life scenarios.

“The Lorax”, written and illustrated by Dr. Suess in 1971, was published in the same year that the Greenpeace movement was originated. This particular children's fiction was said to be Dr Seuss's favourite. The story begins with a boy walking down a dilapidated town towards the street of a lift Lorax, who suddenly piques his curiosity " What was the Lorax? Any why was it there? And why was it lifted and taken somewhere from the far end of town where the Grickle-grass grows?". Then he goes to meet the only man who can provide all the answers to his questions: the Once-ler. The author with his captivating and colourful illustrations and comical rhyming words brilliantly serves it as the perfect tool for children to learn about environmental awareness.

From an ecocritical perspective, there is a philosophical viewpoint that closely aligns with the plot of the story. Anthropocentrism refers to the viewpoint that places humans at the centre of consideration and biocentrism, a perspective that believes all living things deserve equal moral consideration, is evident in the main characters, the Once-ler, and the Lorax. The Once-ler, an entrepreneur, is depicted as an anthropocentric character when his greed becomes evident after discovering the Truffula trees and planning to cut them down to make thneeds, a garment, "But those trees! Those trees! Those Truffula Trees! All my life I'd been searching for trees such as these". At that moment, his journey of self-destruction and environmental harm began. In contrast, the Lorax portrayed as "shortish, and oldish, and brownish and mossy. And he spoke with a voice that was sharpish and bossy", who seems to be representative of the tress, to be more philosophical, is a biocentric character. When the Once-ler carried out deforestation to expand his thneed business, the Lorax emerged as a powerful advocate for the diverse array of living creatures that inhabited the area, including the Swomee-Swans, Brown Bar-ba-loots, and Humming-Fish. The narrative also portrays the realistic ecological concepts and crises like deforestation, pollution, and the loss of biodiversity. With the Once-ler cutting down all the trees, there were no Truffula fruits for

the brown bar-ba-loots to eat. Due to the expansion of factories, the emission of gases and chemicals led to water and air pollution, which caused the swomee-swana and humming fish to lose their habitats. At last, the environment had to confront the loss of biodiversity around it. This tragedy has led the creatures to migrate. The Once-ler, who now became poor because of his failed business has been isolated with grief and regret. The central theme of the story focuses on the inevitable consequences of human greed. In the future, due to increased urbanization, we may face the same consequences as the Once-ler and ultimately, we could be forced to choose between starvation and migration, similar to what the creatures experienced. In the end, the Once-ler offers the little boy the last Truffula seed to grow. This moment shows a new beginning for nature to regrow, and the possibility of that happening is in the little boy's hands. "UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."

Frances Hodgson Burnett's "The secret garden" in 1911, depicts a complete shift in the treatment of nature compared to the "The Lorax." Here, the text is not only about friendship but how the ecological elements flora and fauna play a major role in the well-being of others. The secret garden in the Misselthwaite Manor if looked through an ecocriticism lens, it represents the secret garden as an ignorant relationship the humans has towards nature. This relationship lasted until Mary Lennox, a spoiled girl who didn't show interest in anything but cared for the garden. She took care of them every day and even asked for her brother to help her with gardening. Mary moreover made a new friend, Colin who was sick, and weak. When Mary took Colin to the garden. With their everyday visit, the garden was filled with flora " with delphiniums, foxgloves, and irises lined the walls".

The mention of fauna, Robin the bird and the fox moreover conveys a co-existing relationship between nature, animals, and humans. This harmonious relationship brought closure to the lonely children. It shows how the nature and the children went through a

healing transformation with each other's help. "This theme resonates with modern ecological discourse, emphasizing the mental and emotional benefits of engaging with nature." (Vaghela 2) "Inspire ecocriticism and readers alike to reflect on the vital role of flora and fauna in our lives and the potential for ecological restoration and renewal." (Vaghela 2) A relationship of mutualism as shown in the story, must be present in real life as well. It moreover, sends a message that just like the revival of seasons, the revival of nature is possible with proper care of flora and fauna in our environment.

Similar to *The Lorax*, Oscar Wilde's *The Selfish Giant* showcases the repercussions of human greed and selfishness. This classic fiction was written in 1888 in England. During the 19th century, England was facing severe consequences of industrialization in their environment. Pollution, those days had severe consequences that resulted in many undesirable outcomes. "The Victorian culture, I propose, is mainly anthropocentric, that is, the view that human beings and their interests are solely of value and always take priority over those of the non-human." (Poorghorban 5) One can notice the similarity in the consequences faced by the selfish giant and the Victorians. Just like the *Once-ler*, at the beginning of the narrative the giant was an anthropocentric character as well, but a biocentric shift takes place at the end. This story heavily represents nature as a character. When the selfish giant refuses to let the children play in his beautiful garden, a "garden, with soft green grass. Here and there over the grass stood beautiful flowers like stars, and there were twelve peach-trees that in the spring-time broke out into delicate blossoms of pink and pearl, and in the autumn bore rich fruit". He builds a wall to keep the garden all to himself. Here, the wall symbolises the confinement of nature and using it for one's own enjoyment. But he soon faces nature, particularly winter's harsh treatment in his garden: "the Spring never came, nor the Summer. The Autumn gave golden fruit to every garden, but to the Giant's Garden she gave none. "He is too selfish," she said. So, it was always Winter there, and the North Wind,

and the Hail, and the Frost, and the Snow danced about through the trees." Later, his anthropocentric mindset changes into a biocentric perspective when he watches spring have finally returned as the children came to revisit the garden. Spring generally symbolises a new beginning. The said new beginning is for the selfish giant who became selfless towards nature when he accepted the children and regretted his actions in confining the garden for his selfishness. This transformation of the selfish giant and the interconnectedness of nature and humanity is crucial for our environment.

The Lorax, The Secret Garden, and The Selfish Giant, being the best children's classics of all time, offer a unifying notion of environmental consciousness when studied through the perspective of ecocriticism. These texts have various versions of picture books.

"The Lorax," a classic picture book, written and illustrated by Dr. Seuss (1971), along with a specific picture book version of "The Secret Garden" by Adelina Lirius (2020) and a specific picture book version of "The Selfish Giant" by Ritva Voutila (2012), offers fun, colourful, and imaginative illustrations that help children learn about environmental awareness. With children's literature through the perspective of ecocriticism, children can acquire certain basic knowledge about conserving the environment. For instance, in "the Lorax", the once-ler offers the Truffula seed to plant the tree. this message can provide a mindset to plant more trees and plants. In "the secret garden", children has the opportunity to learn about the healing power of nature and how it encourages empathy and compassion among children in taking care of the environment, similarly to Mary's care towards the garden. Finally, in "the selfish giant," the children learns that selflessness towards nature is important. These are small but crucial aspects of environmental literacy that will soon bloom into a sincere passion for children, enabling them to become future eco-citizens.

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