



The Use of Children's Picture Books to Promote Environmental Awareness

Ravindra Neupane, PhD

Lecturer, Department of English, Ratna Rajyalaxmi Campus, TU

Email: rdkkneupane@gmail.com

Received: September 10, 2023; **Accepted:** November 24, 2023; **Published:** November 30, 2023

Abstract

Environmental catastrophe is one of the biggest problems of the current century. As one of the living things on the planet, humans must start to understand the environmental problems in their immediate surroundings. To increase the future generation's understanding of the current situation of the environment, children must receive a high-quality education. This study highlights how children's exposure to green literature can help them become more aware of their surroundings. This study uses a qualitative research approach based on an interpretative model. In this investigation, several children's books are utilized as the study's subject material to demonstrate that young readers' literature may be a very effective instrument for fostering environmental awareness. Picture books are the type of children's books used in this study. These books are *The Secret Garden* and *The Giving Tree*. An ecocriticism analysis has been used in children's picture books to illustrate how to raise children's environmental consciousness. This study reveals that the authors truly have demonstrated their enthusiasm for promoting environmental awareness and they illustrated the interconnectedness of nature and humanity. In conclusion, it is hoped that this study will boost children's desire to safeguard, conserve, and care for the environment soon.

Keywords: children, children's literature, ecocriticism, environment, nature, picture books.

Introduction

Our planet is the only one with a large supply of usable materials. It never ceases to try to support the inhabitants, as best it can. Unfortunately, as humans become more aware, so too is their level of aggression toward the planet. This has led to the development of numerous sorts of technology. These so-called technologies have improved human comfort levels over the past years. Therefore, they have used all the local natural resources to accomplish this. What they have left behind as a result of their acts is what most pollutes our environment today. The idea, that the more humans are capable of destroying their environment the more inventive they are, makes sense.

Our awareness of the environmental predicament is continually increased by environmental damage. Some of us have already started acting in response to this catastrophe. Somebody developed a tool to spread awareness. To spread awareness, mass media like television and social media are used. They made an effort to cover every environmental story, such as deforestation, the trafficking of endangered species, the melting of the ice cap, and polluted rivers, which are now commonplace. However, not everyone can express themselves via social media or television. It can also be communicated in writing. Some picture books were utilized in this technique to raise awareness of the problem.

It is essential to start from the beginning of the process of increasing environmental consciousness. Children are the finest audience to teach this to because they are the future generation. Children are naturally very curious about their environment. Additionally, they have a keen intuition for when anything is wrong. So it is simpler to start bringing up children's consciousness. There are various strategies for drawing children's attention to the environmental situation. The field trip that the school regularly incorporates into their lecture is a wonderful illustration of this situation. The teaching materials that are used in the classroom demonstrate this. Following a 2012 study by Children and Nature Network, "When children are young, engaging in outdoor activities in "wild" nature will encourage a favorable attitude and behavior toward the environment." Makwanyna and Dick's research revealed that "children's literature encourages children to be aware of, appreciate, know about, and take care of the environment. Moreover, it has been determined that the optimum approach is to start environmental stewardship education when children are still very young (Makwanyna and Dick, 2014). This study focuses on one technique for educating children about their environment through children's literature.

Picture books are one of the various genres of children's literature. A picture book, according to Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson, is a freely illustrated book in which the images

are crucial to the use and comprehension of the tale (Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson, 1993). According to Bader, a picture book is first and foremost an experience for a child and consists of text, illustrations, and a total design. It is both a manufactured good and a commercial product (Bader, 1976). It is obvious from both of those propositions that the picture book does indeed have some excellent values for children.

The term “picture books,” according to Mitchell, conjures up thoughts of vividly colored, exquisitely drawn books that beg to be read. The majority of us still love reading them regardless of our age because of their lively illustrations, complex and evocative language, and sensitive and significant subjects. In the same way that photographs speak to us, picture books also do. They stir our emotions, excite our senses, appeal to our whimsy, and revive childhood memories. We are invited to snuggle up and read picture books (Mitchell, 2003). Mitchell’s description of picture books explains why they could be a useful instrument for compellingly promoting environmental literacy. They present a new perspective and revive the notion of the stale, monotonous feeling in textbooks. Through picture books, children of all ages may learn about their surroundings from multiple angles and develop a greater knowledge of how humans and nature interact.

Through their experience from reading picture books, young children might develop their ideas personally, socially, culturally, and aesthetically. Children who are still learning social skills might benefit greatly from books that explore how humans view nature. Children learn about new environments, new families, and, of course, new environments that are both similar to and distinct from their own in picture books. Because of this, picture books have helped raise children's awareness. These and other factors make children's literature essential to young people’s development and existence.

Picture Books

Orbis Pictus (Visible World) is the first picture book taken into account in the history of literature (Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson, 1993). John Amos Comenius, a Czech educator, wrote the book as a sort of textbook specifically for children, and it was first published in 1658. It is regarded as the first widely used children’s textbook to include illustrations. For the first time in publishing, Latin and German were utilized, followed by many other European languages. The opening picture books soon blew out throughout Europe and were the forerunners of children's picture books with printed text for many years.

Picture books come in a wide range of variations. According to Kennedy, a picture book is a book that is often written for children and in which the drawings

are just as important as the words in conveying the story (Kennedy, 2017). Picture books are described as “a marriage between text and graphics,” according to Goins. In picture books, meaning is created by either contrasting or combining the words and artwork (2004). In conclusion, picture books can be defined as books with both written and visual content that support one another.

As previously said, picture books are those that combine written text with images or pictures. To avoid demeaning the subject of the book, the content must be truthful and presented from a fair-minded viewpoint. In a picture book, the text and images are crucial in establishing the point of view or perspective of the story.

The picture book’s illustrations take on a key role. Illustrations may accomplish something that words cannot. The drawings could "show you," whereas the words could only describe it. You might be able to sense them as well. Every page of a good picture book must feature a picture, either alone or in a pair. The scale of the illustration is important as well. If it reads in a huge group, the size can be large enough to be seen from a given distance. The artist uses the picture or pictures in the book as a tool to express their feelings and pique the reader's interest.

The tone and location of the story are also conveyed through the drawings of picture books. The illustrations in the picture book hold the key to the knowledge, even though the text may be able to convey it. The artwork might depict the precise time or era in which the story's setting takes place.

The way the illustration establishes and develops the character in the text can be used to understand the illustration's final purpose in picture books. By expressing it in the artwork, illustrations can reveal more about a character's behaviors and characterization. Character descriptions are vividly depicted in the images as well as in the text employing the characters' expressions or gestures.

When the children look at the visuals, they will be better able to comprehend the meaning of the story. Picture books can be enjoyed independently by nonreaders and beginning readers thanks to visual cues (Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson, 1993). The children can use the drawings as a guide when their reading skills are inadequate. Children will encounter many challenges in the reading process due to their young age.

Therefore, this is where the illustrations will be crucial. Through the characters' movements, expressions, and other characteristics as well as the surroundings, they will assist the children in following the narrative. When an adult reads the stories aloud to the children, they will be able to enjoy them. When they listen, they will also focus on the story's illustrations. In the end, when the youngsters develop their skills, they will be able to quench their interest in the story and become more focused on the information.

Children's Literature

Since the beginning of the century, adults have always kept children amused with stories, fables, folktales, and other stories. These stories' formats are initially explained verbally. However, through time, these forms evolved into written forms. These days, there are many different kinds of children's literature, which appeal to readers of all ages.

According to Masters, children's literature developed from oral tradition and is passed down the centuries, much like other types of literature. Irish folktales date to 400 BCE, whereas the Panchatantra is considered to be the first collection of folktales in writing. It is created in India and dates back to 200 AD. The oldest versions of Aesop's stories first emerged around 400 AD (Masters, 2012).

The same oral formats were used in Asia, particularly in China, for the birth of children's books. The Song Dynasty is when the storyteller attained its zenith (960-1279 AD). These tales are still told to children today to teach them school lessons. However, nothing like this ever happened in Greek or Roman culture.

Before the 16th century, no books were written specifically for children. The book for adults is the one they used to learn from. Since it is useless, there were no differences between them. Children were presented with an adult-written book when they first started learning to read. Consequently, the book children read for the first time will be intended for adults. Children's literature could fall under the category of religious ideals or anthologies of folktales and oral storytelling.

Ecocriticism

In his article "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" from 1978, Rueckert first introduced the term eco-criticism. Unfortunately, ecocriticism never really took off after that. Glotfelty is the one who spread the word among academics. He employed the phrase as a component of his analytical methodology when examining the nature of writing. *The Ecocriticism Reader* is the name given to the literature that was later published in 1989. Glotfelty clarifies:

Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of the texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies (Glotfelty: 1996).

Later in 1992, the Western Literature Association (WLA) established a separate organization specifically for the study of literature and ecology called the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment as a result of the growing popularity of

ecocriticism in the literary world (ASLE). The goal of this partnership is to advance a fresh method of writing about the connection between literature and nature. and to provide people with additional options when writing about literature. Hopefully, it will also enhance perceptions of how people and nature interact. In 1993, Patrick Murphy ultimately created a new journal, ISLE, with this objective in mind. Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment, or ISLE, is a publication that serves as a venue for literary and environmental criticism.

The main focus of ecocriticism is the problem of the environment on earth. This is represented in a variety of ways, including how people interact with their surroundings, how nature plays a part in stories, how to protect the natural world, how the environment is balanced, and more. The finest option for this piece of writing will be to employ ecocriticism as the research. These topics will all make for the most fascinating literary motif analyses.

Growing awareness at a young age is one of the key responsibilities of ecocriticism. Ecocritical literature can help youngsters become more conscious of environmental issues in a variety of ways. The return to nature will inspire the children to spend more time outside. The current state of technology tends to deter children from playing outside of their homes. In the house, they feel more at ease. They will suffer many negative effects from this, especially in terms of their health. The parents might try to talk the children out of getting the nature-themed picture book for their collection of books. Their curiosity will compel children to investigate their surroundings thanks to the picture book's depiction of nature.

Reach Method

The interpretive philosophy is the foundation of the qualitative research approach used in this study. In a qualitative method, the information is provided as narrative text or a textual account of the phenomenon being investigated. The textual analysis of *The Secret Garden* and *The Giving Tree* is done using the qualitative research method. Children's exposure to green literature is explored in terms of how it might help them become more aware of their surroundings through the use of literary devices including similes, metaphors, personification, the language of animation, symbols, and imagery.

Hancock stated that qualitative content scrutiny is a method for classifying oral or social data for the goals of cataloging, summary, and tabulation in Makwanya and Dick (2014). Thus, qualitative analysis is the appropriate type of technical analysis for this investigation. The data supplied in the forms of words, phrases, and sentences as explained in the preceding section is the explanation behind this.

According to Hoepful in Makwanya and Dick (2014), documented analysis is an additional information foundation that can be very helpful to qualitative academics.

Investigating and evaluating materials related to children's picture books with an environmental theme is part of the document analysis. These children's picture books serve as a source of information for this study.

Analysis and Discussion

The goal of this study's application of ecocriticism to children's literature is to determine how it might encourage young readers to connect with nature. Picture books were scrutinized in this study, as previously mentioned. The two books are *The Secret Garden* and *The Giving Tree*.

Frances Hodgson Burnett wrote *The Secret Garden*, the first picture book, which is published in 1911. This is acknowledged as classic children's literature and is regarded as Burnett's masterpiece. The narrative described the life of a little child named Mary Lennox and is set in England. The picture book used in this study is created by Alan Marks and published in 2013 by Usborne Publishing Ltd.

The characters of Mary Lennox and Dickon can serve as representations of the environmental aspect of Secret Garden. Mary is characterized by the author as a spoilt, irritable, and unhappy child. Her portrayal as the main character in the picture book stood in stark difference from the typical hero in other novels. Mary behaves badly, although she has a close affinity with nature. The period she spent living in India is evidence of this. She always likes to play by herself in the flower garden. Then she would act like she is planting the flower. She makes an effort to make her garden look beautiful each time she plays with flowers. This scene concerning Mary demonstrates how observant she is of her surroundings.

When she first arrived in England, namely in Yorkshire, nature guided her to discover a lovely garden by way of a bird, a robin. "Mary arrives at a new place where she acts as a positive figure on her surroundings because she is good and helpful to others" (Neupane 2022). Robin and Mary become close friends. She even finds the garden's key with its assistance. The connection between Mary and the robin can be seen as an example of the bond between a human and an animal and is a reflection of Mary's communion with her environment. According to Smith (2017), the robin is a sign of maintaining our uniqueness and enjoying a lifetime. It also stands for luck and the springtime song. Sometimes it also denotes someone's rebirth and a fresh start in life. The robin's symbolic meaning matches exactly what occurred to Mary. Knowing about it and developing a friendship with it enabled her to start a new life in a foreign nation.

Mary's life now has a new purpose as a result of discovering the garden. She even found herself a companion who is her own age, Dickon. She had never before

made a friend for herself. Rarely does anyone even attempt to approach her, much less make friends with her? She genuinely wanted to preserve the garden when she first discovered it. She did not, however, have a close pal. She recalls telling Dickon, “I’ve found a secret garden, ‘in a hurry. “I believe it is largely dead. The only one who wants it to survive is me. Visit to view (Burnett, 2012).

This marks the start of Mary and Dickon's friendship. Later, they spend the majority of their time in their own garden. Dickon's persona is said to be the first to have a close bond with nature. He constantly believes that the garden surrounding him is his haven. Even his hands are “gifted.” Ben, the gardener, praises Dickon’s talent by saying, “Dickon can create flowers out of stone and charm the bird” (Burnett, 2012). Dickon has a deep connection to the natural world, as evidenced by the way he treats plants and animals. He always treats the plants as his friends, and he defends the animals—birds, deer, rabbits, and geese—by being open about their habitat. "Can you maintain secrecy?" Dickon grinned. “I always keep things hidden. They wouldn't be safe if I revealed the whereabouts of the wild animals' habitats and bird nesting sites” (Burnett, 2012).

We can utilize the illustration from the picture book to teach our children about their relationship with nature. The reader may see in the picture book the close connection between nature and people. The garden requires care from human hands. In the meantime, humans receive benefits from the garden as well. Mary can control her temper because of the secret garden's existence. She has a horrible temper until she learns about the garden and becomes friends with Robin and Dickon. Her temperament progressively changes as she becomes acquainted with Dickon and Robin. To repair the garden, the children are cooperating. It demonstrates how the bond between people and the natural world can soothe anger. They can support their surroundings by showing them, love. Additionally, it increases their sense of natural protection. Therefore, the relationship between humans and nature is represented well in this picture book. According to psychiatrist Harold Searles, who is cited by Stephen R. Kellert in his article "Experiencing Environment: Affective, Cognitive, and Evaluative Development in Children," a child's relationship to the environment offers a directness and emphasis that are frequently absent in human relationships. She argues that “the non-human environment is often available rather than shut off by parental injunctions, and relatively basic and stable, rather than overwhelming complex and constantly moving” (128). One of these is *The Secret Garden*, where children interact with nature, nurture beauty via growth, and simultaneously experience personal growth on an emotional and spiritual level.

Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree* is the second picture book. In 1964, this picture book is both written and drawn. This composition is a narrative poem. One of his most illustrious pieces is this. The boy and the tree characters were at the center of

the plot in this picture book. The woodland serves as the poem's setting. In the story's opening, the boy and the tree form a close bond. The boy always relies on the tree as his source of support. While the boy simply loves everything the tree gives him.

The poem's opening line, "There once is a tree," introduces the subject of nature that runs throughout this particular composition (Silverstein, 1964). Instead of the boy, the tree character is added in this line. It demonstrates how Silverstein highlights the significance of the tree's presence in the narrative. *The Giving Tree* tells the readers what they cannot find in their daily lives, although the book is a typical one about the link between nature and humans.

The boy's life serves as a metaphor for the existence of all people in this world. However, as the story's title implies, the tree identifies its character as "generous." They contribute without expecting anything in return, which is a reflection of human nature. The boy and the tree are deeply tying their friendship at the beginning. Nothing is expected; they simply enjoy each other's company. "And she loved a small boy," they say (Silverstein, 1964). The boy loves the tree just as much as the tree does, so the relationship is reciprocal. The tree is content (Silverstein, 1964).

Regrettably for the tree, the boy develops into a greedy adult. The tree is no longer regarded as a friend by him. He prefers to think of the tree as the "provider." Something that provides him with something when he desires it:

But the time went by,

And the boy grew older.

And the tree is often alone. Then one day the boy came to the tree and the tree said, "Come, Boy, come and climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and eat apples and play in my shade and be happy."

"I am too big to climb and play" said the boy.

"I want to buy things and have fun.

I want some money?"

"I am sorry," said the tree, "but I have no money.

I have only my leaves and apples.

Take my apples, Boy, and sell them in the city. Then you will have money and you will be happy."

And so the boy climbed up the tree and gathered her apples and carried them away.

And the tree is happy (Silverstein, 1964).

The boy's attitude toward the tree is described in the paragraphs prior. He develops into a ruthless adult. He doesn't consider the tree's feelings; he is simply asking. This situation perfectly demonstrates how nature always supports humans and

how humanities depend on nature. It is an effective approach for Silverstein to express how he feels about people and nature.

The tree is still being sacrificed after that by the time the youngster returns, he has more requests and is not interested in the tree's feelings:

But the boy stayed away for a long time... and the tree is sad. And then the boy came back and the tree shook with joy

and she said, "Come, Boy, climb up my trunk
and swing from my branches and be happy."

The boy's presence left the tree visibly ecstatic. Even so, she urged him to play with her once more. so that he can resume being a joyful boy. Sadly, the boy doesn't feel like playing; instead, he keeps asking the tree for something:

"I am too busy to climb trees," said the boy.

"I want a house to keep me warm," he said.

"I want a wife and I want children, and so I need a house.

Can you give me a house?"

"I have no house," said the tree.

"The forest is my house,

but you may cut off my branches and build a house. Then you will be happy."

And so the boy cut off her branches and carried them away to build his house. And the tree is happy.

This time, the tree offers her limbs so that the boy, who is now a man, can construct a home for a family on his own. This stanza's meanings describe the relationship between humans and nature. Once a human has obtained anything from nature, he will continue to do so until nature has run out of things to provide. It is possessed by the boy. He only shows up if he needs something; else, he won't return. The environment will be depleted as a result of this conduct. The effects extend to people as well as to the environment. Natural disasters like floods and landslides are two examples of those that frequently affect us due to global warming. Whether people are aware of it or not, if they don't take care of nature, more and more natural disasters could affect humanity. In this framework, hell is compared to the contaminated outcome of careless and abusive resource exploitation. (*The Giving Tree* cited by Lenz, 1994/95, p. 160) as an example of a text that suits the metaphorical position of hell.

How may these two pieces of art be used to raise children's environmental awareness? Imitating the process of rebuilding the garden is the simplest way to experience *The Secret Garden*. Children will read *The Secret Garden* picture books as part of a reading assignment, and they will be instructed to put what they have learned into practice. Their teachers may assign homework on how to restore or maintain the

garden. They take the kids on a field excursion or use the school garden as a substitute. The advantages of maintaining a clean garden and the plants must then be explained by the teachers. This is only one of the numerous things a teacher may do to promote environmental awareness.

The Giving Tree allows children to play right around the trees. They could play the game or activity “guess what tree” and “find me please.” The initial game allowed the teachers to create a story around a certain tree. They will read the tree's distinctive features to the children and ask them to guess. The winner will then be granted the right to attend the picnic the following day in the company of the professors, and the two of them may plant the tree together. The children will then be led to the tree while wearing blindfolds for the second game, "find-me-please!" The other children can be the ones to blindfold them. The chosen child can carefully examine all of the tree's components while wearing a blindfold. from trees' bark, branches, and other parts. The child wearing the blindfold can be transported to the other side of the tree once they have completed their duty. When asked to “locate your tree,” the person will remove their blindfold and start looking. This activity aims to bring the children closer to the tree in particular. So even after they grow up, they will still be concerned about the environment and trees.

Conclusion

Children are the best advocates for environmental causes, as demonstrated by *The Secret Garden* picture books. Mary's instinct for protection has been present ever since she discovered the desolate garden. She can express her affection for the flowers through the garden. Additionally, she found relief from her rage and made a colleague in Dickon, the young man who had taught her more about gardening. The theme of the narrative as a whole is how people and nature interact. Mary and Dickon, two of the characters, serve as examples of this.

Through the interaction amid the “giving tree” and the boy, then the man, Silverstein masterfully conveyed the avarice of humanity toward nature in *The Giving Tree*. His poetry caught how nature is sacrificed to humans, and how humans then paid back nature. The males never give; they only ever take. If this habit is not stopped, eventually nature will be destroyed.

Children's literature may therefore be a very efficient means of promoting environmental awareness. Numerous forms of children's literature with an ecological or green subject may be useful in raising environmental awareness among the next generation. Additionally, the teachers' and parents' encouragement could serve as the initial determination. In conclusion, children's literature that addresses environmental

challenges may be a powerful ally, offer the most beneficial service, and make an incredible contribution to humanity.

References

- Bader, B. (1976). *American picture books from Noah's Ark to the beast within*. Macmillan.
- Burnett, F. H., and Marks, A. (2013). *The Secret Garden*. Usborne Publishing.
- Glotfelty, C., H. F. (1996). *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology*. University of Georgia Press.
- Goins, S. L. (2004). *Botany in children's literature: A content analysis of plant-centered children's picture books that have a plot and characters*. Dissertation. Louisiana State University.
- Kellert, S. R. (2002). Experiencing nature: Affective, cognitive, and evaluative development in children. *Children and Nature: Psychological, Sociocultural, and Evolutionary Investigations*, edited by Peter H. Kahn Jr. and Stephen R. Kellert, MIT Press, 117-126.
- Lenz, M. (1994/95). Am I my planet's keeper? Dante, ecosophy and children's books. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 19(4), 159-164.
- Lynch-Brown, C., and Carl M. T. (1993). *Essentials of children's literature*. Allyn and Bacon.
- Makwanya and Dick, M. (2014). An analysis of children's poems in environment and climate change adaptation and mitigation: A participatory approach, catching them young. *The International Journal of Engineering and Sciences (IJES)*, 3 (7): 10-15.
- Masters, K. (2012). *A brief history of children's literature*. <https://www.scribd.com>
- Mitchell, D. (2003). *Children's literature: An invitation to the world*. Allyn and Bacon.
- Neupane, R. (2022). *Environmental subjectivities in children's literature: A plea for green world for children*, Doctoral dissertation, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, English.
- Silverstein, S. (2014). *The giving tree*. Harper and Row.
- Smith, E. (2017). *What Robins teach us*. <https://osf.io>.

