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# Picturebooks and reader training in the 21st century. An ecocritical reading of canonical works of children's literature

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The recent proliferation of environmental children's literature and the growing interest in this type of books by researchers and proponents of ecocriticism could be deemed a byproduct of contemporary concerns regarding environmental sustainability. Considering books for children as more than mere tools for environmental awareness-raising prompts an approach to canonical picturebooks that reveals their ecocritical nature based on the esthetic, multimodal and literary dimensions of these works. This study proposes the analysis of 25 picturebooks by five influential female authors to identify the keys to their ecocritical reading. Indeed, the elements that define literary discourse construction in children's books (paratextuality, illustration and design, character development and focalization) are precisely those that have proved to be fundamental in this sense. Interpreting these seminal works from an ecocritical vantage point updates them in step with current ecocentric paradigms by promoting a sense of wonder in young readers that leads them to delight in and reflect on nature and the environment.

## KEYWORDS

picturebooks, multimodal, ecocriticism, reader training, children's literature

## 1. Introduction

Since William Rueckert coined the term "ecocriticism" in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (Rueckert, 1978), this analytical perspective has developed in a multitude of directions. As a result of the broad foundational definition provided by Glotfelty — "simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xviii)—and the interdisciplinary nature of the field (Batinić, 2022), nowadays several currents and perspectives coexist under the label of ecocriticism. Despite this complex landscape, there seems to be a consensus within ecocriticism as to the role played by the current climate crisis in favoring the development of ecocritical perspectives in recent times, especially with regard to the child audience (Hintz, 2020).

Based on the idea that literary works, as cultural artifacts, influence our way of perceiving the world and nature (Røskeland, 2018), literature has been considered a key element in encouraging child readers to reconnect with an increasingly imperiled natural environment (Harju and Rouse, 2018). This trend is unsurprising given the presence of international guidelines on Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2020) in the most recent national curriculum frameworks of countries such as Spain (Negrín and Marrero, 2021). There is, therefore, clear concern about the worldwide environmental crisis, and children's literature, from an eminently pedagogical and not always literary point of view, is sometimes considered a possible solution to the problem.

The clear influence of current ecological awareness on the publishing landscape is confirmed by the contents of repositories such as the Database of books published in Spain. Of the children's works cataloged as environmental and published over the last five decades, more than half have been published in the last 5 years. This figure increases to more than 80% when we consider only picturebooks, and nears 90% when we specifically refer to non-fiction picturebooks about the environment. This trend is consistent with the recent increase in non-fiction works for children and young adults reported by other studies (Taberero, 2022).

Expanding our perspective to other geographical contexts, Soulioti (2022) finds a similar landscape in Greece. The same is true for international catalogs such as the highly popular *The White Ravens* (2012–2022), in which 40% of the titles concerning the environment are included in the 2021 and 2022 editions.

Coinciding with this boom in publishing, research on children's literature from an ecocritical perspective has thrived in the 21st century (Rättyä, 2018). The volume by Goga et al. (2018) is a central work of ecocritical literary analysis because it updates the field, brings together a range of perspectives and offers researchers the "Nature in Culture Matrix" (p. 12) as a tool for the analysis of children's books. Other recent studies (e.g., Guanio-Uluru, 2021; Campagnaro and Goga, 2022; Doherty, 2022) are a testament to the remarkable presence of ecocriticism in research on children's literature and propose a variety of approaches in this regard.

Thus, a diverse range of existing studies and lines of research have been building a theoretical-empirical body that is constantly growing and incorporating new perspectives. Current explorations from research delve into the very definition of ecocriticism and its application to the field of children's literature (Hintz, 2020), the causes of the current proliferation of the ecocritical in children's literature (Harju and Rouse, 2018), the relevance of a postcolonial perspective to ecocriticism (Echterling, 2016) or the complexity that characterizes the relationship between animal characters and the notion of childhood (Nikolajeva, 2016). Other current lines explore how the construction of children's literary works can claim the reader's participation and, at the same time, contradict or challenge their expectations, making them reconsider their prejudices and preconceptions about nature (Røskeland, 2018). Certain approaches, on the other hand, choose to focus on very specific natural elements, such as plants, to examine their representation in children's literary texts (Guanio-Uluru, 2021).

Likewise, advances in the ecocritical understanding of children's literature are giving rise to specific proposals on how to bring it into educational contexts. Particularly relevant in this regard are studies such as the recent article by Goga et al. (2023), which focuses on the exploration of what they describe as ecocritical dialogues. The authors propose and develop this concept as an effective way to integrate ecocritical reading and environmental awareness through book-based conversation with student teachers. However, not all existing approaches to environmentalism and children's literature are based on this integration of the ecocritical and the literary. In this regard, authors such as Soulioti (2022) point out that one of the current needs of the children's literature field is an approach to this kind of books that considers both their ecocritical value and the quality of their literary construction.

In this way understanding children's literature as an instrument for teaching environmental ethics (Hintz, 2020) or as an

"eco-pedagogical tool" (Echterling, 2016, p. 93) may limit our view of this kind of books. This and the recent popularity of environmental children's and young adult literature are the basis for the distinction drawn by García (2017) between children's books with a unique and unambiguous message of environmental awareness-raising and those that use the language typical of children's literature to build knowledge and raise reader curiosity about nature. According to García, the latter type offers a more open ecocritical reading experience in line with the open and multilayered nature of literary texts. In this way, and in accordance with the proposals of Blanc et al. (2008), the ecological value of a literary text is not merely related to its theme; its esthetic dimension must also be taken into account, although this aspect may not have received sufficient attention in our field (Reid et al., 2010).

In relation to this, authors such as Soulioti (2022) and Rättyä (2018) exemplify an ecocritical approach to picturebooks based on the attention to esthetics and the elements that define picturebooks as a literary genre. They place special emphasis on the characteristic interdependence between verbal and visual codes in the picturebook, which determines its multimodal nature. Similarly, the approach proposed by the Nature in Children's Literature and Culture research group (Goga et al., 2018, 2023) provides fundamental keys to analyze the representations of nature in children's literature. Given the striking surge of new titles on environmental themes, looking back at the preexisting children's literary tradition may be of interest. Ecocriticism, understood as a nature-centered manner of reading (Glotfelty, 1996), can offer novel interpretations of canonical literary works for children, especially considering that this ecocritical revisiting of the canon has already attracted the interest of scholars (Dobrin and Kidd, 2004; Echterling, 2016). In this way, and following in part the recent post-humanist interpretation of children's literary discourse (García-González and Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2020), understanding literary texts as elements in a continuous process of construction favors a new approach to canonical children's books that reveals new readings mediated and enhanced by the specific features of our current context and the concerns it raises.

Thus, nowadays, reader training requires research that favors an ecocritical approach to canonical works of children's literature. Such an approach would therefore acknowledge the presence of a shadow text (Nodelman, 2008) as the key to accessing ecocritical readings of the books that do not involve a self-serving use of them (Eco, 1995), but rather an interpretation arising from direct attention to what the author proposes (Chambers, 1995).

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Study objective and analysis

In light of the contents of the previous section, the present study addresses the following research objective:

- Identify and analyze the keys to an ecocritical reading of canonical picturebooks.

To achieve this objective, we selected 25 works by authors of canonical picturebooks (see Table 1). These works were subjected to a content analysis based on the parameters Reception Aesthetics and Literary Pragmatics (Eco, 1979; Iser, 1987; Jauss, 1990) and the keys

TABLE 1 Study corpus (Source: compiled by the authors).

Bauer, J. (1997). <i>Selma</i> . Oldenburg: Lappan.
Bauer, J. (1998). <i>Die Königin der Farben</i> . Weinheim: Beltz & Gelberg.
Bauer, J. (2000). <i>Schreimutter</i> . Weinheim: Beltz & Gelberg.
Bauer, J. (2012). <i>Steht im Wald ein kleines Haus</i> . Frankfurt: Moritz Verlag.
Crowther, K. (2005a). <i>Poka et Mine. Le réveil</i> . Paris: l'école des loisirs.
Crowther, K. (2005b). <i>Poka et Mine. Les nouvelles ailes</i> . Paris: l'école des loisirs.
Crowther, K. (2006a). <i>Poka et Mine. Au cinéma</i> . Paris: l'école des loisirs.
Crowther, K. (2006b). <i>Poka et Mine. Au musée</i> . Paris: l'école des loisirs.
Crowther, K. (2007). <i>Poka et Mine. Au fond du jardin</i> . Paris: l'école des loisirs.
Crowther, K. (2010). <i>Poka et Mine. Le football</i> . Paris: l'école des loisirs.
Crowther, K. (2013). <i>Poka et Mine. À la pêche</i> . Paris: l'école des loisirs.
Crowther, K. (2016). <i>Poka et Mine. Un cadeau pour Grand-Mère</i> . Paris: l'école des loisirs.
Crowther, K. (2014). <i>Mère Méduse</i> . Paris: l'école des loisirs.
Ferrada, M. J., and Letelier, K. (2018). <i>El viaje de arboreo. Un recorrido por los árboles de Chile</i> . Santiago: Planeta Lector Chile.
Ferrada, M. J., and Ly, M. P. (2015). <i>El árbol de las cosas</i> . Mataró: Abuenpaso.
Ferrada, M. J., and Pérez, L. (2017). <i>Mi cuaderno de haikus</i> . Providencia: Amanuta.
Ferrada, M. J., and Pérez, L. (2017). <i>Mi cuaderno de haikus</i> . Providencia: Amanuta.
Ferrada, M. J., and Poriot, S. (2012). <i>El baile diminuto</i> . Pontevedra: Kalandraka.
Ferrer, I., and Ferrada, M. J. (2016). <i>Un jardín</i> . Mataró: Abuenpaso.
Gravett, E. (2005). <i>Wolves</i> . London: MacMillan.
Gravett, E. (2006). <i>Meerkat mail</i> . London: MacMillan.
Gravett, E. (2009). <i>The rabbit problem</i> . London: MacMillan.
Gravett, E. (2016). <i>Tidy</i> . London: MacMillan.
Gravett, E. (2018). <i>Cyril and Pat</i> . London: Two Hoots.
Potter, B. (1902). <i>The tale of Peter Rabbit</i> . London: Frederick Warne & Co.
Potter, B. (2006). <i>The complete tales</i> . London: Frederick Warne & Co.

to ecocritical analysis proposed in Goga et al. (2018). Given our intention to conduct an ecocritical reading of books according to their esthetic dimension, attention was paid to their construction as works of literature (Genette, 1989) and, especially, as picturebooks (Van der Linden, 2015). All this was considered according to the connection between the idea of space, the configuration of literary discourse in children's books, and character development (Goldstone, 2008; Nikolajeva, 2014; Goga, 2017).

## 2.2. Selection of the corpus

The ecocritical analysis of canonical picturebooks required the inclusion of a diverse range of authors, which led us to consider how the works enter into and dialogue with their respective contexts of production (Soriano, 1995). Some scholars have pointed out that the ecocritical approach to children's books should not overlook their original context (Hintz, 2020) and that the understanding of nature is culturally constructed (Garrard, 2012). As a result, among other things, character development through the physical and natural environment may rely heavily on the cultural conventions of a particular context (Nikolajeva, 2014).

Consequently, in the present study we approached the selection of our corpus of analysis striving to select renowned authors that would help us to consider different historical and cultural contexts of

production. Aiming to introduce in the analysis a gender perspective involving the explicit identification and valorization of relevant women's literary works, only female authors were selected for analysis. Furthermore, when selecting authors considered canonical, our study attempted to apply a broad understanding of this concept. Such understanding sought the integration of both authors established for decades as cornerstones in children's literature and those who, despite being more recent in time, have been identified as highly relevant through criticism and the most prestigious literary awards.

The first one selected was the British author Beatrix Potter, chosen for her role as a trailblazer in the creation of illustrated children's literature and in forging a connection between literature and the environment (Lear, 2007). A classical author, Potter has been recognized for the way in which her commitment to nature, in a context influenced by the Industrial Revolution, permeated her highly popular oeuvre (Bilclouh, 2022). Two other consolidated but more contemporary authors—Kitty Crowther and María José Ferrada (Belgian and Chilean, respectively)—were chosen for the considerable presence of nature in their writing. The influence of Japanese culture is one of the resources used by these two authors to infuse their books with a predominance of nature. In the case of Kitty Crowther, this influence is seemingly linked to a trip to Japan (Antoine-Andersen, 2016) and, in the case of Maria José Ferrada, to her personal interest in Asian culture and her university studies in the field. The fourth author is the German writer and illustrator Jutta Bauer, easily recognizable as canonical for her career and influence. Finally, the fifth author in the corpus of analysis was Emily Gravett, a British writer and illustrator who has received two Kate Greenaway medals, among other awards, acknowledging the quality of her works. She is the author of the popular picturebook *Tidy*, which seems to convey a very explicit environmental message. In part, this author was selected to compare an ecocritical reading of *Tidy* to that of other books written by her with potentially less evident ecocritical messages.

The study method was therefore based on a provisional selection of texts spanning the entire literary production of each of the five authors. After this, a preliminary analysis of this initial corpus was conducted, which resulted in a reduction of the number of titles. The main criterion used to compile this definitive corpus was that nature and physical contexts should have certain relevance to the works beyond merely providing a backdrop for the plot. Table 1 shows the final selection of books for analysis.

## 3. Results: keys to an ecocritical reading of canonical picturebooks

### 3.1. Paratexts as an entry point to ecocritical reading

The analysis showed how the paratexts (Genette, 1997) of the canonical picturebooks analyzed go beyond a simple account of elements surrounding the text. In line with what Gray (2010) suggests, these paratexts can be understood as mechanisms that guide meaning-making and, in these particular works, as aids to the reader in accessing an ecocritical reading. As will be argued below, natural elements and physical spaces take on great significance in meaning-making in the works examined. Our analysis revealed that their paratexts foreshadow this importance of the natural and help readers

to set a series of expectations (Eagleton, 1983) that predispose them to recognize and explore this remarkable presence of nature the authors try to convey.

The importance of the endpapers in meaning-making in picturebooks has been emphasized in several studies (Sipe and McGuire, 2009); in the books analyzed, they draw our attention to elements that are key to an ecocritical reading. This is the case, for example, of the allegorical jellyfish seen in the endpapers of *Mère Meduse*. There is a direct relationship between these animals and meaning-making within the story itself, where the marine habitat and the natural and mythological connotations linked to jellyfish—and evoked by the association between the name of the animal and the mythological Gorgon in French language—are crucial to character development. Another example of the use of paratextual elements is the way in which the map on the endpapers of Beatrix Potter's *The Complete Tales* not only makes explicit the shared sense of the physical space in which the different stories unfold, but also suggests a link between these environs and the Lake District, which the author so admired. The reader is therefore presented with the idealized and interconnected vision of the natural environment that the author yearned for and sought to protect (Bilclouh, 2022), in part by opposition to her residence in industrialized London.

The endpapers are not the only paratexts that invite readers to an ecocritical reading; rather, the front and back covers, which function as calling cards of sorts, also play a decisive role in this regard. The increasing presence of nature in the Poka et Mine collection, which experienced a turning point with the author's trip to Japan (Antoine-Andersen, 2016), becomes evident merely by examining the paratexts. Readers who explore this collection will see how the later books in the series have a greater presence of plants on the front, back and interior covers. That growing presence of the natural in the external part of the books finds its correspondence on the inside, as it happens, for example, in *Poka et Mine. A la pêche*, a book in which the way Asian cultures understand nature is crucial to the construction of the story from the point of view of the protagonists. *Cyril and Pat*, by Emily Gravett, is also an example of the way in which the apparent nature-city duality that defines the story is announced to the reader from the very cover of the book, where the main characters, a squirrel and a rat, are introduced by linking them to elements belonging to their respective contexts of origin.

Finally, the fact that the very format of picturebooks, that is, their status as material objects, is a fundamental mechanism in meaning-making (Van der Linden, 2015; Alaca, 2018) should also be considered. From the point of view of ecocritical reading, some of the works analyzed have certain features that help the reader to understand the relationship with nature created within the story. For example, the particular folding format of *Un jardin* is crucial to identifying the idea proposed in this fold-out book about a life that unfolds constantly in connection with nature. *Selma*, by Jutta Bauer, also illustrates this principle, since the simple but happy relationship that the main character, a sheep, establishes with its natural environment is already suggested by the small and simple physical format of the book.

### 3.2. More than a paratext: illustration, color and composition

Although illustration in literary works was initially identified by Genette as a paratext, the theoretical development in the field of

children's literature has exposed the need to consider visual and verbal codes on equal terms with regard to the construction of discourse (Unsworth and Wheeler, 2002; Op de Beeck, 2018; Papan, 2019). The works that comprise our corpus of analysis, in accordance with the canonical definition of the picturebook by Bader (1976), are understood based on an interdependence between text and image for meaning-making, as an eminently multimodal genre of children's literature. In fact, this relevance of illustration as a defining feature of the genre was identified in the analysis as one of the key elements to an ecocritical reading of the canonical works examined.

Thus, we found that the illustrations of these canonical picturebooks, through different types of relations with the text (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2006), were essential to conveying a concrete understanding of the physical and natural environment. Nature and the environment, which in many of the works analyzed are fully interrelated with the plot, find in the illustrations a space for visual development and reader fascination. This means that readers must attend to visual discourse to round out the textual description and to be able to grasp the vision of nature that the work intends to communicate (Rättyä, 2018; Soulioti, 2022). This would not be possible without illustrations, as seen in the parallel and interconnected evolution of the natural environment and the life of rabbits over the course of a year in *The Rabbit Problem*. Similarly, the images in *El viaje arbóreo* are the elements that most clearly manifest the relationship between the child figure and the trees, thus establishing an emotional link with plants that expands on the text about the need for familiarity with trees and to recognize oneself in them.

In this regard, aspects such as color and composition (Van der Linden, 2015) acquire particular relevance when establishing a communication with the reader through images. The metaphorical use of color to represent the connection with one's surroundings is characteristic of Jutta Bauer's *Die Königin der Farben*. On the other hand, *Mi cuaderno de haikus* is perhaps the clearest example of how composition helps to convey a concrete idea about nature. Japanese culture is present in this book through the figure of the haiku. However, the idea of balance and observation of nature that characterizes this kind of poems also finds its place in the illustrations themselves, in which white spaces and balanced constructions invite the reader to enjoy nature through leisurely reading and observation. This slow, careful reading is also something that picturebooks, with their complex and particular format, invite us to focus on Pantaleo (2019), so the characteristics of the genre seem conducive to a type of interaction with books suitable for fascination with and reflection on nature.

Our analysis confirmed that illustrations in canonical picturebooks transcend the concept of paratext, taking on a crucial role in the construction of meanings about nature and our relationship with it. This means that canonical works of children's literature may help to bring about the esthetic experience of nature defended by Karlsen (2018), an experience that is key to inviting child readers to establish links with the natural environment. In this sense, it is the visual discourse that, due to its artistic nature, is capable of eliciting an emotional response in the reader (Nikolajeva, 2018), who delights in nature through a sense of wonder (Carson, 1965/2021) that encourages curiosity and fascination.

Thus, the necessarily multimodal construction of the picturebook favors an access to its ecocritical reading conditioned, precisely, by the need to integrate the information provided by both the verbal and

visual codes. This multimodal construction and the consequent relevance acquired by the illustration also offer a visual proposal characterized by a markedly dynamic character that suggests a great deal of movement. Among the works analyzed in this study, perhaps those of Kitty Crowther are the ones that exemplify in a particularly evident way this dynamic nature that even seems to suggest a certain cinematographic conception in its configuration. In fact, the almost cinematographic nature of the picturebooks by this author has materialized in her short film *Le banc/The bench*,<sup>1</sup> where different characters and elements of her literary universe converge. This short film offers, in this way, a space where the multimodal character of her work goes a step further and enters the territory of multimodality, where even more codes interrelate to generate complex meanings.

### 3.3. The physical environment and the intersubjective construction of characters

Scholars have pointed out that physical surroundings are one of the mechanisms that can be used in developing characters in children's and young adult literature (Williams, 2007; Nikolajeva, 2014; Mallan, 2018). As an example, Bildungsroman-type literary texts sometimes use physical spaces as metaphors, suggesting character development and growth (Goga, 2017; Khateeb, 2018); these spaces acquire considerable relevance within the narrative.

The analysis revealed that the works that comprise the study corpus foreground natural environments as stimuli for character action or as mirrors of their condition and development. An illustrative example of this is the picturebook *Meerkat Mail*, premised on the relationship between the main character and its environs. It is the desire to find "somewhere perfect to live" that drives Sunny to leave his native desert, while it is the journey through different natural contexts in Africa that allows him to grow and finally recognize the strong bond that binds him to the Kalahari Desert.

However, the ecocritical reflection suggested for the reader regarding the connection between individuals and their surroundings is not limited to specifically natural environments. Hintz (2020) stresses that ecocritical approaches to children's literature should also consider urban locales, based on an understanding of the city as a complex niche of relationships and spaces (Bavidge, 2014). In the canonical picturebooks analyzed there is no shortage of works that raise questions about the relationship between nature and urban settings through the development of their characters. *Cyril and Pat*, by Emily Gravett, illustrates this, as the protagonists and the relationship between them develop in parallel with the apparent opposition between the idyllic park and the dark city. Although part of this distinction prevails due to the different nature of the two contexts, as the narrative progresses, the experiences of the two characters call into question this opposition, thus demonstrating that, as Khateeb (2018) points out, different understandings of the nature-culture relationship can coexist within the same story. It is also interesting to note how the British context of Emily Gravett can be perceived in *Cyril and Pat* through the nods to London buildings, the design of the trash bins in parks, or simply the location of the steering wheel in vehicles. This

implies that the work may have been inspired by the reality of British city parks, although the essence of the nature-city dichotomy presented in the book can appeal to readers from other parts of the world.

In this process by which canonical picturebooks propose readers a series of implicit reflections on the importance of the environment, physical settings can become important to the point of being as necessary to meaning-making as the characters themselves. This helps to identify in these books the configuration of an intersubjective character (Nikolajeva, 2014) in which the perspectives of the characters are intertwined with the viewpoint of their natural environs. Thus, it is true that *Mère Méduse* cannot be understood without attending to the vision of the mother-child relationships transmitted, jointly, by the subjectivity of the young girl protagonist and that of her mother. However, this vision would also be lost if we failed to consider the semantic and metaphorical import of the sea and the beach in the illustrations of this picturebook.

This intersubjective construction that combines the vision of the character and the natural world is particularly evident in the canonical picturebooks in which the main characters are animals. Nikolajeva (2016) has pointed out that characters such as the young protagonist of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* depict a complex reality in which their condition as animals is at odds with their anthropomorphic representation. In the case of *Peter Rabbit*, for example, we can see how his human features (i.e., gait, clothing) spontaneously disappear in the face of danger, as the rabbit flees on all fours from Mr. McGregor. This complex coexistence of animal and anthropomorphic features is also recognizable, as revealed by our analysis, in the characters of the other stories of *The Complete Tales*, as well as in other animal characters of canonical picturebooks.

In this way, the reader finds an apparent incoherence (Nikolajeva, 2016) in *Steht im Wald ein kleines Haus*, when the characters behave in a humanized manner while their motivations and fears continue to be based entirely on the natural predator-prey relationship. Another example of this is *Wolves*, in which the anthropomorphic behavior of the main character, a rabbit, causes the reader—and the rabbit himself—to forget that he is an animal and his relationship with predators, which ends up having dire repercussions for the character. In all these cases, the human attributes of the characters, which are key to the way the stories reach child readers and cause them to identify with the story (Suvilehto, 2019), unexpectedly coexist in an organic way with the needs and particularities of their animal nature.

This complex coexistence of human and animal perspectives in the characters of canonical picturebooks is in itself a challenge to the reader's expectations. This, in turn, calls for participation and involvement on the part of the readers, which, in line with what Røskeland (2018) argues, may lead them to reconsider their preconceived notions about nature. In this respect, what the canonical works seem to propose through the configuration of their characters is a vision of the relationship between nature and humans that, in the parameters proposed by Goga et al. (2018), would resemble the notion of balance and coexistence between the two.

However, this idea of complex equilibrium is not as evident in *Tidy*. This picturebook, in contrast to the other works analyzed, seems to convey a message of environmental awareness that is much more explicit and based mainly on problematizing the relationship between human beings and the environment, something that also seems to be a recurring theme in recently published environmental children's books

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGYrMwNGQ1k>

(Guanio-Uluru, 2021). The anthropomorphism of the main character of *Tidy*, a badger, dominates the character's development in a way that his animal nature is backgrounded in order to transmit an environmental education from an eminently human perspective. This suggests a less subtle and complex construction than that which, in the light of the results of the analysis, seems to characterize the ecocritical reading of canonical picturebooks.

### 3.4. Focalization, dual address, and sense of wonder

Focalization (Genette, 1989), as one of the elements that help to define the specificity of the picturebook genre (Van der Linden, 2015), is the last key to ecocritical reading that emerged from our analysis. The ideas presented in the previous section reveal how the concept of point of view acquires remarkable weight in the works analyzed and in the reading that they propose with regard to nature. Intersubjective character construction (Nikolajeva, 2014), as mentioned, leads the reader toward a complex understanding of the book that necessarily combines the points of view of its characters with the one provided by their physical and natural context. This would therefore be the first way in which the natural environment acquires relevance in canonical picturebooks from the point of view of focalization.

However, this is not the only way through which focalization may help the reader to access an ecocritical reading of canonical picturebooks. Dual address (Beckett, 2018) should be highlighted as a defining feature of children's illustrated literature and one that allows us to recognize the presence of an adult implied reader alongside the child. The analysis of the corpus revealed that the communication between the implied author (Chatman, 1978) and the adult receiver, which is sometimes explained by complicity, foreshadows the presence of this adult figure as a companion in reading and discovery.

In this way, books such as *A la pêche*, with its clear nod to the adult gaze in the final pages, address an adult who understands the complex vision of nature drawn in the book. *Schreimutter* and *El baile diminuto* also exemplify the presence of the adult addressee as a companion of the child. Thus, the shadow texts (Nodelman, 2008) and the different readings that the works of the corpus propose regarding nature and our surroundings are based in part on the possibility of creating shared reading experiences. In these experiences, the role of the adult receiver as a conduit to the keys to ecocritical reading addressed previously in this article reflects the essence of the idea proposed by Rachel Carson in her essay *The sense of wonder* (2021), first published in 1965. As the author points out, a child's experience of nature lies in their innate ability to derive wonder from its beauty, while the adult acts as a companion in a shared process of curiosity, fascination and discovery. Canonical picturebooks may, in light of the analysis conducted in this study, create affordances for this type of co-constructed experience and help to discover, through the implicit and explicit meanings that emerge from the works, a reflective and dynamic vision of the environment and nature.

## 4. Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to identify and analyze the keys to an ecocritical reading of canonical picturebooks. Using a corpus of 25 books by five

influential authors, we have shown that these works help to complete an ecocritical reading under the terms proposed by Glotfelty (1996). This ecocritical approach to the canon is in itself an update of the works that comprise it that, in light of the environmental concerns of today (United Nations, 2020), uncovers new readings and understandings. These readings, however, involve an interpretation and not a self-serving use (Eco, 1995), which, rather than imposing a non-existent ecocritical meaning, emerge from the construction of the works themselves and from what they propose.

In this sense, the keys to an ecocritical reading of canonical picturebooks reside precisely in the features that lend these works specificity as literary works, especially for child audiences. Paratextuality (Genette, 1997), illustrations, their configuration and multimodality (Van der Linden, 2015), the complex development of characters (Nikolajeva, 2014) and focalization (Genette, 1989) are thus revealed as the essential elements to access a reading of these works in line with current ecocentric paradigms (Goga et al., 2018).

The esthetic dimension of canonical picturebooks becomes, thus, fundamental to the construction of their ecocritical meaning (Blanc et al., 2008), which in turn involves a complex transmission of meanings. The explicit, unique and unequivocal meanings that may characterize part of the abundant body of present-day children's environmental literature (García, 2017) give way in the works analyzed to the construction of ecocritical messages that combine implicit and explicit meanings, thereby proposing a complex interaction with the reader consistent with the literary nature of these canonical texts. In this process, the fascination sparked by images and the multimodal configuration inherent to literature for children are crucial in promoting a sense of wonder (Carson, 1965/2021) that may lead the readers to take an interest in their surroundings.

Finally, making up the corpus of canonical authors from different contexts had certain repercussions for the study objective. On the one hand, the geographical, historical and cultural heterogeneity of production contexts does not seem to pose a problem to present the elements mentioned above as key to an ecocritical reading. Although Beatrix Potter's pioneering work was a response to the concerns of her particular context, the passage of time has not substantially modified the way in which canonical picturebooks propose the construction of ecocritical reading. Thus, the keys to its configuration as a children's literary discourse prevail in the transmission of its ecocritical message, thus conferring certain homogeneity to the canon in this regard.

On the other hand, many of the works analyzed convey ecocritical meanings that can be partly traced to culturally specific keys of meaning-making. However, the link between these books and the context in which they emerged does not prevent readers who are not familiar with said context from accessing this reading by inserting themselves in gaps they find and negotiating the production of meaning. In this way, the corpus of canonical picturebooks ascribes to a post-humanist interpretation in constant construction (García-González and Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2020) that would not only help to arrive at an ecocritical reading that is consistent with the concerns of our current context, but would also allow readers from different contexts and moments to access a range of ways of understanding these works and themselves within them.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Author contributions

DL: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. RT: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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