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ECO-CRITICAL REPRESENTATIONS AND ENVIRONMENTAL PEDAGOGY IN CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS: A MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

*This study examines how children's picture books construct ecological consciousness through the interplay of textual and visual narratives. Drawing on eco-critical frameworks developed by Glotfelty, Buell, Garrard, and Morton, the research analyzes selected texts, including *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Baaa*, to explore representations of anthropocentrism, environmental degradation, wilderness, and ecological interconnectedness. Adopting a qualitative multimodal analytical approach, the study integrates close textual reading with visual semiotic interpretation to understand how meaning is produced across narrative forms. The findings suggest that picture books function as significant pedagogical tools that both critique human-centered ideologies and foster eco-literacy by encouraging emotional and imaginative engagement with the natural world. The analysis demonstrates that visual elements – such as symbolism, spatial composition, and transformation of landscapes – play a crucial role in shaping ecological meaning alongside textual narration. By extending eco-critical inquiry into the domain of children's literature through a multimodal lens, this study contributes to ongoing debates on environmental pedagogy and highlights the potential of early literary engagement in cultivating sustainable attitudes and ethical awareness toward the environment.*

KEYWORDS: Ecocriticism; Children's Literature; Eco-Literacy; Environmental Awareness.

1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary ecological crisis represents one of the most pressing challenges of the twenty-first century. These crises include but are not limited to climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, and environmental degradation. These challenges are deeply rooted in cultural perceptions and ethical orientations toward the natural world. As Greg Garrard argues, environmental crises emerge from dominant cultural narratives that privilege human interests over ecological balance, thereby reinforcing anthropocentric ideologies (Garrard, 2012). Such perspectives position nature as a resource for exploitation. One of the most concerning consequences of this paradigm is the growing disconnection between children and the natural environment. Historically, children developed meaningful relationships with nature through direct interaction with outdoor spaces such as forests, rivers, and open landscapes. These experiences fostered ecological awareness and emotional attachment to the environment. However, contemporary lifestyles such as urbanization, digital immersion, and restricted mobility have significantly reduced such interactions. As noted by Rina Pathak, children today are increasingly confined to limited physical spaces and are often more familiar with virtual or fictional entities than with their immediate natural surroundings (Pathak, 2018). This shift not only diminishes ecological knowledge but also weakens the emotional and ethical connections necessary for developing environmentally responsible attitudes.

Formal environmental education, although increasingly incorporated into academic curricula, remains limited in its capacity to engage children beyond cognitive understanding. Such approaches tend to emphasize scientific facts and theoretical knowledge, neglecting the role of imagination, emotion, and ethical reflection. Lawrence Buell highlights that environmental awareness is not solely dependent on information but also on the cultivation of environmental imagination and moral engagement (Buell, 1995). This limitation underscores the need for alternative pedagogical approaches that can address both the intellectual and affective dimensions of ecological learning. In this context, children's literature—particularly picture books—emerges as a significant medium for environmental education. Picture books integrate visual and textual storytelling, making them to communicate complex ecological ideas in an accessible and engaging manner. They have the potential to shape children's perceptions of nature,

influence their attitudes toward environmental issues, and foster a sense of ecological responsibility. Cheryll Glotfelty emphasizes that literary texts play a crucial role in shaping cultural attitudes toward the environment and in constructing human-nature relationships (Glotfelty, 1996). Extending this perspective to children's literature highlights the importance of examining how early narratives contribute to the formation of ecological consciousness.

Despite the growing recognition of eco-criticism as a critical field of inquiry, scholarly attention has largely focused on adult literature, leaving children's picture books relatively underexplored. Existing studies address environmental themes in isolation or emphasize textual analysis without adequately considering the interplay between visual and verbal elements. Furthermore, there is limited research that systematically applies eco-critical theoretical frameworks to analyze how children's picture books construct ecological meanings and challenge anthropocentric ideologies. This gap is particularly significant given the multimodal nature of picture books, where illustrations function not merely as supplementary elements but as integral components of narrative meaning.

Additionally, while many eco-picture books address issues such as deforestation, pollution, and climate change, there remains a need to critically evaluate how effectively these themes are communicated to young readers. Questions persist regarding whether such representations promote ecological awareness and critical thinking or inadvertently simplify complex environmental issues. Moreover, the extent to which these narratives encourage constructive engagement rather than ecological anxiety requires further scholarly investigation.

In light of these considerations, this study addresses the following research problem: how do children's picture books function as eco-critical texts that represent and interpret human-nature relationships, and to what extent do they contribute to the development of eco-literacy and environmental consciousness among young readers? By adopting a multimodal analytical approach grounded in the eco-critical frameworks of Glotfelty, Buell, Garrard, and Morton, this research seeks to examine the representation of nature, the communication of environmental themes, and the role of visual-textual strategies in shaping ecological understanding.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Eco-criticism has emerged as a significant interdisciplinary approach within literary studies, particularly in response to the escalating environmental concerns of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. At its core, eco-criticism examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment, exploring how texts construct ecological meanings and shape human attitudes toward nature. Cheryll Glotfelty defines eco-criticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty, 1996), emphasizing that literary works are embedded within ecological realities and cultural ideologies. This foundational perspective underscores the role of literature in reflecting and shaping environmental consciousness.

Lawrence Buell expands the scope of eco-criticism through the concept of the “environmental imagination,” which highlights the capacity of literary texts to evoke ecological awareness and ethical engagement (Buell, 1995). Buell identifies key characteristics of environmentally oriented literature, including the presence of the nonhuman environment as an active force, the recognition of human accountability to nature, and the integration of ethical considerations into narrative structures (Buell, 1995). In contrast, Greg Garrard provides a thematic framework that categorizes recurring ecological motifs such as wilderness, pollution, pastoral, and apocalypse (Garrard, 2012). While Buell focuses on the ethical and imaginative dimensions of environmental representation, Garrard’s approach offers a structured lens for identifying and analyzing specific ecological themes within literary texts.

Timothy Morton further advances eco-critical discourse by challenging traditional binaries between human and nonhuman entities. His concept of ecological interconnectedness emphasizes that humans are inseparable from the ecological systems they inhabit, thereby questioning anthropocentric assumptions that position humans as dominant over nature (Morton, 2010). Morton’s perspective advocates for a more integrated understanding of ecological relationships. Taken together, the works of Glotfelty, Buell, Garrard, and Morton provide complementary yet distinct analytical tools for examining how literature engages with environmental issues. However, despite their theoretical richness, these frameworks have rarely been applied collectively to the study of children’s literature, particularly in relation to its multimodal characteristics.

Within the domain of children’s literature, the application of eco-critical theory has gained

increasing scholarly attention, though it remains comparatively underdeveloped. Picture books, as a hybrid literary form combining textual and visual narratives, offer unique opportunities for environmental representation and engagement. Scholars have argued that such texts play a crucial role in shaping early perceptions of nature and fostering ecological awareness among young readers. Rina Pathak highlights the growing disconnection between children and the natural environment in contemporary society, noting that urbanization and technological advancements have limited children’s direct engagement with nature (Pathak, 2018). This observation underscores the importance of literary and visual narratives in reintroducing ecological concepts and experiences into children’s imaginative worlds.

Eco-picture books have emerged as a distinct genre that addresses a wide range of environmental themes, including conservation, sustainability, biodiversity, and climate change. These texts employ narrative and visual strategies to simplify complex ecological issues while maintaining their emotional and ethical significance. For instance, Jeannie Baker’s *Where the Forest Meets the Sea* presents a detailed depiction of rainforest ecosystems, illustrating both their beauty and vulnerability to human intervention (Baker, 2004). Similarly, David Macaulay’s *Baa* offers a satirical critique of industrialization and its ecological consequences, reflecting Garrard’s thematic concerns with pollution and environmental collapse (Macaulay, 2019; Garrard, 2012). Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*, although primarily interpreted as a psychological narrative, also engages with themes of wilderness and ecological otherness, thereby challenging conventional human-nature boundaries (Glotfelty, 1996).

While these studies demonstrate the potential of children’s literature as a site of eco-critical inquiry, existing research often remains limited in scope and depth. Much of the scholarship tends to focus on individual texts or thematic elements without engaging in comprehensive theoretical synthesis. Furthermore, there is a tendency to prioritize textual analysis while overlooking the significance of visual representation in shaping ecological meaning. This limitation is significant in the context of picture books. The interaction between text and image creates a multimodal framework through which ecological concepts are communicated, yet this dimension remains insufficiently explored within eco-critical studies.

The pedagogical implications of eco-picture books

have not been fully examined within eco-critical scholarship. Although these texts are often recognized for their educational potential, there is a lack of empirical and theoretical studies that explore their role in fostering eco-literacy and environmental ethics. Buell's emphasis on environmental imagination suggests that literature can play a transformative role in shaping ethical perspectives (Buell, 1995), yet this insight has not been adequately extended to the context of children's multimodal narratives. Similarly, Morton's concept of ecological interconnectedness offers a valuable framework for understanding how picture books can challenge anthropocentric worldviews, but its application in this domain remains limited.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative interpretative research design based on eco-critical theory to examine how children's picture books construct ecological meanings and environmental consciousness. Given the narrative and visual complexity of picture books, a multimodal analytical framework is employed, integrating textual interpretation with visual semiotic analysis.

3.1. Selection Of Texts

The study focuses on a purposive selection of children's picture books that engage explicitly with environmental themes and are widely recognized within children's literary discourse. The primary texts selected for analysis include *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak and *Baa* by David Macaulay, along with reference to *Where the Forest Meets the Sea* by Jeannie Baker. These texts were chosen based on three criteria: (i) their thematic relevance to ecological issues such as anthropocentrism, environmental transformation, and human-nature relationships; (ii) their integration of visual and textual storytelling; and (iii) their significance within the canon of children's literature.

3.2. Analytical Framework

The analysis is carried following key eco-critical

concepts derived from the works of Glotfelty (1996), Buell (1995), Garrard (2012), and Morton (2010). These frameworks provide a structured basis for examining representations of nature and environmental ethics within the selected texts. Specifically, the study focuses on thematic constructs such as anthropocentrism, wilderness, environmental degradation, and ecological interconnectedness. Garrard's thematic categorization is used to identify recurring ecological motifs, while Buell's concept of environmental imagination provides the analysis of ethical and affective engagement. Morton's notion of ecological interconnectedness is applied to interpret the dissolution of boundaries between human and nonhuman entities.

3.3. Multimodal And Semiotic Analysis

To capture the dual nature of picture books, the study employs multimodal discourse analysis, which considers both textual and visual elements as integral components of meaning-making. Textual analysis uses close reading of narrative structures, character representation, and thematic development, while visual analysis is based on semiotic principles to examine elements such as color, composition, spatial arrangement, symbolism, and perspective. Particular attention is given to how visual transformations—such as shifts in landscape, scale, and environment—contribute to ecological interpretation.

3.4. Analytical Procedure

The analytical process was conducted in three stages. First, the selected texts were subjected to repeated close reading to identify key ecological themes and narrative patterns. Second, a coding framework was developed based on eco-critical categories. Third, the findings were interpreted through the lens of the selected theoretical frameworks to establish connections between narrative representation and broader ecological concepts. The overall analytical process and theoretical integration adopted in this study are illustrated in Figure 1.

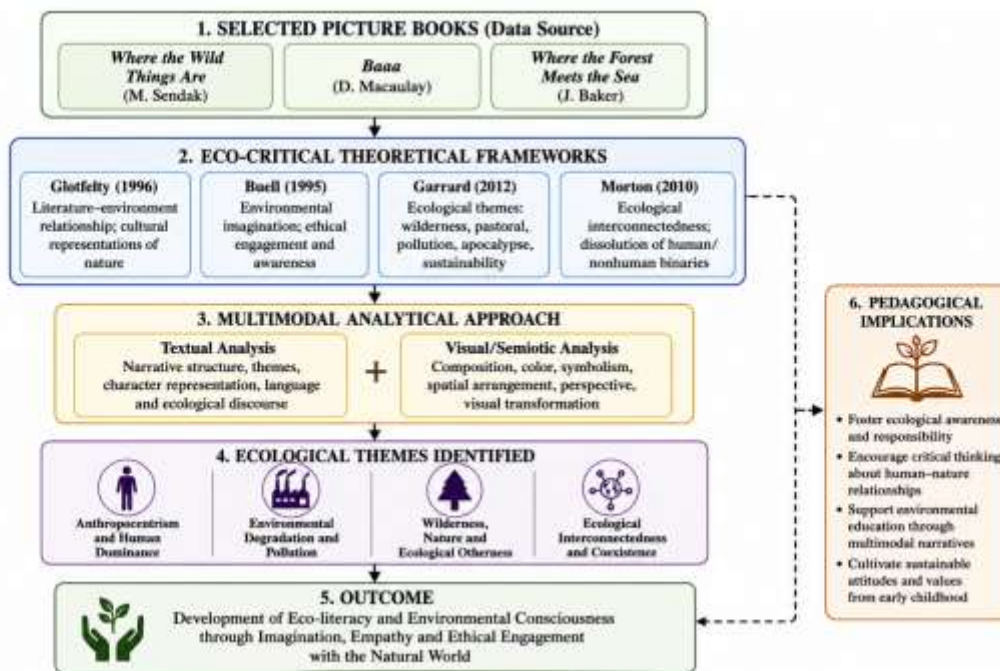


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Eco-Critical Multimodal Analysis of Children's Picture Books.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Anthropocentrism And Environmental Transformation in *Baa*

A key finding of the analysis is the critique of anthropocentric ideology through the transformation of natural landscapes in David Macaulay's *Baa*. The narrative depicts sheep that progressively adopt human-like behaviors, leading to industrialization, overconsumption, and eventual environmental collapse. This transformation reflects Garrard's concept of environmental degradation and apocalypse, where human-centered progress narratives culminate in ecological imbalance (Garrard, 2012; Winter, 2008). The shift from pastoral harmony to industrial excess highlights the consequences of prioritizing technological advancement over ecological sustainability.

From a multimodal perspective, the visual progression in *Baa*—from open green landscapes to densely constructed industrial settings—reinforces the textual critique of anthropocentrism. The gradual loss of natural elements in illustrations signifies not merely environmental change but also ideological transformation. This aligns with Buell's notion of environmental imagination, where literary texts evoke awareness of ecological consequences through narrative and imagery (Buell, 1995). The eventual collapse of the constructed society and the re-emergence of nature suggest an ecological resilience

that challenges the illusion of human dominance. Furthermore, the allegorical structure of *Baa* underscores the cyclical nature of environmental exploitation and recovery. The sheep's imitation of human systems functions as a satirical device that exposes the unsustainability of anthropocentric models (Hopkins, 2013). In this sense, the text not only critiques environmental degradation but also invites reflection on alternative ecological paradigms grounded in balance and coexistence.

4.2. Wilderness, Imagination, And Ecological Otherness in *Where the Wild Things Are*

Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* presents a more nuanced engagement with ecological themes through the interplay of imagination and wilderness. While interpreted as a psychological narrative of childhood emotion, the text also constructs a symbolic representation of the human relationship with nature. The transformation of Max's domestic space into a dense forest signifies a transition from structured human environments to untamed ecological spaces. This transformation reflects Garrard's concept of wilderness as a site of both fascination and fear, representing the "otherness" of nature in relation to human society (Green, 2015). The wild things themselves embody this ecological otherness, existing beyond human norms and control. However, Max's interaction with them suggests a temporary reconciliation between

human and nonhuman realms, aligning with Morton's concept of ecological interconnectedness, which dissolves rigid boundaries between species and environments (Morton, 2010; Ryan, 2001).

The visual expansion of the forest across successive pages plays a crucial role in constructing this ecological narrative. As the illustrations gradually occupy more space, they immerse the reader in a nonhuman environment, emphasizing the agency of nature. This multimodal expansion enhances the thematic exploration of ecological immersion, suggesting that engagement with nature requires a departure from anthropocentric perspectives (Layton, 2019). At the same time, Max's eventual return to his domestic space introduces a tension between ecological immersion and human-centered order. This movement can be interpreted as a reflection of the difficulty of sustaining ecological consciousness within structured social environments. However, the persistence of the forest imagery implies that the experience of wilderness leaves a lasting imprint, reinforcing the role of imagination in shaping ecological awareness.

4.3. Environmental Imagination and Ecological Awareness in Where the Forest Meets the Sea

Jeannie Baker's *Where the Forest Meets the Sea* offers a more direct engagement with environmental conservation through its detailed visual representation of a rainforest ecosystem. The narrative juxtaposes present-day environmental conditions with imagined historical and future scenarios, thereby illustrating the impact of human intervention on natural landscapes. This temporal layering aligns with Buell's concept of environmental imagination, as it encourages readers to envision both the past integrity and potential future degradation of ecological systems (Buell, 1995; Cousteau, 2016). The text's emphasis on observation and reflection invites readers to consider their role in environmental change, thereby fostering a sense of responsibility.

Visually, the book employs intricate collage techniques to depict the richness and complexity of the rainforest. The inclusion of subtle details—such as hidden animals and gradual changes in landscape—encourages active engagement and close observation. This visual strategy enhances the pedagogical function of the text by transforming reading into an exploratory process (Hall, 2018). In contrast to the more symbolic representations in *Baaa* and *Where the Wild Things Are*, Baker's work adopts a realist approach that emphasizes ecological specificity. From an eco-critical perspective, the text

challenges anthropocentric assumptions by foregrounding the intrinsic value of nonhuman life forms. The absence of overt moralizing allows the narrative to communicate its ecological message implicitly, relying on visual evidence rather than didactic instruction.

4.4. Multimodal Construction of Ecological Meaning

Across all three texts, meaning is not confined to the written narrative but emerges from the interaction between textual and visual elements. This finding underscores the importance of considering picture books as integrated semiotic systems rather than as texts accompanied by illustrations (MvGinty, 2020). In *Baaa*, visual transformation reinforces the critique of industrialization; in *Where the Wild Things Are*, spatial expansion constructs ecological immersion; and in *Where the Forest Meets the Sea*, detailed imagery facilitates environmental observation. These varied strategies demonstrate how visual elements contribute to the representation of ecological themes, often conveying meanings that extend beyond the textual narrative.

This multimodal approach also enhances emotional engagement, which is essential for fostering eco-literacy. By combining narrative and imagery, picture books create immersive experiences that enable readers to connect with ecological issues on both cognitive and affective levels (Messner, 2017). This aligns with Buell's assertion that environmental awareness involves not only knowledge but also imagination and ethical engagement (Buell, 1995).

4.5. Implications For Environmental Pedagogy and Eco-Literacy

The findings of this study highlight the pedagogical potential of children's picture books in promoting environmental awareness. By presenting ecological themes through accessible and engaging narratives, these texts serve as effective tools for introducing complex environmental concepts to young readers. The integration of visual and textual elements allows for multiple modes of learning, accommodating diverse cognitive and emotional responses (Paul, 2015). Importantly, the analyzed texts do not merely convey information about environmental issues but actively shape attitudes and values. The critique of anthropocentrism in *Baaa*, the exploration of ecological interconnectedness in *Where the Wild Things Are*, and the emphasis on conservation in *Where the Forest Meets the Sea* collectively contribute to the development of eco-

literacy. These narratives encourage readers to reflect on their relationship with nature and to consider more sustainable ways of interacting with the environment. At the same time, the study reveals that the effectiveness of eco-picture books depends on their ability to balance simplicity with complexity. While the texts simplify ecological issues to make them accessible, they also retain sufficient depth to encourage critical thinking (Verde, 2016). This balance is crucial for fostering meaningful engagement.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined how children's picture books function as eco-critical texts that construct ecological meaning through the interaction of visual and textual narratives. Drawing on the frameworks of Glotfelty, Buell, Garrard, and Morton, and employing a multimodal analytical approach, the findings demonstrate that picture books serve as effective pedagogical tools for fostering environmental awareness among young readers. The selected texts—*Baaa*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, and *Where the Forest Meets the Sea*—engage with

key ecological themes such as anthropocentrism, environmental transformation, wilderness, and ecological interconnectedness. The analysis reveals that ecological meaning is not conveyed solely through narrative but emerges through the integration of visual elements, including spatial composition, symbolism, and environmental change. These multimodal strategies enhance both cognitive understanding and emotional engagement, thereby supporting the development of eco-literacy and environmental ethics. This study contributes to eco-critical scholarship by extending its application to children's literature through a multimodal lens and by addressing the limited integration of visual analysis in existing research. It also underscores the pedagogical value of picture books in shaping early environmental consciousness. However, the study is limited by its focus on a small corpus and its reliance on qualitative interpretation. Future research could expand the range of texts and incorporate reader-response approaches to further explore the impact of eco-picture books. Overall, the study highlights the potential of children's literature as a meaningful medium for promoting sustainable attitudes and ecological awareness.

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