

## **Children's Literature: As a Way of Raising Environmental Consciousness – A Study**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*One of the major crisis's in this century is the environmental crisis. Humans as one of the creatures that inhabit the earth need to begin to realize the environmental issues around them. The children as the next generation must be educated well in order to raise their awareness about the present state of the environment. This study aims are to emphasize how green literature could help to encourage the children to get closer to their environment. The qualitative research methodology is employed in this study based on the interpretative philosophy. The Ecocriticism theory is applied in this study. Several of children literature books are used as the object of the study to prove that the children literature could indeed be a very helpful tool for raising the eco-consciousness. The children books are used in this study are in the form of picture books. These books are *The Secret Garden* and *The Giving Tree*. Documentary analysis of ecocriticism was used to the children picture books to reveal the way to increase children awareness about their environment. The result of this study showed that those picture books are: 1. the authors are indeed very creatively showed their enthusiasm in raising environmental awareness 2. They depicted how nature and human connected each other. In the end, this study will hopefully increase children's love to protect, preserve and nurture the environment in the near future.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Children literature, Ecocriticism, Green literature, Nature, Picture Books.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Our planet, the earth can be said as the only one home that storing many useful materials. It never stops does it best to support us, humans, as the inhabitants. Unfortunately, the more knowledgeable humans are their aggressiveness towards the earth also rising equally. This then resulted in many forms of so-called technology. These so-called technologies have a tendency to make humans' life more comfortable than before. So, they used all natural resources around them in order to achieve this. Afterwards, what their actions left behind are the things that pollute our environment the most. Indeed this makes sense when it said that the more innovative humans are, the more they can destroy their surroundings.

The destruction of environment continuously makes us realize the issues of environmental crisis. Because of this destruction, some of us have already taken the first initial to act. Some created tool to raise the awareness. Mass media such as social media and television are used to raise the awareness. They tried to report every news about the environment, for instance, the deforestation, smuggling protected animals, the melting of ice the North Pole and polluted rivers, now can be seen every day. Yet, not all can be express in the social media or televisions. It can also be expressed through the writing. This method used some of the picture books in order to increase the conscious about the issue.

The process of raising awareness of the environmental issues is needed to do from the root. As the next generation, children are the best object to teach about this. Children always have high curiosity towards their surroundings. They also have a very alert sense when they see something is not right. Thus, it is easier to begin raising the awareness of the children.

There are several ways to build children's attention toward the environmental crisis. The good example of this case is the field trip that school always includes in their lesson. It can be seen from the educational media that put in the classroom. According to the study conducted by

Children and Nature Network in 2012, "the children's outdoor activities with the "wild" nature will encourage positive attitude and behavior towards environment when they grow up. The research by Makwanyana and Dick concluded that "children's literature promotes environmental consciousness, appreciation, knowledge, and stewardship of the children. In addition, in order to inculcate long lasting impression on environmental stewardship, it has been concluded that catching them young is the best method (Makwanyana and Dick, 2014). This research clearly exemplified one of the methods used to teach children about their environment through children literature.

Children's literature has many forms, one of them is picture books. Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson, a picture book is a freely illustrated book in which illustrations are essential to the employment and understanding of the story (Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson, 1993). Bader said that a picture book is a text, illustration, a total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historical document; and foremost, an experience for a child (Bader, 1976). Clearly, from both statements, the picture book indeed has very great values for children.

Similarly, Mitchell stated that the name "picture books" evokes images of brightly colored, beautifully illustrated books that beg to be read. No matter what our age, most of us still enjoy reading them because of their vibrant pictures, rich and evocative language, and poignant and meaningful themes. Picture books speak to us in the same way photographs do. They touch our emotions, delight our senses, appeal to our whimsy, and bring back memories of our childhood. Picture books invite us to curl up and read them (Mitchell, 2003). Mitchell's statement of picture books vividly gives us the reason why picture books could be used as an important tool to promote environmental literacy. They give a fresh idea and renew the idea of the dead boring feeling in textbooks. The children of different ages could learn many sides of their surroundings and they could get the better understanding of the relation between human and nature through the picture books.

The young children could develop their idea personally, socially, culturally and aesthetically through their experience from reading the picture books. The children, who newly socialized, can get a great help from book to explore the human motives towards nature. Through picture books, children meet the new surroundings, the new families, and of course the new environment that similar and different in some way of their own. This resulted in the contribution of picture books towards children's awareness. Thus, all these reasons make the children's literature has a vital role in their lives and learning process.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Picture Books**

In the history of the picture book, the first one made to read aloud. The first picture book considered in the history of literature is *Orbis Pictus* (Visible World) (Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson, 1993). The book was kind of textbook written purposely for children by Czech educator John Amos Comenius and it published for the first time in 1658. It was considered the first widely used textbook with pictures for children. Latin and German language were used for the first time publishing and later in many European languages. This first-time picture books spread around the Europe quickly and became the pioneer of children picture book with written text for centuries.

There are many variations of picture books. Kennedy said that a picture book is a book, typically for children, in which the illustrations are more important (or even important than) the words in telling the story (Kennedy, 2017). Goins herself states the definition of picture books "as marriage between text and images. Through either the opposition or union between the words and artwork meaning is made in picture books (2004). In sum, picture books could be said of the book that has the picture and written text in order to support each other.

As it said before, the picture books are the books that contain the combination of picture or illustrations and written text. The content of the book must be accurate and it must have some balanced perspective in order not to belittle the topic of the book. The text and the illustrations in the picture book play the important role to build the perspective or point of view in the story.

Illustrations become an important part of the picture book. Illustrations have something the words could not do. The words could only describe it, but the illustrations could "show you". They could also make you feel them. A good picture book must have a picture on every page, and/or one in a pair. The size of illustration is also mattered. The size should big enough to be seen from a certain distance if it reads in a large group. The picture or illustrations in the book are the tools for the artist to convey their feeling and to stimulate their reader' sense.

Another function of illustrations in the picture books is to create the mood and display the setting of the story. As mention before, the text could provide the information in the picture book, but the illustration is the key to the information. In relation to the setting, the illustration could show the exact time or period of setting in the story.

The last function of the illustration in picture book could be seen from the way it defines and develops the character in the story. Illustrations could explain more of character's actions and their characterization by depicting it in the illustration. The descriptions of the characters not only explain within the text, but it is also vividly described through their expression or gesture in the illustrations.

The children will be able to understand more the meaning of the story when they look through the illustrations. Visual clues enable nonreaders and beginner readers to enjoy picture books by themselves (Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson, 1993). The illustrations will be a guide for the children when they do not have enough ability in reading. Children because of their young age will face several obstacles in the reading process.

So, this is where the illustrations will have the important role. They will help the children to follow the stories through the action of the characters, their expressions, actions, setting and so on. Then, children will be able to enjoy the stories when the adult read them aloud. When they listen, they will also pay attention to the illustrations of the story. In the end, when they gain more ability the children will be able to satisfy their curiosity about the story and they will be more attentive to the content.

### **Children's Literature**

From the beginning of the century, the children were always entertained by the adult with tell tales, fables, folk tales and so on. The forms of these stories are conveyed orally at first. But along the time these forms developed to the written forms. Nowadays, the genres of children's literature have shifted to multiple genres and draw many interests from everyone and every age.

According to Masters, the form children literature just as other forms of literature, it grew from oral tradition and passed down through the generations. Irish folktales could be traced back from 400 BCE, while the Panchatantra could be categorized as the earliest written folktales. It came from India and written around 200 AD. As for Aesop's fables for the earliest version, were appeared around 400 AD (Masters, 2012).

In Asia, especially in China, the emergence of children's literature was the same, the forms also were in oral. The storyteller reached its glory during the reign of Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD). Nowadays, these stories are still used to instruct the children in their school. However, in Greek and Roman something like this never occurred.

The children did not have any specific books made for them before 16th Century. The book that they used to learn was the book for the adult. There were no differences between them because there was no use of it. The first time children will learn to read they were faced with the book written for the adult. So, the book that they read for the first time will be the book

for the adult. For children, the books written for them conceivably have the genre in religious values or anthology of the oral stories and fairy tales.

### **Ecocriticism**

In 1978, Rueckert used the term Eco-criticism in his writing entitled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism". Unfortunately, ecocriticism was not gained any popularity after this. Glotfelty was the one who makes it known among the scholars. He used the term as part of his critical approach to analyzing the nature of writing. That writing then published under the title *The Ecocriticism Reader* in 1989. Glotfelty explains:

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 1992, the popularity of Ecocriticism in literature world caused the Western Literature Association (WLA) formed a new association especially for study in literature and ecology namely, Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE). This association aimed to promote a new approach to writing in the relationship between nature and literature. So that people can have new choices in writing about literature. Hopefully, it could also improve the idea of human and nature relationship. With this goal in mind, Patrick Murphy in 1993 finally composed a new journal, ISLE. ISLE or Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment is a journal used as a forum for critical studies in literature and nature.

Ecocriticism's main topic is the issue of environmental in the earth. The representation this can be seen from the relationship of human and their surroundings, the role of nature in the story, how to preserve the nature, the balance in the environmental system and so on. The use of ecocriticism as

the study for this writing will be the best choice. All of these issues will be the most interesting motif to analyze in literary works.

One of the important tasks of ecocriticism is raising the awareness from the early age. According to Lankford, the tie between children and environment emerged primarily because of John Locke's belief in the existence of a true nature in the child. He implies that nature is at once definable and real while it also mirrors the pure and simple nature of child (Lankford, 2010).

There are many benefits that can be gained using ecocritical texts to raise children's awareness of environmental issues. The appearance of nature will encourage the children to get back to it. Currently, the improvement of technology seems to discourage the children to play out of their home. They feel more comfortable inside the home. This will be caused them many disadvantages especially about their health. The parents could try to dissuade them from buying the picture book about nature for their reading materials. Through the representation of nature in the picture book, their curiosity will make them want to explore their surroundings.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study uses qualitative research methodology based on the interpretive philosophy. In a qualitative research, the data presented are in the form of narrative text or textual description of the phenomena under study. So, the object of this study presented more in words rather than in numbers.

Hancock in Makwanya and Dick (2014) said that qualitative content analysis is a procedure for the categorization of verbal or behavioral data, for purposes of classification, summarization, and tabulation. Therefore the best technical analysis for this study is qualitative. The reason is the data presented in the forms of words, phrases, and sentences as explain in the previous paragraph.



As Hoepful in Makwanya and Dick (2014) stated that another source of information that can be invaluable to qualitative researchers is documented analysis. The document analysis involved inquiring and analyzing documents on the children picture books that have the environmental theme. Those picture books also become the source of data in this study.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Applying ecocriticism in children's literature in this study aimed to seek how the children's literature could help the children to get close to their nature. As mention before, the type of children's book used in this study is picture books. The books are *Secret Garden* and *The Giving Tree*.

The first picture book, *The Secret Garden* was created by Frances Hodgson Burnett and published in 1911. This one is considered as Burnett's masterpiece and also acknowledge as classical children literature. The story was set in England and told a little girl named Mary Lennox life. The picture book version used in this study published in 2013 by the publisher Usborne Publishing Ltd and the illustrator is Alan Marks.

The aspect of environmental in *Secret Garden* can be depicted through the character of Mary Lennox and Dickon. The author described Mary as spoil, bad-tempered and unpleasant child. Her characterization as a protagonist in the picture book was a very contrast to the common protagonist in other books. Even though Mary's behavior is bad, her relationship toward nature is very close. This can be seen from the time she lived in India. She always enjoys playing alone in flower garden. She would then pretend to plant the flower. Every time she plays with flower, she tries her best to make her garden looks pretty. This scene about Mary clearly portrays her awareness of the environment around her.

The time she moved to England, in Yorkshire exactly, nature leads her to find a beautiful garden through a bird, a robin. Mary and the robin become good friends. It even helps her to find the garden's key. The friendship of

Mary and the robin could be interpreted as the relationship between human and animal, this is a part of Mary's communion in her surroundings. The robin itself, according to Smith (2017) Robin birds is a symbol of retaining our identity and sweetness in life. It also represents the spring song and good luck. Sometimes it also represents the renewal and the new beginning of someone's life. The symbolizing of the robin is the exact thing that happened to Mary. Knowing and having the friendship with it help her to begin her new life in a new country.

The finding of the garden brings a new purpose in Mary's life. She even got herself a friend, Dickon, a child of her age. This is the first time she got herself a friend. Usually, no one even dares to talk to her moreover befriend her. At the time she found the garden, she is sincerely wanted to save it. However, she did not have a good friend. She remembers Dickon, she told him, "I've found a secret garden," she said quickly. "I think it's mostly dead. I'm the only person who wants it to live. Come and see (Burnett, 2012).

This is the beginning of Mary friendship with Dickon. Later, they mostly spend their time in their secret garden. The character of Dickon described as the first to have an intimate relationship with nature. He always thinks that the garden around him is his sanctuary. He even has "gifted hands". The gardener, Ben comments of his skill, "Dickon can grow flower out of stone and charms the bird (Burnett, 2012). Dickon is very intimate with nature; it can be seen from his treatment towards the plants and animals. Towards the plants, he always treats them as his friends and towards animals such as birds, deer, rabbits, and geese, he protects them by not concealed about their habitat, "Can you keep a secret?" Dickon chuckled. "I keep secret all the time. If I told where wild animals live and birds make their nests, they wouldn't be safe" (Burnett, 2012).

The scene from the picture book can be used to help our children to build the friendship with nature. The picture book clearly shows the reader the strong relationship between nature and human. The garden needs human

hand's to nurture it. Meanwhile, the garden also gives humans something in return. The existence of the secret garden for Mary, help her to ease her temper. Before knowing about the garden and having a friendship with Robin and Dickon she has a terrible temper. Then she befriends Dickon and Robin, her temper gradually change. The children are working together to rebuild the garden. It shows us that the human and nature relationship can heal the feeling of anger. It can help them to shower their love to nurture their surroundings. It also raises their protective feeling towards nature. So, in this picture book the connection between human and nature depicted clearly.

The second picture book is *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein. This picture book is written and illustrated in 1964. This work is the narrative poem. This is one of the most notable works of his life. The story in this picture book centered on the two characters, the boy and the tree characters. The setting of this poem is in the forest. The tree and the boy have a strong relationship in the beginning of the story. The tree always becomes the provider for the boy. While the boy just enjoys every time the tree give him anything.

The theme of nature in this particular work set out in the first line of the poem: "There once was a tree" (Silverstein, 1964). This line introduced the tree character first rather than the boy. It shows how Silverstein emphasizes the importance of the existence of the tree in the story. Even though the story is classic one, about the relationship between nature and human, *The Giving Tree* shows the readers what they could not find in their everyday life.

The life of the boy symbolizes the life of all humanity in this world. Whereas the tree describes it is character rightly from the title of the story, as "giving". This then represents our nature, they give something while not asking in return. At the first stage, the boy and the tree are bonding their relationship deeply. They just enjoy their time together, nothing expected, its just happy life, "and she loved a little boy" (Silverstein, 1964). The tree's

feeling is reciprocating, the boy also loves the tree, “And the boy loved the tree... very much. And the tree was happy” (Silverstein, 1964).

Unfortunately for the tree, the boy grows up to be someone selfish. He no longer treats the tree as his friend. He rather treats the tree as the “provider”. Something that giving him anything at the time he needs something:

But the time went by,  
And the boy grew older.  
And the tree was 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 was happy (Silverstein, 1964).

The lines before describing the boy's attitude towards the tree. He grows up to be a selfish man. He is just asking and he does not think of the tree's feeling. This situation is exactly how nature always provides for humanity and how the humanities are depending on nature. It is a very demonstrative way of Silverstein's ability to convey his feeling about human and nature.

The sacrifice of the tree does not end there. By the time the boy comes back he is asking for more and does not care for the tree feelings:

But the boy stayed away for a long time...  
and the tree was 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 tree clearly overjoyed with the presence of the boy. She even told him to play with her again. So he can be a happy boy once more. Unfortunately, the boy's feeling is not keen to play, but asking for something of the tree, again:

"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 was happy.

This time the tree gives her branches in order for the boy, now the man, to build himself a house for a family. The meanings in this stanza describe the situation of nature and human. Once human got something from nature, he will take it again and again until the nature exhausted and could give no more. The boy has this trait. He just comes if he needs something, otherwise, he will not come back. This behavior will lead to depletion of the environment. The impact is not only to nature but too human as well. The global warming, the natural disaster such flood and landslide are two examples of the natural disaster that happened quite often to us. Aware or not, more and more natural disasters could befall humanity if they were not careful in treating the nature.

How to use these two works in order to increase the consciousness of environment in children? The simplest way to *The Secret Garden* is to imitate the process of rebuild the garden. The picture books of *Secret Garden* will be used as the reading project for children and tell them to be

ready to apply them. The teachers can give them homework on how to rebuild or to preserve the garden. They have to bring the children on the field trip or use school garden as the medium. Then teachers have to explain the benefit of having the garden clean and the plants. This is one of many things that teacher can do to raise awareness of the environment.

In *The Giving Tree*, the children could directly to play around the trees. The activity or the game they could do is “guess what tree” and “find-me-please!” In the first game, the teachers could make a story about one particular tree. They will read the specific characteristics of the tree and make the children guess it. The winner then will have a right to go to picnic for the next day accompanied by the teachers and they can plant the tree together. Then, the second game “find-me-please!” the children will be blindfolded and lead to the tree. The one who will blindfold them should be the other children. The chosen child with blindfold should explore every inch of the tree’s parts. From branches, trunks, barks and so on. When they finished the task, the child with blindfolded should be moved to the other side of the tree. The question will be “find your tree!” the blindfold will be take off for he or she to begin their search. The aim of this game is, in particular, to make the children closer to the tree. So when they no longer are a child, they would still care for trees and environment.

## **CONCLUSION**

The picture books of *The Secret Garden* show that children are the best agent to raise the awareness of environmental issues. From the moment Mary found the deserted garden, her protective instinct suddenly comes up. Through the garden, she can deliver her love for the flowers. She also soothed her anger and makes a friend with Dickon, the boy who taught her more about gardening. The whole story conveys the message of the relationship between human and nature. This is represented in the characters of Mary and Dickon.

In *The Giving Tree*, Silverstein successfully captured the greed of humanity towards nature through the relationship between the "giving tree"

and the boy, later the man. His poem captured the sacrificing of nature to human and in return how the human repaid the nature. The men are always taking but never giving. In the end, nature will be destroyed if this behavior is not stopped.

Therefore, as one of the way to raise the environmental consciousness, children's literature could be very effective. Many kinds of children's literature with the theme of ecology or green literature could be a helpful tool to promote the eco-consciousness among our future generation. Moreover, the teachers and the parent encouragements could become the first effort. In the end, children's literature tied together the environmental issues could be a strong ally and provide the most valuable service and amazing effort toward humanity.

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