

ANNA JANUS-SITARZ ORCID: 0000-0003-2730-7048
Jagiellonian University

It Sees, Feels, Tells... and Fixes the World. The Tree as a Literary Character for a Young Audience

Abstract: Nature in the young adult and children's literature is not just a set of events. It is inextricably woven into the fate of people, observes them, interferes: sometimes helps, admonishes them, allows to better understand the world around. One of such popular characters who actively enter the action is a tree. It communicates important values to human co-heroes and shows how to be useful (Silverstein's *Gift Tree*). However, this article puts the question what is the special function of books that perform literary vision of the scientific research proving the intelligence of plants. In the novels of Harasimowicz *Mirabelle tree* and Applegate's *Wish Tree*, the tree, drawing wisdom from many years of observations of the reality that changes around it, prompts the reader to reflect on how to fix this not the best world. Literary pictures of trees have a chance to convince young readers that nature knows more than we do. The analysis of literary visions of a tree in selected books for young people proves that such a way of meeting the literature presenting nature as a living, feeling, suffering organism can be of great importance in proecological thinking and ethical approach.

Keywords: critical plant studies, ecocriticism, tree, young adult and children's literature, Katherine Applegate, Cezary Harasimowicz

THE WISDOM AND USEFULNESS OF NATURE

Researchers of the „critical plant studies” trend point to direct relationships between the scientific interests of biologists, literary scholars, philosophers and a political movement that argues that the chance of our planet's survival depends on plant life. (Kokkola, 2017: 274–280). Within literary research, this argument is strongly emphasized, especially when the literature is analyzed, showing specific examples of human dependence on the world of flora. As Lydia Kokkola argues, the „critical plant studies” emphasize the central place that plants occupy in determining the future of life on Earth, and the presence of the thread of human-nature relations in works addressed to young audiences is

an expression of adults' concern for the environment that children will inherit from us. (Kokkola, 2017: 274–275).

Ecocriticism undermines discourses assuming the superiority of people over the surrounding nature and also proves how, in the Anthropocene era, man actively interfered with the order of nature, leading to the threat of an ecological catastrophe (Bińczyk, 2018, Fiedorczuk, 2015, Jasikowska, 2018). Showing the extraordinary importance of an ecosystem, in which human existence depends on clean air or unpolluted water, is often done through literary dystopian images of ecological crises resulting from a disregard for the role and power of nature.

Such a metaphorical picture of this crisis is presented in many books, for example, by Marcin Szczygielski in his novel *Czarny Młyn* (Szczygielski, 2010). The abandoned mill attracts hundreds of the electric objects – symbols of consumerism and the destruction of the environment – and creates dangerous monsters from them, and their adult users, perpetrators of a climate catastrophe (manifestation in the novel is, for example, the confusion of the seasons and the terrible asphalt highway where rabbits die). As a consequence of these events young people have to save the world from an ecological catastrophe.

Numerous similar dystopian literary examples are provided by Alice Curry (Curry, 2017). She analyzes the books for young readers that present apocalyptic visions of people fleeing to other planets because on their own planet they have disturbed the hierarchy: man – environment, preferring the realization of their own selfish desires over the fight against the threat of destruction of other organisms living next to them on earth.

However, the subjects of these considerations are not literary dystopian examples but those in which the positive power of nature can be found, resulting from its specific wisdom and usefulness. Both qualities are the subject of the research and description in scientific and popular science books addressed to adults or youth. Ecocriticism researchers say that denying the intelligence of plants is not based on scientific data but on prejudices held over the centuries. Meanwhile, biologists, referring to the criteria used in the study of animal intelligence, demonstrate that plant behavior clearly reveals the ability to feel, the ability to move, search for light, adapt to new conditions, and respond to sounds. (Kokkola, 217: 276)

Even stronger evidence of the wisdom of plants can be found in popular science publications recently published in Poland. In the book *Finding the Mother Tree. Discovering the wisdom of the forest* Suzanne Simard, professor of forest ecology at the University of British Columbia, introduces a reader to the secrets of trees, especially examples of their cooperation, communication through an underground network of mycelium, the ability to consciously feel, help other individuals, and maintain bonds with them (Simard, 2021). Similarly, Peter Wohlleben, a German ecologist, activist, and forester, writes

in his work *The Secret Life of Trees* (Wohlleben, 2016) about how trees communicate with each other, care for their offspring, and nurture their old and sick neighbors. The same secrets of trees' communication and their struggle for survival are described in a book intended for younger readers *What the trees rustle about* and published with illustrations by Diana Karpowicz (Wohlleben, 2018).

The second issue – the usefulness of flora, including trees – is taken up in the popular science book for children *The team to fix the world. How ten million species bend over backwards to save your ass*. Anne Sverdrup-Thygeson writes in it, inter alia:

On a warm August day in 1962, a botanist found himself under a twisted eight-meter-long Pacific yew. As the tree was the 1645th plant he sampled, he gave it the simple and elegant name B-1645. Samples were sent for analysis. Paclitaxel, a substance that causes cancer cells to stop dividing, has been found in the B-1645 cortex. Today, this agent is one of the most economical anticancer drugs ever produced. And all started with a piece of bark. (Anne Sverdrup-Thygeson, 2022; translation – A. Janus-Sitarz)

The meaning of a tree is not always as spectacular as that of a professor of natural sciences in the Norwegian book, but its special role in fiction may have an impact on children's perception of the world, its problems, relationships between people and their place in nature.

A SPACE OF FREEDOM AND FUN

It is worth considering which of biologists' findings regarding the intelligence of trees are implemented in the latest literature for young people, as well as what specific ecological and moral goals their authors set for readers. First, however, we will look at examples of earlier literary implementations of the tree motif in children's literature.

Some of the books for young readers are limited to presenting the tree as a special place: a space of freedom and fun, a territory reserved exclusively for carefree children, with the right to transform boughs and branches into castle halls, labyrinths, a mysterious island or simply a safe island by the power of their imagination. hiding place.

It plays such a role in 1975 Maria Terlikowska's classic, repeatedly re-published novel, *Tree up up to the Sky* (Terlikowska, 2015). It is here, when climbing a magnificent tree growing in the yard, little characters experience adventures, turn into knights, save the princess; they discover a secret garden. The tree becomes a great jungle for them, a playground, and a place to grow up. When the plans to remove the tree, which for the builders is an „obstacle”, approach, all residents, including children and adults, fight for it in solidarity.

Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek, in an article about Terlikowska's book, called one of the headings: *This is not an ecological book...* (Wójcik-Dudek, 2019: 224). Indeed, the residents' protest against cutting down the only tree growing in their backyard is actually episodic and does not translate into the ecological awareness of the little characters. For them, the tree is above all a great place to play, meet, observe, and mature. Playing in the tree is conducive not only to the integration of the participating children, but also to the rest of the backyard community. The threat that the tree will be cut down and resistance to this decision trigger a community spirit in the inhabitants.

Terlikowska's story conveys the value of social bonds. The tree is treated by the inhabitants as a symbol of community, children defend it because it is a place of integration in play and growing up, adults defend it because it probably embodies their childhood memories, it is also a „common good”. However, it is not treated as part of a greater good, nature, rather, as part of their property, such as the yard or the houses around it.

A similar function is a territory of great fun, a metaphor for a carefree childhood, and a fodder for imagination in the series of books by Andy Griffiths, which began with the volume of the *13-story treehouse*. The trees in these works, however, are not the characters of the story. Although, as a space – they become a kind of *spiritus movens* of the children's characters' actions, they remain passive themselves.

THE INTELLIGENCE OF THE TREES

The situation is completely different in the works in which we deal with anthropomorphized the trees¹, which assume the role of beings endowed with wisdom and feelings, who address their words directly to the little child characters or, indirectly, to a child's reader.

Therefore, Shel Silverstein goes one step further to determine that the tree is not only a place to play and live for others in the *Gift tree* (Silverstein, 2017). In a short story about the friendship between the apple tree and the boy, we find a touching and instructive parable about the consequences of taking advantage of the good offered by a tree without getting anything in return. The apple tree fulfills all the boy's dreams and needs, first giving him a great place to play and eating fruit and then – as he grows up – branches, boughs, and finally a trunk for building a house and a boat. When he comes to it for the last time, it offers him a place to rest on its cut trunk. A child will probably read this wise story as a lesson about the boundless love and sacrifice that one friend gives to another. Maybe also about the boy's lack of gratitude and reciprocity, because he

¹ M. Kotkowska wrote about anthropomorphic representations of plants in illustrated books for children at the turn of the 20th century in the article *Rośliny – dzieci, plody Matki Ziemi w książce dziecięcej początku XX wieku*, (Kotkowska, 2019).

was guided only by his selfish desires. Whether the little reader will read something more will probably depend on an adult intermediary in the reading, that will direct reflection on the relationship between man and nature, on its exploitation, thoughtless, irresponsible use, leading to slow but inevitable death. The young recipient has the opportunity to understand that he is responsible for healing the world by caring for trees. What is more, the keys to saving the planet are in the hands of the children.

However, we deal with a particular representation of the trees in two novels for young adults: *Mirabelle tree (Mirabelka)* by Cezary Harasimowicz (Harasimowicz, 2018) and Katherine Applegate's *Wish tree* (Applegate, 2021). The books selected for analysis are united by a literary concept, which involves entrusting the role of a narrator to anthropomorphized trees, as well as the implementation of an ecological and ethical messages. The title characters: a fruit tree and an oak are not only a representation of the extraordinary usefulness of their species, a quiet and devoted plant, they are above all a wise voice of nature, endowed – according to the claims of previously mentioned scientists – with intelligence, the will to survive, the ability to feel and communicate. They are living beings who observe, feel, suffer, and tell about these observations, feelings, and fears because they are the narrators of the story. They tell the world.

In the novel by Cezary Harasimowicz the mirabelle growing in the courtyard of prewar Warsaw and then its offspring: first the daughter and then the granddaughter, tell the difficult history of Poland, the stories of the inhabitants of one courtyard, the fate of specific people marked by violence, intolerance, and the lack of acceptance for otherness.² The trees enjoy the quiet life of the Jewish district, the holidays of its inhabitants, and the smells of their dishes; they suffer when a district turns into a ghetto and its unfortunate community turns into ghosts; they feel painfully when successive beloved human friends leave the country that enslaves them.

Trees and people, particles of the same biosphere, are subject to the same laws of nature: they feel anxious about the processes taking place in their young organisms, they seek communication with others, they suffer when someone hurts them, they get sick, lose their strength, and die. Trees experience a special bond with people, they rejoice in their joy and despair over their misfortunes.

Sometimes these misfortunes are so great that sensitive mirabelles cannot bear them, they strain the trunk, tear their roots out of the ground, and prepare to flee. When mirabelle's mother stops comprehending the war reality behind the ghetto walls, she also stops bearing fruit and starts talking to her Lord God, the Big Tree. She asks him why the trees – despite their diversity – understand each other, give way to each other, share the sap of their roots, even when they

² Krzysztof Rybak writes more about the history contained in *Mirabelka* and the reflections on the passing of time, in his review *Niezwykła siła zamknięta w pestce. Recenzja „Mirabelki” Cezarego Harasimowicza*, (Rybak, 2018).

die, and „people... People ... Every man is different and often turns this otherness into hatred” (Harasimowicz, 2018: 95³). Her numerous questions about the cause of evil, about the innocent death of the victims remain unanswered, and perhaps the most important ends them:

„Tell me, Big Tree, what do these people owe other people except that they are different?”

The Great Tree is silent. (Harasimowicz, 2018: 97)

Literary trees, however, do not stop at asking questions, which, of course, are also questions to the reader, from whom they expect to give an ethical answer, in line with Levinas’ philosophy (Levinas, 1961). Mirabelles also give hints to people on how to fix this world. The first tip is about tolerance, acceptance of otherness, and enjoying diversity. It is therefore a lesson about relations with another person or another living being, with someone who has different customs, such as the Jewish inhabitants of Nalewki, or with someone who has a different social status, such as the families of Dorka and Chaim, or with the one who will always remain a child like Maciek with a big head, or with the one with leaves, roots, and fruit like a mirabelle.

The second lesson, on the other hand, gives hints on how to change yourself in order to live your life well; how to come to terms with the sadness and inexorable passing away, the leaving of loved ones, where to draw strength from, how to feel like a part of great nature and trust in its laws.

When the old mirabelle plum withers, she assures her daughter:

– I will never leave you. My roots will remain in the ground. I will feed you with my juices. [...]

– You are an adult, my daughter. You bear beautiful fruit, give sweetness, and please the eyes of the people who live here. You can do without me. You have to be independent. (Harasimowicz, 2018: 124)

This belief in a constant relationship with ancestors who never really leave allows to survive difficult moments, to understand the meaning of one’s duration and mission. The mother’s words make the mirabelle draw strength from them many years later, despite the misfortunes:

How could I escape here? After all, I grew up in the soil where my mother and my grandmother had their roots. I take juices from the remains of my ancestors. I am fine here. I draw strength from the sun and the happiness of people who make compotes and cakes from my fruit. (Harasimowicz, 2018: 157)

Mirabelle realizes that she is also absorbing the memory about that city, which she has not seen but it has been seen by her mother and grandmother. She

³ All quoted fragments of *Mirabelle tree* and *Wish tree* are translated by the author of the article.

grows in memory, draws strength and wisdom from the experiences of her predecessors. This lesson on self-change is also a lesson on how to be useful and enjoy it.

The character of Harasimowicz's book gives the young reader a simple message that repairing the world must begin with ourselves.

Similar hints are provided to the audience by Oak, the protagonist of the novel *Wish tree* by Katherine Applegate. In tree's narrative, we find the same observations, wisdom, and messages as in Harasimowicz's novel, although told differently. Oak, like the mirabelle, is subjected to various adversities („I was threatened by axes, saws, diseases and pests”) (Applegate, 2021: 36) and just like her, it becomes a long-standing witness of human kindness or unfriendliness towards others, here: newly arrived town inhabitants.

At that time, as at many other times in history, hungry and desperate people traveled across the sea in overburdened boats to settle here. Many have moved to the area. The blue and green houses were brown then and full of people, new arrivals.

Sometimes they were warmly welcomed. Sometimes not. But they still came, with hope and dreams, like all people. (Applegate, 2021: 110)

Oak, like a mirabelle, observes how successive generations of the inhabitants experience joy, emotions, but also suffering, intolerance, what desires they have and how easily others, including trees, are hurt.

Oak has easy access to knowledge of people's dreams, because it is a tree of wishes and it is there that the inhabitants hang cards written with their hidden thoughts, hope, and the need for love. Such trees, hung with cards, ribbons, scraps of fabric, can be seen all over the world: in Mjanmar (Burma), Turkish Cappadocia, European Lisbon. People everywhere are looking for happiness, while the literary trees argue that happiness depends on themselves. They show it on their own example. Just as the mirabelle was delighted that she could give sweet fruit to others, the Oak also derives joy from its own usefulness, although in the face of the announced cutting down it ponders whether it has given enough to others:

I also wondered if I had done enough for the world I loved. The specter of imminent death provokes reflection.

Yes, I was casting a cool shadow. I was producing oxygen that people breathed.

I gave shelter to small and large. [...]

And yet... (Applegate, 2021: 70)

Full of kindness to people and responsibility for the world, Oak looks for a way, how to fix it, how to help people fix the world. He lays out his philosophy starting with his own example. And – just like the mirabelle plum – the Oak also shows that good relationships are the basis of happiness:

[...] I am not just a tree. I am home. Community.

Various creatures live among my branches. They dig burrows and burrow the ground between my roots. They lay eggs on my leaves. (Applegate, 2021: 25)

And this community is bound by certain laws that allow it to live peacefully because:

There is a lot of give and take in nature. Woodpeckers poke holes in my bark, but they eat harmful insects. The grass protects the soil from drying out, but it competes with me for water. [...]

For example, this spring exceptionally many babies were born, and I give shelter to the little owls, little possums, and little raccoons. [...]

Animals do not like tight spaces; they stick to their territories. In fact, they should argue and even throw each other out of their nests or fight for space.

In fact, there are conflicts, but I immediately warned them that eating neighbors is out of the question as long as I keep the order here.

Keeping others safe is a good way of life. (Applegate, 2021: 28)

Community, giving, taking, shelter, and care are the key words in a lesson about good relationships. Talking about the changing inhabitants of the nearby houses, Oak delights with their diversity, languages, cuisine and customs. For him, this variety is „the most beautiful garden”. (Applegate, 2021: 51) This is not an ordinary lesson in tolerance; it is about enjoying the richness of sounds and smells. That is why the tree’s patience ends when the words full of hatred are shouted out at the newly arrived girl and her family: „Get out!”, „Muslims go home!”. The basis of good relations is openness to others.

The wisdom of nature tells us that repairing the world must start with accepting yourself and others, because „Peace is beautiful, and accepting the world is full of charm” (Applegate, 2021: 32). Oak admits that it itself often wonders:

What would it be like to be able to fly? Hop? To swim? Gallop?

Certainly fantastic. Joy itself. Yet I would not give up even the smallest root for it.

It is a great gift to know how to love yourself and who you are (Applegate, 2021: 42).

Letting go of unrealistic ambitions brings peace, as well as the ability to enjoy life, the stars, the touch of wings, calm meditation and living in harmony with nature.

The voice of the mirabelle in Harasimowicz’s novel is heard only by children. The same happens in Applegate’s book. For adults, it is „just a tree” that they want to get rid of, because it gives too much shade and the cards with wishes hung on it litter the street. For the child characters, „it is like a man” (Applegate, 2021: 145), and you only need to listen to it carefully.

IMAGINATION AND ECOLOGY

The authors of the School of Ecopoetics, established at the Institute of Reportage, in their manifesto refer to the words of Lawrence Buell, one of the early promoters of environmental humanities, who puts to the fore the question of the relationship between human beings and nonhuman nature: „The ecological crisis is primarily a crisis of imagination” (*Manifesto*, 2022). And then they declare:

Ecology is not an escape from the world with its complexity and suffering; on the contrary, it is a confrontation, sometimes painful, with reality. On the damaged planet, however, life continues – human and nonhuman, and creation takes place alongside destruction. The School of Ecopoetics is our attempt to direct energy towards creation (poiesis). It is a collective action. It is a search for creative survival strategies.

We are convinced that reflecting on how we tell ourselves reality is a key task today. Language sets the boundaries of the world in which we live – working with words becomes, therefore, almost the first-front activity in the fight for our future. (*Manifesto*, 2022, translation – A. Janus-Sitarz)

How Harasimowicz and Applegate tell us the world, making trees narrators of the stories, is precisely the way of preventing the crisis of imagination leading to the annihilation of nature, including our human species, the way of expanding the boundaries of the world and searching for survival strategies.

Such a way of meeting the literature presenting nature as a living, feeling, suffering organism can be of great importance in proecological thinking. Magdalena Środa, in a lecture at the GeoLogos conference (Środa, 2022) devoted to reflection on the paths that humanists should follow to save us from the climate catastrophe, spoke about the need for practical ethics based on empathy, care and responsibility for the future. She emphasized that in order to disseminate such ethical values and lead to their interiorization, unconventional methods of action are necessary, which must open the „third eye”: „planetary eye”, which will allow to see and understand problems from a much wider perspective. Literature, poetry, and metaphor can be useful in this „opening of the planetary eye”. Reading books for children showing our world, the world of people from the perspective of wise, compassionate trees can make it easier for young readers to cothink with nature, of which they are a part, an endangered species.

Literary pictures of trees have a chance to convince young readers that nature knows more than we do.

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