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Ada and Her Path to Freedom. Books *The War That Saved My Life* and *The War I Finally Won* by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley in an Ecocritical Mirror

Abstract: The article is an attempt at an ecocritical interpretation of two novels by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley. Their protagonist is 10-year-old Ada, locked in a one-room flat in London since she was born. She knows the world around only from the perspective of looking through the window, she is illiterate and does not even know her name. Although it is difficult to believe, the reason why her mother decided to lock her up was Ada's deformed foot. The girl has to face not only her disability but also the sense of rejection and contempt from her mother. Everything changes after she and her brother flee from the city afflicted with bombings to the countryside, which appears to be the land of peace and safety. The contact with nature, human kindness and, above all, the courage and determination of the protagonist herself enable her to win a better future for herself and her brother. The proposed interpretation of Bradley's novels, with reference to ecocriticism, disability studies, and intersectionality, offers expanded possibilities for interpretation and practical use in school settings.

Keywords: ecocriticism, utopia, ethical interpretation, nature, war, disability, literature for a young reader, disability studies, intersectionality

INTRODUCTION

Education, according to many contemporary researchers, should enable the development of:

sensitivity to the needs of other people and problems of the natural environment; tolerance towards the beliefs of others; responsibility for people and nature. It is essential to teach understanding and functioning in a world of multiple views, values, attitudes, and identities, also through the ability to conduct a dialogue. In the field of cognitive skills, one should develop the ability to think critically, learn and understand different perspectives, worldviews,

emotions, attitudes. Education should also help one to adapt to the unpredictability of life and the world and prepare them for various, including complex, existential experiences by shaping the attitude of *resilience*, which is facilitated by developing broadly understood social and communication skills. Finally, it is important to raise hope – education should be not only reactive and retrospective but also proactive and prospective, shaping the sense of agency (Michalski, 2021: 29–30).

Among the many books of contemporary literature for the young reader, those that “teach an open attitude towards multiculturalism, empathy towards the Other, especially the weaker one” (Janus-Sitarz 2021: 502), respect for every life, and an empathic attitude towards nature and all its inhabitants are particularly valuable. This category of works certainly includes two of Kimberly Brubaker Bradley’s novels *War That Saved My Life* and *War I Finally Won*.¹

Lucyna Sadzikowska accurately observes that

At present, children’s and young adult literature is not only studied through the lens of traditional references, but it is also interpreted in the light of poststructural research methods such as hermeneutics, deconstruction, gender, feminism, and postcolonialism. In the school setting, students’ openness to multiple interpretations of the text is a vital postulate. They cannot be confined to a single proper research paradigm (Sadzikowska, 2017: 360–361).

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Reading these books from an ecocritical perspective opens up opportunities to consider Ada’s history as a meeting with otherness or the place of the Other in the environment and the relationship between the human being and the environment. For my considerations, I will refer to the critical findings of ecocriticism, one of the vital contemporary proposals of literary research.² Ac-

¹ It is worth noting that both books gained the status of bestseller according to the New York Times, the title of the best children’s book of the year according to the Washington Post and Wall Street Journal, and the best book of the year according to Kirkus.

² As a literary studies trend, ecocriticism is represented in world literature by numerous significant monographs and other scholarly texts. It is worth mentioning, among others, Buell L. *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Blackwell, Malden, MA 2005; Knickerbocker S. *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst 2012;; Garrard G., *Ecocriticism*, Routledge, Oxon and New York 2012; . *Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook*, ed. By P.D. Murphy, T. Gifford, K. Yamazato, Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, Chicago 1998; Clark T., *Ecocriticism on the Edge. Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*, Bloomsbury Academia, London–New York 2015; Murphy Patrick D., *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies. Fences, Boundaries and Fields*, Lexington Books, Plymouth 2009; Huggin G., Tiffin H., *Postcolonial Ecocriticism. Literature, Animals, Environment*,

According to Anna Barcz, this approach emerged from the interest of humanists in “the problems of environmental protection and reflection on the changes in human attitudes towards the surrounding nature and related cultural phenomena” (Barcz, 2012: 59). Ewa Domańska, characterizing the new scientific paradigm – *ecological humanities*, emphasizes that the world is one system of equal elements. Therefore, there is a need of

submitting to the laws of ecology and regarding humanity as a part of a larger whole of a living system [...] [it is necessary to refer to] an ethics of respect and interspecies solidarity, which is of considerable significance for the consideration of the idea of social justice and opening it up to non-human beings. (Domańska, 2013: 21) [English translation: http://rcin.org.pl/Content/59981/WA248_79763_P-I-2524_domanska-ecological_o.pdf].

The essential statement about the considerations undertaken in the article is that of Przemysław Czapliński, who notes that

Ecocriticism is an interpretive trend oriented towards texts (not only literary) as a source of knowledge about the relations between human beings and their environment. Ecocritics recognize that every text presents and designs the relationship between a human being and nature, so everything can be read and interpreted from an ecocritical perspective (Czapliński, 2017:11).

A similar position is taken by Julia Fiedorczuk, who emphasizes that, according to ecocritics of the so-called second wave, “every or almost every text can be read from an ecological perspective, because every text, consciously or not, is somehow staging the relationship between human being and the natural environment” (Julia Fiedorczuk, 2015: 27–28). Such a way of reading is referred to as *green reading*, during which questions are asked, among others, about the way of representing the natural environment in the work or the presentation

Routledge, London, New York 2010. In Polish academic circles, the study of ecocriticism is undertaken by, among others, Ewa Domańska (Domańska, 2013), Anna Barcz (Barcz, 2016), Julia Fiedorczuk (Fiedorczuk, 2015), Włodzimierz Tyburski (Tyburski, 2013), Przemysław Czapliński, Joanna B. Bednarek and Dawid Gostyński (Czapliński, Bednarek and Gostyński, 2013), Wiesława Tomaszewska (Tomaszewska, 2018), Anna Kronenberg, (Kronenberg, 2015), Aleksandra Ubertowska (Ubertowska, 2020). Contemporary literature dedicated to researching literature for young readers is equally rich. See also e.g.: Beauvais, C. *The Mighty Child: Time and Power in Children's Literature*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2015; Joosen, V. *Adulthood in Children's Literature*. London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2018; Nikolajeva, M. *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*. London: Routledge, 2010; Waller, A. *Rereading Childhood Books: A Poetics*. London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi and Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2019; Review of Polish research by Sadzikowska Lucyna, see *Mapa współczesnych badań nad książką dziecięco-młodzieżową*. In: K. Tałuć (ed.), *Literatura dla dzieci i młodzieży*. Vol. 5 (pp. 360-378). Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, (2017).

of a specific place, as well as the problem of the relationship with a specific inhabited “green” place. (Kronenberg, 2015: 29–31) *Green reading* (as well as *green writing*) can be referred to as “the content of literary works themselves”; ecological humanities broadens the perspective on literature, on a literary work [...] the analysis of a work can also reveal ecological content “. (Tomaszewska, 2018:84)

According to Anna Kronenberg,

green reading and writing (or relationships between literature and the environment) consist of many fields of research, including geopoetics, ecofeminism, indirectly ecophilosophy and ecocritics [...] in geopoetics, the focus is on the natural environment: the entire planet and specific geographical places. A human being appears in relation to the place. There is a shift of perspective from anthropocentric to bio/geocentric (Kronenberg, 2015: 45).

It is crucial to address critical principles of disability studies and intersectionality theory when considering the persecution and exclusion that the disabled protagonist experiences. Disability has been and continues to be the subject of numerous theoretical studies and interdisciplinary research. Especially significant in the reflection on disability are the so-called disability studies, pioneered by Simi Linton, the author of the 1998 book titled *Claiming Disability. Knowledge and Identity*.

According to Simi Linton, disability is a social, political and cultural phenomenon [...] In her opinion, this approach enables disability studies to have numerous points of intersection with other research perspectives [...] She also describes oppressive mechanisms present in everyday and scientific English language and societal divisions, evident through the arrangement of public space. According to Simi Linton, the objective of disability studies is to engage in a critical self-examination of various categories such as independence versus dependence, aesthetic preferences that exist in a particular culture, the concept of health and its definitions, and the issue of ableism. Ableism refers to the irrational bias against disabled individuals, particularly in its subtle forms, and its influence on the wider social fabric. (Fidowicz, 2016: 112)

Incorporating intersectionality, an interdisciplinary research perspective³, into the discussion of the causes and forms of discrimination faced by Ada can

³ Intersectionality is one of the most important concepts in the social science. The term was introduced by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in the article *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, University of Chicago Legal Forum: Vol. 1989: Iss. 1, Article 8. Available at: <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica: Intersectionality, in social theory, the interaction and cumulative effects of multiple forms of discrimination affecting the daily lives of individuals, particularly women of color. The term also refers more broadly to an intellectual framework for understanding how various aspects of individual identity

provide a more comprehensive approach to the observations. In intersectional analysis, various social categories that shape the identity are taken into consideration. (Crenshaw, 1989) By following the principles of this research approach, we can discover the intersection of different forms of persecution and oppression that the protagonist experienced. This can help us understand the impact of these on her perception of herself and the world. Furthermore, this approach can broaden the interpretation of the story and open up new possibilities for using it in educational practice.

THE START OF HITLER'S WAR SET ME FREE⁴

Kimberly Brubaker Bradley's novels can be read from many perspectives. We are dealing here with works embedded in the reality of World War II. Katarzyna Wądolny-Tatar believes that

Narratives aimed at young children about World War II often focus on individual experiences of characters who are portrayed as peers. These stories also pay attention to the child's position within the family, and take care not to expose them to too much cruelty. Instead, these narratives aim to inspire compassion and empathy in young readers. (Wądolny-Tatar, 2017: 113) (Wądolny-Tatar, 2017: 113)

As Beata Mytych-Forajter aptly writes, the books by Brubaker Bradley, narrating the wartime experiences of the Smith siblings involved in the Pied Piper evacuation – the relocation of 800.000 children from London to the English countryside – stand out against the backdrop of

Polish wartime prose for young readers who grew up reading 'Czterej pancerni i pies' (Four Tank Men and a Dog) and other stories of World War II, concentration camps, and the post-war Sovietization of Poland [...]. The works mentioned above provide an opportunity to explore a unique perspective on

– including race, gender, social class, and sexuality – interact to create unique experiences of privilege or oppression [...] Crenshaw introduced the concept to address experiences of oppression that could not be adequately understood as the result of ordinary patterns of discrimination". Intersectionality | Definition, Kimberle Crenshaw, History, Applications, Criticism, & Facts | Britannica, dostęp: 2024-01-15. See also K.W. Crenshaw, Ch.L. Harris, A Primer on Intersectionality Booklet. African American Policy Forum, Vassar College, Columbia Law School, Poughkeepsie 2009, http://aapf.org/tool_to_speak_out/intersectionality-primer/; L. McCall, The Complexity of Intersectionality, „Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society” 2005; P.H. Collins, Reflections on the Outsider Within, „Journal of Career Development” 1999/2000, vol. 26 (1), pp. 85–88. vol. 30 (3), s. 1771–1800; K. Davis, Intersectionality as Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful, „Feminist Studies” 2008, no. 9, p. 67;

⁴ See Bradley, 2017: 13. [English original source (p. 10) <https://archive.org/details/thewar-thatsavedmylifebykimberlybrubakerbradley1/page/n9/mode/2up>]

portraying wartime trauma [...]. The wartime context is essential, but the forefront is given to the psyche of an abused child, subjected to the cruelty of an inept mother with sadistic tendencies (Mytych-Forajter, 2021: 2).

Ada's story is about toxic relationships in the family, about the difficult experiences of siblings, whose lives were complicated by the war on the one hand. Still, on the other hand, it changed them dramatically. It is about the search for their identity and sense of value, about regaining trust in people and the world, and rejection and exclusion of otherness and others. We can also try *green reading*; then, in reflecting on the story of the heroine of Bradley's novel, it will be essential to examine the relationship of this character with the places where she happened to function and the impact of the environment on her life. We meet Ada when she is ten years old and lives with her mother and brother in London in a one-bedroom apartment on the third floor. She tells her own story. It is June 1939, England, Europe, and the world just before the World War II outbreak. But the prospect of global conflict does not arouse fear in her, as opposed to most people at that time, as she says:

[...] while I'd heard of Hitler – little bits and pieces and swear words that floated from the lane to my third-floor window – I wasn't the least concerned about him or any other war fought between nations (Bradley, 2017: 9). [English original source (p.8) <https://archive.org/details/thewarthatssavedmylifebykimberlybrubakerbradley1/page/n9/mode/2up>]

Such a statement may be surprising, but we cease to be surprised when we learn the context. Ada is disabled from birth, and that makes her struggle to move around. Therefore, it is justified to look at the girl's story from the perspective of disability studies.

My right foot was small and twisted so that the bottom pointed skyward, all the toes in the air, and what should have been the top touched the ground. The ankle didn't work right, of course, and it hurt whenever I put weight on it, so for most of my life I never did. I was good at crawling. (Bradley, 2017: 10). [English source: p. 9]

The mother was ashamed of her daughter's disability, which was why she forbade her from leaving the apartment,

"You're nobbut a disgrace!" – she screamed. – A monster with that ugly foot! You think I want the world seeing my shame? (Bradley, 2017: 10). [English source: p. 8]

The woman did not attempt treatment or rehabilitation, which would be a chance for a normal life for her daughter. The apartment was a prison for Ada. She knew the outside world only from the stories of her brother, Jamie,

and from the observation through the window. The girl associated the four walls of the tiny room only with fear and pain. The mother often threatened her daughter that she would board the window up for disobedience and thus deprive her of one of the few joys of life. The woman often punished her daughter by locking her in an even smaller space – a cabinet under the sink.

The cabinet was a cubby [...] The pipe dripped sometimes, so the cabinet was always damp and smelly. Worse, roaches lived there. I didn't mind roaches out in the open so much. I could smash them with a piece of paper and throw their bodies out the window. In the cabinet, in the dark, I couldn't smash them. They swarmed all over me. Once one crawled into my ear (Bradley, 2017: 18). [English source p. 13]

It seems that it is no coincidence that cockroaches appear here, as we can refer to the stereotypical perception of these insects. On the one hand, they repulse people – in dreams, they are a symbol of sadness and adverse and unfortunate events, but on the other hand, their view may herald positive life changes.⁵, as we see in the further parts of the novel.

Ada, although she was a disabled child herself, had to take care of her younger brother. [...] the pub where Mam worked nights.

In the mornings Mam slept late, and it was my job to get Jamie something to eat and keep him quiet until she was ready to wake up. Then Mam usually went out, to shop or talk to women in the lane; sometimes she took Jamie with her, but mostly not. In the evenings Mam went to work, and I fed Jamie tea and sang to him and put him to sleep, and I'd been doing all that for as long as I could remember, from the days when Jamie still wore diapers and was too small to use the pot. We played games and sang songs and watched the world out the window [...] (Bradley, 2017: 9–10). [English source: p. 8]

However, Jamie went out more and more with his mother's permission, and Ada was left alone. Initially, at his sister's request, he remained in her sight, but quite quickly, the area of playtime with his peers grew, and the girl lost sight of him.

[...] he [...] went running out of sight all day. He came home with stories about the docks on the River Thames, where big ships unloaded cargo from around the world. He told me about trains, and warehouses bigger than our whole block of flats. He'd seen St. Mary's, the church by whose bells I marked time. As the summer days grew longer he stayed out later and later, until he came home hours after Mam left. He was gone all the time [...] (Bradley, 2017: 11). [English source: p. 9].

⁵ See <https://senneo.net/sennik-karaluch>. The motif of a cockroach as a symbol of transformation also appears in the short story *The Cockroaches* by Bruno Schulz and *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka. In Franz Kafka's story, the central motif is Gregor's transformation into a worm, a cockroach, and then his death, which is interpreted as a symbolic image of the devastating impact of the family on his life. Ada's mother also had a destructive effect on her daughter, but her actions became an impulse to change, to fight for a better future.

Ada's loneliness was terrifying; she tried to force Jamie into the house. Another concern was the prospect of her brother starting school in September, which involved an even longer absence from home. For Ada, it became an impulse for change; she decided to learn to walk, and it involved much suffering:

Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad if I'd been walking all along. Maybe the little curled-up bones in my ankle would have been used to it. Maybe the thin skin covering them would have been tougher. [...] I let go of the chair. I swung my bad foot out. I pushed my body forward. Pain stabbed my ankle like a knife. I fell down. Up. Grab the chair. Steady myself. Step forward. Fall down. Up. Try again. Good foot forward first this time. A quick gasp, a swinging of the bad foot, and then – crash. The skin on the bottom of my bad foot ripped. Blood smeared across the floor. After a while, I couldn't take it anymore. I dropped to my knees, shaking, and I got a rag and wiped up the mess. That was the first day. The second day was worse. The second day my good foot and leg hurt too. It was hard to straighten my legs. I had bruises on my knees from falling, and the sores on my bad foot hadn't healed. The second day all I did was stand, holding the chair. I stood while I looked out my window. I practiced moving my weight from one foot to the other. Then I lay down on the bed and sobbed from the hurt and from exhaustion. (Bradley, 2017: 14–15). [English source: p. 11]

Ada was sure that thanks to her walking skills, she would be able to leave her prison and, above all, she would gain the sympathy of her mother, who would stop being ashamed of her. This belief allowed her to endure pain:

After a hard day, when I was holding my leg on the bed and shaking from the effort of not crying more, I thought of Mam taking my hand to help me walk down the stairs. I thought of her leading me out on the street, saying to everyone, "This is Ada. This is my daughter. See, she's not so hopeless as we thought." She was my mother, after all. (Bradley, 2017: 16). {English source: p. 12}

At the end of the summer, it turned out that due to the threat of bombing, the evacuation of children from London to the countryside was ordered. Mytych-Forajter emphasizes that for the characters in Brubaker Bradley's work, this forced journey was a redemption and, at the same time, opened up entirely new interpretative possibilities.

This unique intertwining of personal and historical events offers a fresh perspective on stereotypes linked with World War II. Suddenly, relative turns out to be what hurts the most. It's not the bombing raids and the terror of death at all but the pathological relationship with an adult caregiver that serves as the matrix for all other relationships (Mytych-Forajter, 2021: 4).

This became the beginning of Ada's new life and her journey to freedom. The mother flatly stated that the daughter would never leave London because the parents

sent their kids to nice people. Who'd want you? Nobody, that's who. Nice people don't want to look at that foot. [...] You can't leave. You never will. You're stuck here, right here in this room, bombs or no. (Bradley, 2017: 20–21), [English source: p. 14]

Ada then made a dramatic decision to flee the city with her brother. She stole her mother's shoes (she never had hers) and went outside on her own for the first time. Limping and walking on all fours, she went with Jamie to the train station, from where the train was to leave upcountry. She's not worried about the war, about the prospect of bombing, because paradoxically, it freed her from the influence of a toxic mother. Hence the title of the novel – *The War That Saved My Life*.

ANYTHING TO GET AWAY FROM MAM

The escape was an act of extraordinary courage because the girl did not really know where she was going or even what the word “country” meant. Even before getting on the train, she learnt that everyone thought she was retarded from what Jamie's friends were saying. The children could not believe that she was imprisoned by her mother and deprived of access to education only because of a deformed foot.

The outside world delighted Ada and aroused her curiosity; everything was new and exceptional to her. She noticed seemingly insignificant details, e.g., the blue haze hovering over the roofs in the pink glow of the rising sun, which made everything seem nicer, according to her. From the perspective of her London apartment window, the world was small. “Already the world seemed huge to me. If I looked up at the tops of the buildings I felt dizzy” – says Ada (Bradley, 2017: 24). [English source: p. 17]. And that was only the beginning. The buildings ended and

suddenly there was green. Green everywhere. Bright, vibrant, astonishing green, floating into the air toward the blue, blue sky. I stared, mesmerized. (Bradley, 2017: 30–31). [English source: p. 21].

Ada didn't know that the green in the fields was grass. The trees, which she compared to giant celery stalks, were also a complete surprise to her. She fixed her eyes on the green, absorbing its scent in her imagination. This emphasis on the green commonly associated with hope can be interpreted as another sign of a change in the heroine's life, of her being reborn soon. The absolute euphoria, however, was triggered by the sight of a girl racing with a train on a pony.⁶

⁶ It is not surprising that a pony appears here. The motif of the horse, pony is deeply rooted in Anglo-Saxon literature and culture. It is worth adding that the pony has been popularized by the generation of My Little Pony toys, the accompanying animated se-

The girl was laughing, her face wide open with joy, and it was clear even to me that she meant to be on the pony. She was directing the pony, telling it what to do. Riding the pony. And the pony was running hard. I knew ponies from the lane but had only seen them pull carts. I hadn't known you could ride them. [...] I saw a stone wall ahead of them. I gasped. They were going to hit it. They were going to be hurt. Why didn't she stop the pony? They jumped it. [...] Suddenly I could feel it, the running, the jump. The smoothness, the flying – I recognized it with my whole body, as though it was something I'd done a hundred times before. Something I loved to do. I tapped the window. "I'm going to do that," I said. (Bradley, 2017: 31–32). [English source: p. 21].

The observed scene awakened in Ada a hidden dream of arising from the disability. The unity of human and horse surprised her; she admired their mutual understanding and harmony of movements. Earlier confined within the dead space of the apartment, in which the only living creatures besides mother and brother were disgusting vermin, she suddenly experienced an encounter with nature. The ponies she knew from London were in a situation similar to hers, enslaved by men and used for hard work. Obviously, horseback riding requires earlier animal training, but Ada did not notice anything inappropriate. In her eyes, the animal did not experience harm. Galloping, it was as happy as its caretaker; they had complete confidence in each other, so it followed her instructions.⁷ It was a liberating experience for her, inspiring her to act, and fight for herself, her health, her education, and better prospects for her brother.⁸ In the rest of the novel, it seems we would receive an idealized, idyllic image of the English province and its inhabitants, who gladly welcome refugees from London to their home. Ada very quickly disillusioned the reader.

The teachers herded us down the street into a big building and lined us up against one wall. Men and women from the village filed past, looking to see if we were sweet and pretty and wholesome enough to take home. That they didn't think many of us were good value was clear from the expressions on their faces and the things they said. [...] They're filthy! My bit don't extend to a pack of dirty street rats [...] This lot looks like they'll murder us in our beds. (Bradley, 2017: 37). [English source: p. 24,25]

Ada's observations were confirmed; she and Jamie as the only ones from the whole group, were left out; a cripple and a small boy, both dirty and neglected,

ries, and so-called licensed products (clothing, office supplies, and small gadgets primarily aimed at girls).

⁷ Bernard Rollin believes we can assume a similarity between animal and human experiences. As he writes, "if animals were not beings capable of thinking and feeling, they would not be tamed or able to work with us" (Shollenberger, 2016: 206).

⁸ According to Carl Jung, horses symbolize personal power, things a human being can achieve. It seems that the appearance of the girl on the pony triggers in Ada these hidden layers of strong will and stubbornness in pursuing the goal.

would be too much of a burden.⁹ However, the author provided a happy solution, although not everything was perfect from the beginning. The children found themselves at Miss Susan Smith's in Kent, who is single and reluctant to welcome refugees into her home. Despite initial fears and mutual distrust, they eventually came to an agreement. Ada and Jamie's stay with Susan was the best thing that could have happened to them. Thanks to their caretaker's help, the girl learned to read and write, and her deformed leg was operated on. She made some real friends in the country. The benevolent adults helped her free herself from the custody of the toxic mother and win a private war for her wellbeing, symbolized by the second volume's title – *The War I Finally Won*.

As mentioned above, for the discussion about Ada, it will be crucial to examine her relationship to the places she lived in and the impact of the environment on her life. It was shown that the family home was a prison for the girl, and her health issues made it impossible for her to leave the apartment. Mistreated by her mother, she felt humiliated, ashamed, and painful loneliness. Her attempts to contact the world through a closed window were perceived as the incomprehensible cries of a retarded person. Therefore, it is evident that until the time of evacuation from London, the protagonist did not have the opportunity to feel nature, admire its beauty, or identify with a "green place". Hence her reactions to common elements of the natural environment: trees, grass, and animals.

Nature is undoubtedly one of the key elements of the represented world. So let's look at how the author builds an image of nature in the text, its position in it, and what elements it consists of. Most of the action takes place in the English province, so it is not surprising that the landscape/environment is completely different from the one Ada got used to in London. There, nature was not really present; here, it is the arena of the most important events, and its inhabitants – plants and animals – influence the decisions of the heroes, especially the protagonist. So let's point to specific milestones on the way to the freedom of the main character. Certainly, such an event was the appearance of a pony near Miss Smith's house. When the children overheard Susan refusing to accept them, they decided to seek help elsewhere, and that's when

everything changed. To the right side of the sleeping house, a bright yellow pony put its head through the bushes and stared at me. I could see that it was standing behind a low stone wall. It had a white stripe down its nose and dark brown eyes. It pricked its ears forward and made a low whickery sound. [...] It was like something I'd imagined come true. I felt again in my gut the feeling I'd had on the train when I'd seen the galloping pony and the girl. [...] If the pony didn't live with Miss Smith, it at least lived next door, and wherever it was, I was staying too. (Bradley, 2017: 41–42). [English source: p. 27].

⁹ This is where the deep-rooted stereotype of rejecting a person with a disability due to their physical defects, irrational prejudice against disability, or otherness came into play.

The animal, which evoked such emotions in the girl during the train ride, became a catalyst for action. Since it personified Ada's dreams, she decided to do everything to live near it. Already at the first meeting with Buttler, as this was the name of Miss Smith's pony, the girl described him in an idealized way. He and everything around him were magical for her. Ada treats the pony as a reward for her courage, for walking so long, and for leaving her mother. Buttler triggers in her a solid resolve to fight: "I got to keep walking forever." (Bradley, 2017: 52) [English source: p. 33]. The protagonist, although she had never had contact with nature before, perceived it with all her senses and noticed even the smallest of its elements in harmony with each other: moist grass pricking at her feet, soft soil that was *squishy, like new bread*, tree crowns swaying in the sun, singing birds. The pony had a soft, warm snout, snuggled up to Ada confidently, and smelled fresh butter. Ada was so happy that she forgot about her bad leg, cruel mother, escape, and the uncertainty of tomorrow and fell asleep in the meadow. This image evokes idyllic threads from the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau¹⁰, who saw in nature the source of all good, happiness, harmony, and peace, or the utopian vision of the world described by Isaiah Berlin:

A society lives in a state of pure harmony, in which all its members live in peace, love one another, are free from physical danger, from want of any kind, from insecurity, from degrading work, from envy, from frustration, experience no injustice or violence, live in perpetual, even light, in a temperate climate, in the midst of infinitely fruitful, generous nature. (Berlin 2004: 18). [English original source: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v20/n23/christopher-hitchens/moderation-or-death>].

A return to a not-so-miraculous reality was awakening. However, it should be emphasized that for Ada and Jamie, leaving London turned out to be highly beneficial, as already mentioned above. People living in the town were mainly kind to visitors from the capital, even though they were an additional burden for them, not only financially. Children need to be provided with a roof over their heads, food, clothing, and above all, care and support. For Ada, leaving home was not traumatic at all; she left her prison and her abusive mother with relief. However, she perceived every gesture of help from strangers with great distrust as she had never before met with kindness and care and had not become accustomed to such treatment. At the beginning of her stay at Susan's house, the only place she felt comfortable and carefree was in the garden.

The field was fascinating. Grass, dirt, flowers. Little flying bugs. I rolled onto my stomach and stroked the grass, sniffed it, pulled it out of the dirt. Scooted

¹⁰ The Enlightenment philosopher often emphasized that to achieve true happiness and a sense of fulfillment, a person needs nature.

forward to examine a white flower. Eventually I felt a whoosh of breath against my neck. [...] it was Butter. He sniffed my head, then stepped aside, grazing. I watched his feet and how he moved them, and how his long yellow tail swished flies away. (Bradley, 2017: 72–73). {English source: p. 44}.

Jamie missed London, his home, and his friends, especially when some of them came back to town. Ada firmly declares that she has no intention of returning there ever again because her family home brings about only bad memories. – *Everybody thinks I'm nasty, back home They think I'm some kind of monster [...] There's nothing good at home [...] I was hungry, and I was alone, and I was trapped [...]*. (Bradley, 2017: 89–90). [English source: p. 53]. They both had problems understanding the words used by the caretaker and other town residents, including the names of things. Their origin, inappropriate upbringing, and lack of education made their vocabulary extremely poor: [...] *I didn't have the words for the thoughts inside my head*. (Bradley, 2017: 162). [English source: p.95]. It's hard to believe they didn't know what bedding, tablecloth, velvet, robe, birthday, perseverance, and kindness were. Ada and her brother did not experience their mother's love, so they did not understand what it was. When the girl accidentally damaged Susan's sewing machine, she inflicted a similar punishment on herself as her mother did. For Ada, it was the end of the world; she was sure Susan would send her back to London. The caretaker had to explain to her that nothing had happened, that it was only minor damage that could be quickly repaired. She locked herself up because, as Jamie explains, *Mam puts her in the cabinet [...] whenever she's really bad*. (Bradley, 2017: 182). [English source: p. 106].

Susan and other town residents showed Ada help and support, but it is difficult for the girl to believe their sincere intentions. The anger accumulated over the years prevented her from cutting herself off from her old life. The heroine was paralyzed by the fear that the war would end and she and her brother would have to return to their mother. She was trying to remember that her current situation was only temporary. She didn't want to get used to Susan because she was temporary, *someone we have to live with for a while*. She treated the friendship offered by Maggie very suspiciously because she did not deserve such feelings; she did not deserve love, care, or interest. Such an attitude is proving that

Ada suffered not only physically (problems with her foot and walking), but above all mentally. She could not feel safe; she was flooded with feelings of panic and rage; she was morbidly distrustful and over-responsible; she constantly wondered why her mother could not love her. As a victim of abuse, she often escaped from reality and her feelings into the world of her dreams and thoughts (Mytych-Forajter, 2021: 4–5).

The mother appeared many times in the memories of the children. Despite the harm she had suffered, the girl tried to justify her mother's actions by blaming

her own disability, believing that monsters like her should not have been born at all. Constant feeling of rejection and low self-esteem did not allow her to receive even the slightest positive attention from others; she was convinced that people were lying. It was most evident when she got a dress, a Christmas gift from Susan:

It was so beautiful I couldn't touch it. I just stared. [...] "Come," Susan said. "Let's see if it fits." "It's perfect. Ada. You're beautiful." She was lying. She was lying, and I couldn't bear it. I heard Mam's voice shrieking in my head. "You ugly piece of rubbish! Filth and trash! No one wants you, with that ugly foot!" My hands started to shake. Rubbish. Filth. Trash. [...] – "I can't wear this," I said. [...] "I'm different, I've got the ugly foot, I'm –" My throat closed over the word rubbish. (Bradley, 2017: 223–224). [English source: p. 128,129].

MAM HAD NEVER LOVED ME¹¹

When the mother arrives from London to pick up her children, they forget for a moment their suffering, but very quickly find out what was the reason for her decision: *First I get a letter says now I have to pay the government for taking my kids away, nineteen shillings a week and the government wants me to pay.*" (Bradley, 2017: 299). [English source: p. 171]. The woman hit her daughter and jerked her son around, even in front of Susan. She took the kids back home. She was violent and vulgar and forbade Ada from leaving the apartment:

'Cause I don't need the world shaming me for having a crippled girl. I don't care what you did somewhere else. You're with me again, you'll do as I say. You disobey me, I'll make you wish you hadn't. You're a cripple. That's all you are. A cripple, and nothing but a cripple. You've never been anything else. [...] [...] "Disobey me," she said, pointing at Jamie, "and I take it out on him. Got that?" (Bradley, 2017: 307–308).

It seems that Ada lost everything she managed to build during her stay with Susan; she would give up and be forever only a cripple whose mother was ashamed of. However, the love she had just experienced, learning what normalcy was, and the hope of operating on a deformed foot were stronger than the fear of the mother. She decided to talk to her. This conversation was another traumatic experience for the siblings, who learnt from their mother that she had never wanted them, that if possible, she could get rid of them forever without paying a penny. The children left the house a second time and decided to return to Susan, who at the same time went to London to take the siblings back to her place. When they took the train back to Kent, Susan's house got hit

¹¹ See Bradley, 2019: 174. [English original source: <https://www.onlinereadfreebooks.com/en/The-War-I-Finally-Won-757680/1>]

by a bomb, and she and the kids became homeless. But at the same time, Ada was breaking her distrust of Susan for the first time.

A strange and unfamiliar feeling ran through me. It felt like the ocean, like sunlight, like horses. Like love. I searched my mind and found the name for it. Joy. (Bradley, 2017: 228). [English source: p. 187].

The children's mother died soon in the bombing of London, which did not cause Ada great despair. The information reached the girl when she was in the hospital and had an operation on her foot.¹² The only concern for her was what happened to them now, whether they could stay with Susan. However, after a successful operation and removing the plaster, she is filled with sadness and grief for the woman: "*A couple of months in hospital fixed it?*" *All my life I'd been miserable because of that foot.* (Bradley, 2019: 37). [English original source: <https://www.onlinereadfreebooks.com/en/The-War-I-Finally-Won-757680/1>] The girl believed that her mother did not treat her intentionally because she had to have a reason to hate her. That's why Ada also feels the same way about her mother: *Of all the things I hated my mother for, that was the worst. That I could have had a regular foot all along.* (Bradley, 2019: 78). How deep Ada's psychological trauma was could be seen when everything seemed to be back on track.

I was standing on two feet, without crutches, wearing two shoes. I could read, and I could sing. I had walked to church even though it was a long way. I needed to remember that. I tried to force myself to feel happy, but underneath the happiness I felt prickly, like my skin was stretched too tight all over. I might not be a cripple, but I didn't know who I was. (Bradley, 2019: 81). [English original source: <https://www.onlinereadfreebooks.com/en/The-War-I-Finally-Won-757680/1>]

All her short life, she was nothing, a hideous cripple whose mother was ashamed of, a monster who didn't know her name or how old she was. When physical disabilities were overcome, all she had to do was to enjoy her health, especially since she and her brother gained a loving caregiver and their place on earth. However, it was not that simple; mental wounds were still bleeding, and the girl was still emotionally unstable and looking for her identity. She was still unable to feel safe. Despite Susan's assurances that her mother can never hurt her again, she feels the pain of rejection will stay with her forever: *Mam*

¹² The second part of the story begins with Ada's hospital stay and the news of her mother's death. This can be seen as foreshadowing the changes that will occur in the siblings' lives. Mytych-Forajter considers this sequence of events as a symbolic coincidence. According to the researcher, the death of the mother and the recovery of the girl mark the end of their abusive relationship. Thus, Brubaker Bradley's novels are a part of the therapeutic literature trend that offers hope for overcoming challenges and starting anew.

had never loved me and never would. That would hurt forever. (Bradley, 2019: 174). [English original source: <https://www.onlinereadfreebooks.com/en/The-War-I-Finally-Won-757680/1>]

In addition to the criticism of the heroes' mother, the text makes several remarks depreciating the poor people of London as those who do not think rationally and take their children home:

At least a dozen of them have gone back already. I've told their parents over and over that it isn't safe. London will be bombed. But it's no use. Those simple-minded women prefer their present comfort to the long-term safety of their children. (Bradley, 2017: 82). [English source: p. 49.]

On the other hand, the English province is presented as a friendly place, and its inhabitants, despite some drawbacks, as people full of compassion and willingness to sacrifice. It's a small community that cares about each other and the common good. Taking care of evacuees was not treated as an opportunity for additional income because childcare was paid as an allowance but as a civic, human, and Christian obligation. It would be too much to say that the place of residence made these people like this, but the content of the work shows exactly this perception.

FAITHFUL FRIENDS¹³

The critical figure in Ada's story is the pony. The desire to learn how to ride him triggered the girl's perseverance, patience, and resourcefulness. For this dream, she endured pain and repeated falls, working at Lady Thorton's stable in exchange for Fred Grims' care of Buttler and valuable riding tips. One can risk saying that the animal received from Ada everything that she did not receive from her own mother. It repaid the girl with friendship and affection,

¹³ The relationships between the animals and the characters in Bradley's novels can be examined by considering the principles of animal studies. According to Dariusz Piechota, 'Animal studies researchers draw inspiration from works featuring animal characters to interpret human-animal and animal-human relationships. The attempts to delve into the world of animals and describe humans from a non-anthropocentric perspective seem intriguing' (Piechota, 2015: 169). Undoubtedly, it would be interesting to analyze how animal companions transform the characters. Hanna Mamzer writes that [...] animals play a colossal role in children's socialization processes, both through their direct presence and metaphorical existence in cultural contexts [...] Animations depicting the 'human world of animals' are often used to teach children about the human world. The presence of animals in poems, rhymes, and songs reinforces the cultural message about human traits, shaping acceptance or aversion towards them. It teaches about the relationship between good and evil. The real presence of animals is supposed to primarily impact a child's emotional development by expanding the spheres of empathy, responsibility, and shaping prosocial attitudes (Mamzer, 2015: 157). However, this is a topic for separate considerations.

Whenever I called him, he'd come galloping, ears and tail alert. He would slide to a stop just in front of me and gently lower his head. He never once knocked me down, not even in the beginning when I was weak and afraid. (Bradley, 2019: 45). [English original source: <https://www.onlinereadfreebooks.com/en/The-War-I-Finally-Won-757680/1>]

It is worth noting that Jamie also made his animal friend in the countryside. [It was] the ugliest cat Susan and I had ever seen. *Its filthy, matted hair might have been any color at all beneath the dirt. One eye was swollen shut.* (Bradley, 2017: 184). [English source p. 107]. Jamie brought him home from nowhere, called him Bovril, and since then the cat accompanied him almost everywhere, it was his own onager.¹⁴ *Every night after that, Jamie fell asleep with Bovril curled in his arms. He never wet the bed again* (Bradley, 2017: 185) [English source: p. 108].

Thanks to the animal, Ada felt that she had become who she wanted to be. When riding Oban, Lady Thornton's horse, it was as magical as when she left the London flat:

Mist rose with the sun over the green-gold fields. The broad leaves of potato plants stretched far and wide, and in the hedgerows birds sang loudly. Oban walked beneath me with a marvelous loose swinging stride. I gathered the reins until I could just feel the edges of his mouth, and he softened his neck and relaxed into my hands. I let my hips swing and made myself breathe quietly. [...] Suddenly my fear fell away. Oban was flying, and I was flying with him. Flying. I was flying! t was the best, most joyful feeling in the world. I dropped my hands to Oban's mane. I let the reins run out, let my hands surge with the movement of his mouth. Instead of pulling him in, I kicked him forward. He bunched his hindquarters and ran harder. [...] His speed increased until his stride began to feel as smooth as rushing wind, as effortless as flowing water. I moved with him, effortlessly. On the day I was evacuated, I'd looked out the window of our train and seen a girl galloping a pony, racing the train. Now I was that girl, galloping, laughing, my head thrown back, the wind tugging my hair. (Bradley, 2019: 230–232). [English original source: <https://www.onlinereadfreebooks.com/en/The-War-I-Finally-Won-757680/1>]

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

The interpretative suggestions provided can serve as a starting point for a deeper analysis and preparation of detailed proposals to introduce these issues into educational practice. In the opinion of both critics and readers of Bradley's novel, these are works primarily about courage, care, love, selflessness, stubbornness in achieving goals, breaking barriers and limitations, and fighting against rejection and otherness. Green reading directs our attention to the role

¹⁴ Onager was an animal from "The Swiss Family Robinson", a book Susan read to her siblings. [...] *onagers were like donkeys. You could ride them. They were nothing like cats.* (Bradley, 2017: 184). [English source p. 108].

of place in Ada's life and the importance of fascination with nature and animals in her quest for fitness. Indeed, nature does not serve Bradley as the background to the story told. Without Buttler and Oban, there would be no victory for Ada, no release from the trauma of her family home. The road to freedom was not easy, and the fact that the girl walked it was undoubtedly due to the English province. There, she established ties not only with the residents but, as Kenneth White puts it, with a specific inhabited, "green" place. She finally felt safe, loved, and needed in Kent and called this place her home.

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