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An Ecocritical Reading of *Just a Dream* by Chris Van Allsburg and *The Curious Garden* by Peter Brown

Abstract: Recently, social sciences have shown an increasing amount of interest in environmental issues. The world has seen noticeable rapid changes in the environment during the second part of the twentieth century, which has made literary scholars and authors themselves more aware. Consequently, ecological systems and environmental issues have been the focus of literature. This chapter will examine two picture books by Peter Brown and Chris Van Allsburg that specifically discuss environmental issues. The specific aim is to investigate how environmental problems and concerns related to them are conveyed in Peter Brown's *The Curious Garden* (2009) and Chris Van Allsburg's *Just a Dream* (1990), and how the two works highlight the importance of consciousness and its potential to improve both the condition of humanity and the environment itself.

Keywords: Environment, Eco-criticism, Awareness, Chris Van Allsburg, Peter Brown

I. INTRODUCTION

Although, when asked, most individuals claim to care for and appreciate nature and animals, they tend “to abuse them in a multitude of ways” (Bekoff & Bexell, 2010: 70). The destructions we, as human beings, cause are discernible if we care to pay enough attention. Interestingly, we tend to ignore the dire consequences of our actions only to be concerned about our well-being. Yet, there has been a growing interest in ecological issues in various social sciences. In their article “Emerging Environmental Issues” Munn *et al.* point out the fact that “The study of emerging environmental issues has become a growth industry” (2000: 1603). They state further that “early identification of emerging issues will assist in 1) developing research priorities over the midterm (the next 5 years), 2) designing appropriate early warning monitoring systems, and 3) providing insight into policy responses that might be taken before an issue has become a serious threat to society and/or the biosphere” (Munn *et.*

al., 2000: 1603). It is fortunate that the same growing interest that will help increase awareness of environmental issues can be seen in literary studies, as well. Not only literary scholars but also authors themselves have gained consciousness due to the noticeable and rapid environmental changes that the world has witnessed since the second half of the twentieth century. As a result, environmental challenges and ecological systems have been the subject matter in literature. In *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryl Glotfelty (1996) defines ecocriticism as follows:

Simply put, 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 texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.

On the one hand, this definition serves well to establish a territory for the field. On the other hand, it is too broad: thus, it fails to define any methods or ways of interpretation. For the sake of this discussion, Serpil Oppermann's article "Theorizing Ecocriticism: Toward a Postmodern Ecocritical Practice" is worth including here. In the article, after providing several definitions Oppermann writes:

Almost none of the definitions of ecocriticism signals a move towards a field-defining theoretical method, nor provide a viable model of interpretation. The only discernible pattern among ecocritical definitions is their focus on the importance of the relationship between literature and the physical environment; they also share the common aim to synthesize literary criticism with the natural sciences, and literary studies with the environmental philosophies. (2006: 105)

In this perspective, ecocriticism can be said to employ literature as a pretext for examining environmental concerns and "evaluates relevant texts according to their capacity to articulate ecological contexts" (Oppermann, 2006: 111). However, an eco-critical reading of texts can proceed regardless of whether or not the text is explicitly concerned with nature or the environment. The researcher might try to see the links between the physical world and human beings, and how the physical world impact culture and/or the construction of the literary work.

Children's literature has also evolved into a very rewarding area for the formation of ecocritical consciousness of both children and adults in order to recognize the harmful apocalyptic path that modern society is approaching (Elnady, 2018). In this chapter, two picture books that explicitly include environmental issues will be analyzed. Specifically, the aim is to explore how these issues are presented in *Just a Dream* (1990) by Chris Van Allsburg and *The Curious Garden* (2009) by Peter Brown and how these stories reveal the

significance of awareness which could change the lives of people and the environment itself. In *Just a Dream*, the young protagonist is forced to change for the better and be more responsible for the future of the earth while the protagonist of *The Curious Garden* is the agent who initiates a happy change that leads to a cleaner, greener, and more beautiful city. The change is so visible and effective that the garden spreads, and so does its inspiration. People start to engage in activities that would make both themselves and their surroundings improve.

II. JUST A DREAM

Chris Van Allsburg (1949–), one of the authors of contemporary American Children's Literature, has written and illustrated over twenty books. Van Allsburg received the Caldecott Honor Medal in 1980 for his book *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*. Along with receiving the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*, he is the recipient of two Caldecott Medals for his work on *Jumanji* and *The Polar Express*. He also won the Boston Globe Award for both *The Polar Express* and *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*. Finally, Van Allsburg was awarded The Regina Medal for lifelong accomplishment in children's literature. *Jumanji* received the National Book Award for Book Illustration in 1982, and in 1996, a successful feature film adaptation of the book was released.

Van Allsburg explores the mysterious territory between fantasy and reality in most of his stories, which intrigue readers of all ages. When the fantasy world invades the real world in his stories, the hero or heroes set out on a magical/surreal adventure, which enables them to learn their lesson over the course of the story. Olgahan Bakşı Yalçın states that "Van Allsburg's lessons in his picture books are often found by reading between the lines since without being didactic his stories incite wonder and invite children to track down clues in the fantasy world to reach the hidden lessons" (2022: 28). Accordingly, *Just a Dream* (1990) is a story in which promoting environmental awareness, sustainability, and conversation of ecosystems are the significant components. The book also focuses on character development as in almost all his other stories. Van Allsburg's shifting perspectives and angles in his illustrations also contribute to the surreal atmosphere of his stories, inviting the reader either to be a part of the scene or watch from above. In his story, *Just a Dream*, the protagonist, a young, careless boy named Walter changes drastically because of his dream, which turns into a nightmare when it shows him possible versions of the future. In an interview, Van Allsburg mentions how writing *Just A Dream* was an intentional act to raise awareness about ecological issues. He puts forward that:

Just a Dream was my attempt to contribute to causes that advocate for the protection of the planet – at that point in my life, I was reading Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature*. I thought that I could do something personally as an artist. I'm

not sure that's the best motivation for an artist because the message can dominate the story in a way that strips art from it. Nonetheless, I did *Just a Dream* and tried to tell the story in a way that had certain elements of fantasy. I was trying to create something that wasn't too grim and depressing, and also to suggest the future could be better if it more closely resembled the past.¹

While children are growing up, they create a sense of reality in accord with their interaction with other human beings, and the audio-visual materials they are exposed to. Since picture books provide settings with valuable information and set examples, guide the readers through the exploration of both the real and fantastical worlds, and convey values like empathy, bravery, belonging, and diversity that are essential for their development and growth, they play a major role in children's sense of reality. The role of literature in constructing reality is a well-studied issue. For instance, on fantasy literature and how it influences reader, Daniel Baker writes that "Fantasy does not escape reality but exposes, subverts, and creates it" (2012: 445). As Baker also puts it fantasy literature, in particular, has the capacity to subvert reality only to construct a new one. An equally significant aspect of fantasy, as Matthew Grenby suggests in his book *Children's Literature*, is that it is suited for thinking about identity-related issues. The characters are removed from the contexts that place and tie them into a certain function within the family, the school, or the greater society by traveling to another country or period. They must then rediscover who they are, and, often, by the conclusion of the book, they are better able to return to their reality (2008: 164).

In *Just a Dream*, Van Allsburg portrays Walter as a careless boy who does not think about the effects of his actions. From the first page, it is clear that Walter does not care for the environment as we see him crumbling up the empty bag of a doughnut with jelly he has bought from the bakery and throwing it carelessly at a fire hydrant on his way home. While presenting a character who is ecologically ignorant, Van Allsburg does not hesitate to create a foil for this character. Rose, his next-door neighbor, is presented as an ecologically conscious girl, who loves the environment so much as to ask for a tree for her birthday. At home, Walter sees Rose watering the tree that has just been planted for her birthday. It is beyond Walter's understanding that someone asks for a tree as a present. It is revealed that "his own birthday was just a few days away, 'And I'm not getting some dumb plant,' he told Rose", mocking her for her delight in the tree she has just received (Van Allsburg, 1990). On the same day, after dinner, we see Walter taking the rubbish out into the same container without sorting them out or recycling it as he hurries back home for his favorite show because "He was too busy to sort through garbage, especially when there was something good on television" (Van Allsburg, 1990). His attitude is reminiscent of his ignorance, even selfishness.

¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20120326203905/http://www.devstu.org/blogs/interview-with-chris-van-allsburg-part-2>

Up until here, Walter can be seen as a representative of indifferent people who does not care about nature and how, as human beings, we destroy nature by simply not being aware of the destruction that we cause. In their article entitled “Ignoring Nature: Why We Do It, the Dire Consequences, and the Need for a Paradigm Shift to Save Animals, Habitats, and Ourselves” Marc Bekoff and Sarah M. Bexell most cogently state that “Humans are big-brained, invasive, and omnipresent mammals who seem to think they can do almost anything they want” (2010: 70). They claim that we tend to ignore our responsibilities toward the ecosystem not only because of selfishness but also because of lacking awareness. As a result, they believe that responsible individuals should play a vital role in being a role model to ecologically unaware people. They add that the media must be encouraged to report on ecological issues and offer simple, workable solutions. Additionally, researchers must serve as positive role models for the wider public, especially in nations where economic restrictions make change difficult (Bekoff & Bexell, 2010: 71).

“Walter went to bed wishing he lived in the future. He couldn’t wait to have his own tiny plane, a robot to take out the trash, and a machine that could make jelly doughnuts by the thousands” (Van Allsburg, 1990). As can be seen in the quote, in the show Walter hurries back to watch, there is a boy like himself living in the future with robots doing chores for him and tiny personal planes, and machines that make life easier. Indeed, it is a promising future for him. Walter falls asleep that night as an ecologically unaware child and his wish to live in the future comes true in his dream as he travels to the future. To his surprise, the future is not as promising as he has hoped to be.

Walter woke up in the middle of a huge dump. A bulldozer was pushing a heap of bulging trash bags toward him. “Stop!” he yelled.

The man driving the bulldozer put his machine in neutral. “Oh, sorry,” he said. “Didn’t see you.”

Walter looked at the distant mountains of trash and saw half-buried houses. “Do people live here?” he asked.

“Not anymore,” answered the man.

A few feet from the bed was a rusty old street sign that read FLORAL AVENUE.

“Oh no,” gasped Walter. He lived on Floral Avenue. (Van Allsburg, 1990).

Through Walter’s dream, the readers are reminded of most of the ecological issues that the world deals with now or will face soon. It is a wounded world ravaged by the careless mistakes of the past. Each scene in Walter’s dream journey invites the reader to observe types of ecological/ environmental degradation. For instance, Walter travels in his sleep to the midst of an endless garbage dump situated on his street, which points out the dangers of illegal dumping and land pollution/degradation. Then, he travels to a tree in a forest that is about to be cut down, which indicates the ill effects of deforestation on the future of humanity.

Next, Walter finds himself on the top of a smokestack belching pollution, which burns his throat and makes his eyes itchy reflecting the air pollution as well as the growing hole in the ozone layer/atmospheric degradation. Then his dream takes him to the middle of a fishless sea, where the reader is introduced to the problem of reduced fish stock in the world's oceans/ water degradation. In his dream, Walter also visits places like The Great Canyon in the USA, which is impossible to see because of the smog, and Mount Everest, which only strengthens the negative versions of the future. Walter's interaction with the places he journeys to in his dreams shows him possible versions of the future and at the same time displays the possible adverse consequences of his being messy or careless, and indifferent to the environment.

Seeing as this is a picture book that is originally illustrated and written for children, the representation of the scenes through pictures plays a significant role. The details, in particular, in his dream are illustrated as immense and exaggerated so as to deepen the effects of a possible environmental disaster. It is not surprising that Walter's imagination as a child makes things even bigger and more intolerable, which functions as a reminder of Walter's own responsibilities and how small he is, and how small we are as human beings when it comes to facing nature's force. When he wakes up, he is a changed boy, and immediately he goes out to find the empty jelly doughnut bag that he threw at the fire hydrant on his way home from school and even sorts out all the trash by the garbage that he neglected to do the previous night. In his article "Ethical fantasy for Children," Francis J. Molson states that "choosing between right and wrong and accepting the consequences of that choice are marks of maturity" (1982: 86). Thus, it might be claimed that Walter's change is an indication of his coming of age which could result in his ecological awareness and emotional maturity. In line with his newly acquired environmental awareness, a few days later on his birthday, he asks for a tree, which is planted near Rose's birthday tree. When he falls asleep that night, he dreams of the future again. In this dream, he is shown a different version--instead of a world of robots and machines, laundry hangs on the line, and a man mows his lawn with a motorless mower. Walter is delighted to see that the two little trees have grown tall and strong in the clean air. This second dream indicates that only if individuals, like Walter, are aware of their responsibilities towards the environment, can they dream of a better future. The story's message is that everyone plays a significant role in protecting nature.

A central theme in Chris Van Allsburg's stories is the development of a character – how the character's thoughts and feelings change for the better– and this change is often inferred. His ideas about his environment change at the end of the story, and he becomes more responsible and thoughtful, which highlights the importance of caring for the Earth not only for children but also for readers of all ages. When his dream turns into a nightmare for him, it teaches him

the importance of being thoughtful and responsible in the present. Thus, Chris Van Allsburg helps his readers to gain environmental awareness, learn how to achieve sustainability, and protect ecosystems. For instance, the child reader learns about litter, waste, recycling, conserving resources, and the importance of planning for future generations. Through dramatic illustrations and humor, we get a glimpse of what the future could be like if we did not change our habits. This is not only a great discussion starter but also a call to action.

III. THE CURIOUS GARDEN

The second picture book to be discussed in this chapter is *The Curious Garden* (1979) by Peter Brown who earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in illustration at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena California. Having written and illustrated over ten widely popular books, Peter Brown has illustrated six books for other writers. In addition to authoring four *New York Times* bestsellers, he has also won the Caldecott Illustration Honor and received positive reviews from *Booklist*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Publishers Weekly*, *School Library Journal*, and *Horn Book Magazine*. Brown also received E. B. White Read Aloud Honors for his picture books *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild* (2013), *Children Make Terrible Pets* (2010), *The Curious Garden* (2009), and *Creepy Carrots* (2012). Finally, the 2011 Irma S. & James H. Black Award Honor and 2011 Parents Choice Award Silver Medal were given to *You Will Be My Friend* (2011). *The Curious Garden* is significant because of being able to convey several important messages for not only children but also adults. Brown creates a world in which we can sense the importance of curiosity, education, and even more important leadership. Therefore, the protagonist's one intentional action toward a better environment helps and heals not only the environment but also the inhabitants having lived in a lifeless city.

Having been inspired by the revival of the Highline railway on the west side of Manhattan, Brown combines appealing images with a story that is full of discovery and optimism. In the epilogue, the author writes about the Highline railway project and how it stimulated him to write *The Curious Garden*:

On the west side of Manhattan, there is an old, elevated railway called the Highline. Its trains rumbled high above the city streets for decades, but in 1980 the Highline was shut down and forgotten. Without people and trains getting in the way, nature was free to redecorate. Over the years, the rusty rails and gravel slowly gave way to wildflowers and trees. And if you look at the railway today you'll see a lush garden that curves above the streets and between buildings.

...

All of this made me curious: what would happen if an entire city decided to truly cooperate with nature? How would that city change? How would it all begin? (Brown, 2009)

As is clear from the statement above, the story can be read as a lesson about the value of education and leadership in developing positive relationships with the living world. The result is an inspiring ecological story that is a great read for both children and adults.

The Curious Garden is about a boy named Liam who likes to walk in the city even though the city is “a dreary place”, “without gardens or trees or greenery of any kind” (Brown, 2009). It is a depressing city, very polluted, with factory fumes and ugly skyscrapers covering the sky, which forces people to stay indoors most of the time. Unlike those, Liam always walks curiously around the city. Considering the youngsters today, he is a more independent child who is allowed to go outside by himself, making the most of this priceless gift of freedom by exploring his city and finding isolated pockets of life there. In this way, Liam develops the abilities required for internal sustainability, self-reliance, and confidence. Through Liam’s outdoor experiences that lead to a happy change in society, Brown also conveys the message that spending time outdoors, in nature, is better than sitting in front of the TV or playing video games and it could lead to exciting discoveries, which is also an indirect message for the children.

One day, while walking by himself around the old railway “he stumbled upon a dark stairwell leading up to the tracks” (Brown, 2009). With curiosity, he goes up to the railway only to find dying wildflowers and plants that need a gardener. He feels sorry for them and the next day he goes there to help dying flowers. He encounters several issues, but he quickly discovers what plants require to survive. When the blooms swell and cover the railroad rails, his effort and commitment pay off. Not being an “ordinary garden”, Liam’s garden wants “to explore” just like its young gardener often does (Brown, 2009). In a few months, the little a-gardener finds himself dealing with a garden “explore[s] every corner of the railway” (Brown, 2009). Finally, winter arrives forcing Liam to stay indoors, not being able to see his garden. We see him educating himself about gardening by reading books during the snowy days and finally, the snow starts melting after three months; he is much more knowledgeable about gardening. It should be noted that as a children’s book, the story raises awareness of not only ecology but also the importance of education. In his book *How Children Learn*, John Holt points out the ways children should be educated. He writes that:

Children do not need to be made to learn, told what to learn, or shown how. If we give them access to enough of the world, including our own lives and work in that world, they will see clearly enough what things are truly important to us and others, and they will make for themselves a better path into that world than we could make for them. (Holt, 2009: 157)

With *The Curious Garden*, Brown provides a vital example of children’s learning and education. The young boy is not told to protect nature or “shown how” (Brown, 2009). He has access to the world without any restraints only to

discover an area in which he expands his knowledge and capability. It can be claimed, then, that Brown inspires children to educate themselves about the issues that would make them more knowledgeable and successful. Liam's enthusiasm about being a better gardener yields great results; when spring arrives, he puts his newly acquired knowledge into practice, which may lead young readers to reflect on the steps of learning and once more inspire them.

Liam does not try to get rid of "the tough little weeds and mosses" (Brown, 2009) and when the winter ends, they appear once more. As the story unfolds, we learn that even though these "popped up farther and farther from the railway and were closely followed by the more delicate plants" (Brown, 2009). In her well-known essay, "Why are Americans afraid of Dragons?" Ursula K. Le Guin writes that "To discipline something, in the proper sense of the word, does not mean to repress it, but to train it – to encourage it to grow, and act, and be fruitful, whether it is a peach tree or a human mind" (1974). Likewise, Liam's interaction with nature, by not repressing but encouraging it in Le Guin's words, once more yields positive results and the curious garden expands. Liam has a strong affinity for the garden's curiosity and irrepressibility and thus, he admires how it may appear in the most unexpected locations and may be in harmony with its environment while maintaining its character. He does not differentiate between weeds and flowers; he cares for them all while admiring the garden's resilience, brightness, and beauty, which shows the readers Liam's respect towards the garden's own tendencies and its own nature.

Children construct reality using a variety of sources including tales, songs, plays, movies, and other experiences that aid in codifying reality into repeatable common patterns. They learn about themselves and the environment they live in through these sources. Picture stories, like *The Curious Garden*, in particular, play a significant role in children's sense of reality because they offer knowledge and role models, lead the reader through the exploration of the real and fantastical worlds, and communicate values like empathy, courage, belonging, and diversity that are crucial for their development and growth. In this regard, the narrative simplicity of Brown's story sets a positive example and helps young readers to understand better and erase boundaries between the characters and themselves. Such simplicity also helps children to build empathy with the young Liam which would lead them to take him as a role model.

Social learning theory explains why people are prone to look to role models for advice as well as how role modeling may be connected to ethical leadership. According to the theory, imitation, and observation of role models play a significant part in how people learn what to do and how to act (Brown & Treviño, 2014: 588). Michael E. Brown and Linda K Treviño, henceforth, point out that "children select attractive ethical role models and learn from them by observing and emulating modeled behaviour" (2014: 589). I contend that children's stories should create role models that are not far different from the

children who are reading these stories. In this way, the young readers will feel empowered and gain self-confidence. Therefore, not only Liam as an enthusiastic young boy but also others in society become role models for both young and adult readers.

In her article entitled “Why Are They So Afraid of Children’s Books? The Subversive Power of Imagination”, Olga Bukhina discusses censorship regarding children’s books. She contends that because of holding the power of giving messages to the next generations the authorities tend to censor children’s books. She cogently argues that “Many books possess a hidden subversive power that helps the next generations to change the world” (Bukhina, 2019: 171). In a similar vein, in her essay, “Why are Americans Afraid of Dragons?” Le Guin writes about fantasy as a genre and how people choose to ignore its power and significance. She contends that:

For fantasy is true, of course. It isn’t factual, but it is true. Children know that. Adults know it too, and that is precisely why many of them are afraid of fantasy. They know that its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is false, all that is phony, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living. They are afraid of dragons because they are afraid of freedom (1974).

Despite the fact that neither rejection of fantasy as a genre, nor censorship is an issue of importance in this chapter, their claim is significant and applicable to understanding Liam’s initiation for a better world. In the story, as the curious garden spreads around the city, more people become interested in gardening and more gardeners start to appear across the city, covering the buildings and streets in blooms and vegetation. That people are influenced by the curious garden and each other is something that needs special consideration. It shows that people can be guided easily to do some good for themselves and society. On the one hand, Liam’s self-discovery of the garden, his interest in gardening, and his effort to gain knowledge in this new area are inspirational for young readers. On the other hand, the visible result of young Liam’s experience, which is inspiring others to change their environment, is a message for children demonstrating that even only one individual has the power to change the people and the environment. It is also worth mentioning that Liam’s influence is a subtle one instead of a direct pressure on others; yet, it is even more effective. Emine Ulu Aslan and Bayram Bas (2020) argue that when one realizes his/her potential this self-realization is shared by other people in society.

The first step of eco-criticism philosophy is the realization of the self-realization potential of the human being and starting to live consciously. In this way, the philosophy of self-realization, which has the belief that the consciousness acquired individually is shared by all humanity, becomes a lifestyle. In this lifestyle in which ecological consciousness spreads, there is a cycle where everything is interconnected. (Aslan & Bas, 2020: 713)

In line with what Aslan and Bas argue, Liam becomes a figure who starts a revolution for the city itself and its inhabitants because as people start integrating the living world into many aspects of their lives, the formerly gloomy and lifeless town gradually undergoes a complete transformation. It is a fact that people's quality of life can be improved by having access to green areas. This leads to healthier lifestyles, increased productivity among people and their families, and better lives for women, children, and the elderly.

As a result, not only the environment changes with Liam's revolution but also the people living in the city transform. They start conversing and socializing with each other, thus creating a livelier and merrier atmosphere for everyone, which directly improves people's mental health. Thus, the story is also conveying messages about the relationship between the environment and one's mental health. Environmental psychology is the study of how people relate to their surroundings, examining how both the constructed environment and the natural world have an impact on who we are as individuals. It is concerned with how individuals shape their environments and how various environments influence people's experiences and behavior. Liam and the other city dwellers simply experience the advantages of spending time in the natural world and engaging themselves with physical activities concerning nature. This changes not only their physical environment but also their social environment.

As the title suggests, the garden has its agency; it is a curious garden. The author uses anthropomorphization to convey the message. The garden's curiosity is what makes him reach the other parts of the city. In line with this notion, it can be claimed that human beings or nature do not act by themselves in the way of a better world; their interaction and cooperation could yield positive results. Eco-critics focus on the relationship between culture and nature, claiming that it is imperative that they co-exist and interact with each other. The garden's expansion into new territories along with human beings' constant care and improved knowledge work together for a better world as stated in the epilogue.

It often seems impossible for nature to thrive in a city of concrete and brick and steel. But the more I've traveled, and the closer I've looked at the world around me, the more I've realized that nature is always eagerly exploring the places we've forgotten. You can find flowers and fields and even small forests growing wild in every city; you just have to look for them. (Brown, 2009)

At the end of the picture book, it is revealed: "Many years later, the entire city had blossomed. But of all the new gardens, Liam's favorite was where it all began" (Brown, 2009). Referring back to the social learning theory, we can infer that through imitating others around both nature and people acquire an awareness. According to Etienne Wenger, another scholar studying social learning theory, participation increases the efficiency of learning and helps individuals

construct identities. Here, participation refers to a broader process of becoming an active participant in the practices of social groups and developing identities in connection to these communities rather than merely local occurrences of participation in specific activities with specific persons (Wenger, 1998: 4). Learning as participation, in his words, “takes place through our engagement in actions and interactions, but it embeds this engagement in culture and history. Through these local actions and interactions, learning reproduces and transforms the social structure in which it takes place” (Wenger, 1998: 13). What happens to Liam and the city proves social learning theory and the impact of participation and developing new identities that lead to a positive change in the social structure.

CONCLUSION

In his article, “Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism,” Glen A. Love claims that “[t]he most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world” (cited in Opperman, 2006: 106). It is my view that both *Just a Dream* and *The Curious Garden* can be read as fascinating examples of ecocritical reading. At the heart of both stories is a celebration of the characters who go through a dramatic change only to become more conscious about the environment, a change caused by either themselves or the characters around them. In Chris Van Allsburg’s *Just a Dream*, the protagonist changes drastically as a result of his dream, which turns into a nightmare as it shows him possible versions of the future. Similarly, in *The Curious Garden*, not only the garden but also the other gardens along with the people change because of Liam’s effort to make the curious garden alive again. Today we all face significant issues including rapid climate change, the ecological collapse of our oceans, the decline of significant biodiversity in wildlife, the increasing scarcity of freshwater, and other problems related to pollution that affect all of earth’s inhabitants in one form or another. In addition to applying sustainable environmental practices, we can also combat environmental issues by raising the awareness of future generations, in other words, our children via literary texts in children’s literature as Chris Van Allsburg and Peter Brown achieve successfully.

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