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“The Green Children” – A Tale of the Bizarre by Olga Tokarczuk with an Environmental Message to the Young Generation Facing the Climate Crisis

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to indicate links between *The Green Children*, one of the ten bizarre short stories by Olga Tokarczuk, and present-day environmental protection problems. Apparently this text on the stay of a king's physician in Volhynia in 1656 is not connected with the contemporary environmental discourse. In this short story the reader may find no fragments concerning global sustainable development goals or preventing degradation of the Earth's resources. However, a thorough reading of this text shows that the short story by Olga Tokarczuk may be considered an influential contribution to the multigenerational discussion on the need to prevent climate disaster and promote good environmental practices. This short story should be analyzed and interpreted at lessons of the Polish language in secondary schools, since it provides an important message in line with the position of conservationists and supporters of Youth Strike for Climate. The story of the green children and their symbiotic relationships with nature is in line with the postulates of present-day teenagers, representatives of the generation of Greta Thurnberg and Fridays for Future. *The Green Children* is another important text within the environmental dimension of literary works by Olga Tokarczuk (after the novel *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, a collection of essays *The Moment of the Bear* and fragments of the Nobel Lecture *The Tender Narrator* delivered at the Swedish Academy in 2019). For many years now the writer has been involved in actions promoting the preservation of natural resources, she advocates attitudes ensuring coexistence of humans and nature and is a vocal opponent of instrumental treatment of animals and plants (the Nobel laureate is a vehement critic of the hunting traditions and advocates intensification of actions ensuring effective protection of tree stands).

Keywords: nature, humans, ecology, environmental protection, green children, short story.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL DIMENSION
IN THE WORKS OF OLGA TOKARCZUK

Olga Tokarczuk frequently includes environmental aspects in her writing. Issues related to environmental protection account for a major dimension in the works of the Polish Nobel prize laureate, who is known for being vocal about animal rights and protection of trees. Love for wildlife, respect for all living creatures, deep concern for the future of our planet and mitigation of the negative impact of climate change are environmental issues of paramount importance in the literary works by Olga Tokarczuk. The writer poses topical questions concerning the relations between humans and nature, questions on the continuity of our planet's ecosystem, the planet we inhabit as a civilisation of intelligent, or sapient, creatures. Grzegorz Bożek, the editor of *Dzikie Życie* [Wild Life], an influential monthly on environmental issues, stressed this aspect in his remarks for a weekly *Tygodnik Przegląd* (in the survey *Czytam książki Olgi Tokarczuk, bo...* [I read books by Olga Tokarczuk because ...]): "I read books by Olga Tokarczuk, because they give the reader an opportunity to encounter environmental issues, rarely found in literature" (Sobczyk 2019)¹.

One of the most important examples of the environmental dimension in the works by Olga Tokarczuk is *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (Tokarczuk 2009), which has been popularized by *Pokot* (Spor) – a film adaptation directed by Agnieszka Holland (2017). In this novel Tokarczuk expressed her vigorous protest against public acceptance of harming and killing of animals by hunters. *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* is a moving critique of the hunting culture and the cruel rituals it entails. The narrative focuses the attention of contemporary readers on the outdated traditions and reveals the controversial actions of hunters. Olga Tokarczuk presents inhumane cruelty of people towards defenceless animals, which are brutally killed in the pursuit of fleeting self-satisfaction. This book is the vehement criticism and vocal defence of animal rights. The story of Janina Duszejko provokes reflections on the role of humans in the ecosystem. The writer focuses the readers' attention on the absolute, ruthless subordination of nature by humans and subjecting other living organisms to pillage and plunder. In the opinion of the author of *House of Day, House of Night* contemporary people treat nature as subservient, totally subjected to their absolute power; as a result mankind constitutes a threat to numerous species of fauna and flora. Małgorzata Książek-Czermińska when discussing the environmental message of *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* wrote that "the novel proved to be excellent script

¹ By the time this paper was submitted for publication *Opowieści bizarne* [Bizarre Stories] had not been officially translated into English. The author prepared translations of the fragments of Olga Tokarczuk's stories, as well as studies and other texts in Polish, which are cited in this article.

material for *Spoor*, a film directed by Agnieszka Holland showing the absolute cruelty of the hunting traditions" (Książek-Czermińska 2021). Another work, in which Olga Tokarczuk indicates examples of abuse of animals is a collection of essays *Moment niedźwiedzia* [*The Moment of the Bear*] (Tokarczuk 2012).

Olga Tokarczuk takes an unwavering stance in the discussion concerning the degradation of the natural environment. This environmental position of Olga Tokarczuk is a manifestation of her concern for a better future for the Earth's ecosystem. In her Nobel Lecture given at the Swedish Academy the author of *Flights* underlined the need to prevent the environmental disaster and encouraged a change in our perception of nature [Tokarczuk 2020: 289]. Polish conservationists after hearing the Nobel Lecture stated: "We are pretty convinced that the strong stance of Olga Tokarczuk on climate and the future of our planet will raise public awareness persuading people that the time to act is now" (Kokoszkiwicz 2019). Thanks to her literary work and continuous participation in the environmental discourse the writer is affecting public opinions and attitudes, promoting changes in deleterious habits into new ones, markedly more beneficial for the natural environment.

Support for human and animal rights, as well as nature conservation and environmental protection are the statutory tasks of the Olga Tokarczuk Foundation. The *Final report on the Foundation's operations in 2022* provides information on the two debates within the #zezwierzęcej [#animal perspective] project ("Animals and war" and "The animal burden"), which "focus on animal rights and ethical treatment of animals" (the Olga Tokarczuk Foundation 2022).

In 2021 Olga Tokarczuk received a Doctor Honoris Causa title of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. In the justification for this decision the Senate of the oldest Polish university indicated "her literary works, which creatively reveal the truth about the human nature, help find order and sense, as well as her activity outside literature: cultural, social, civic, environmental activism, promoting the ideals of equality, freedom and democracy, and responsibility for the natural environment" (Kopiejka 2021).

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN *THE GREEN CHILDREN*

The Green Children, one of the ten bizarre stories published in 2018, is an example of the environmental dimension in Tokarczuk's writing (Tokarczuk 2018). The first impressions do not really indicate ties of this micronarrative with the contemporary discourse on preventing degradation of the Earth's resources. *The Green Children* only marginally are related to the global postulates of sustainable development and even the keenest reader will find no remarks in this story on the need to shift towards conservationism in the coming decades of the 21st century. A tale by William Davisson, a Scotsman from Aberdeen and the court physician of the Polish king John II Casimir takes the form of an

autobiographical report from his stay in Volhynia in 1656. It is purported to be an evocative reminiscence from a journey by this foreigner over the Eastern Borderlands of the 17th century Poland. What attracts the reader's attention in this short story by Olga Tokarczuk is a story of green children as a manifestation of an unusual relationship between people and nature.

The Green Children is a story in line with the bizarre dimension as the primary category of narrative in the ten short stories published following the world acclaim of *The Books of Jacob* (Tokarczuk 2014). The original term "bizarzny" used in the Polish title is a Polonized version of the French adjective "bizarre", as defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary denoting strange, unusual, peculiar, eerie, weird or odd (Cambridge Dictionary 2022).

On the cover of this Olga Tokarczuk's book we will find information that these are "unpredictable, strange, beautiful, eerie tales of the bizarre [...] Each of them takes place in a unique space. Volhynia at the time of the Swedish Deluge, contemporary Switzerland, an ordinary tenement house somewhere in Poland, distant Asia and imaginary places" (Tokarczuk 2018). These "strange and unusual" stories by Olga Tokarczuk are loaded with meaning. They evoke different historic times and even a futuristic vision of the future (in the short story *Kalendarz ludzkich świąt [A Calendar of Human Holidays]*). These short fiction forms are in line with Gothic and horror stories, so popular in the English language literature, as evidenced in works of authors writing in English, whether British, American, Irish, or Welsh (E.F. Benson, Robert W. Chambers, Ch. Dickens, N. Hawthorne, H. James, H.P. Lovecraft, E. A. Poe), as well as French literature (Guillaume Apollinaire, Honoré de Balzac, Anatole France, Théophile Gautier, Guy de Maupassant, Prosper Mérimée, Gérard de Nerval), Russian literature (Anton Chekhov, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Nikolai Gogol, Mikhail Lermontov, Alexander Pushkin, Aleksey K. Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev) or German literature (Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Heinrich von Kleist, Heinrich Mann, Thomas Mann, Paul Ernst). In turn, in Polish literature the convention of Gothic or horror stories was adopted by Zygmunt Krasiński, Józef Korzeniowski, Bolesław Leśmian or Władysław Stanisław Reymont.

Opowieści bizardne [Bizarre Stories] are a vivid confirmation of the author's mastery in playing games of fiction with her readers. They are unique stories, far from following regular schemes, occasionally catching the reader off-guard. They constitute a series of peculiar philosophical tales, in which Olga Tokarczuk ponders the condition of the world, the individual and nature, asks numerous questions and searches for answers, while at the same time refraining from giving definitive solutions. This bizarre quality is a binding element for the entire book. In an interview given to Emilia Padoł, the author of *Flights* defined the function of the bizarre in her stories: "I selected for them a title framework, that is the word "bizarzny" [bizarre], because I believe that their common denominator is to penetrate the boundaries of our experience

and face novel themes, which are emerging in the area of our interests, fears, anxieties" (Padoł, 2018).

The quality of being bizarre is mentioned in texts devoted to this collection of short stories published in 2018. The meaning of the French adjective *bizarre* is referred to in the titles of reviews and in interviews with the writer herself. For instance, an interview with Olga Tokarczuk conducted by Katarzyna Kubiśowska for *Tygodnik Powszechny* (an influential Roman Catholic weekly magazine focusing on social, cultural and political issues), is entitled *Światy bizarre* [Bizarre worlds] (Kubiśowska 2018). A review by Michał Sowiński in *Krytyka Polityczna* (a quarterly of left-wing intellectuals covering social science, culture and politics) was printed under the title *Olgi Tokarczuk dziwniejsze opowieści* [More bizarre tales by Olga Tokarczuk] (Sowiński 2018). Jerzy Sosnowski devoted an extensive piece of writing on his blog to explain the meaning of the word "bizarność" [the quality of being bizarre] and the functions, which this concept serves in the analyzed short stories (Sosnowski 2018). Next to positive opinions on bizarreness in the collection of Olga Tokarczuk's stories there have also been some less favorable. The latter include e.g. a highly critical analysis by Paweł Kaczmarski *Opowiadania mizerne* [Feeble stories] published in *Mały Format* (Kaczmarski 2018), or a measured review by Wojciech Szot in *Zdaniem Szota* (Szot 2018), in which the author indicated both strong and weak points of the Nobel winner's Bizarre stories².

The reality of the Volhynia in 1656 is bizarre – it is the spacetime of *The Green Children*, one of the best and most intriguing short stories in this volume. This is how it is described by the author of *The Books of Jacob*:

The principle is simple: the closer to the center, the more real and palpable everything seems to be, whereas the farther from the center, the more evidently the world seems to disintegrate, falling apart like mildewed fabric. One more thing – this center of the world seems to be slightly raised, with ideas, fashions, inventions, everything trickling down. First they saturate the adjacent or neighboring areas, only to trickle down farther, with their impact becoming weaker, while only a small part of the contents may reach the most distant areas (Tokarczuk 2018: 25).

One of the modules in the recreation of events taking place in the 17th century somewhere in the remote areas of Poland's Borderlands is devoted to an extensive reflection on nature, on its peculiar manifestation – two green children. These title characters were brought to a manor house in Hajdamowicze by several armed courtiers from King John II Casimir's retinue. The children were unusual catches captured during a hunt. As Davisson wrote in his memoirs:

² Wojciech Szot wrote: "They are still good, and occasionally even very good stories, but at times they are lacking this freshness of narrative, which we could observe in previous short story collections by Tokarczuk. From time to time it gets stuck" (Szot 2018).

they were two children, small and thin, poorly clad, or rather dressed in rags, in coarse cloth, all in tatters and mud-covered. Their hair was matted into rope-like strands, which I found very interesting, as an excellent example of *plica polonica*. The children were tied up like you do with roe deer and attached to the saddles – I was afraid they may have been battered a bit and their thin, brittle bones broken. The armed retainers explained they needed to do it, for the youngsters were biting and kicking. [...]

Was I to judge them by their size, I would have said they were around four and six; however, judging by their teeth I decided they were older, although looking tiny. The girl was bigger and stronger, while the boy looked peaked, half-starved, but brisk and lively. But it was their skin which I found most intriguing. It was an odd skin tone I had never seen before – resembling either young peas or Italian olives. The hair falling over their faces in matted dreadlocks was fair, but seemed coated with a greenish mildew, like moss-covered stones. As I was told by the young Ryczywolski those Green Children, as we immediately named them, were probably the victims of war, which nature nurtured in the forest, as it may have been sometimes heard, as in the story of Romulus and Remus (Tokarczuk 2018: 19–20).

In another section of his memoirs, written following the convention of 20th century personal document literature, the Scottish physician once again discussed the phenomenon of the green colored skin and hair.

With time the girl started to trust me and allowed me to examine her [...] I gently turned the girl's face towards the light and I took several rope-like strands of her hair into my hands – they felt warm, as if made from wool, while sniffing them I found them to smell of moss; it appeared they were overgrown with some lichens. Her skin when examined closely was covered with a multitude of tiny dark-green spots, which I had mistaken for dirt before I had the chance to take a closer look. We were greatly surprised – me and Ryczywolski; we decided that she had something vegetal about her. We suspected that was the reason why she would undress and sit in the sun, since as all plants she needed sunlight, which nourished her through the skin, and apart from that she had no need to eat much more of anything, she got by on bread crumbs alone (Tokarczuk 2018: 29).

The narrator focuses the readers' attention on the older girl. This is because the younger sibling, the Green Boy, died and his body disappeared under mysterious circumstances. His sister was named the Crumb. For around a dozen weeks the local residents believed that the girl was unable to communicate with others. Socialization resulted in making verbal contact first with the young gentleman, Feliks Ryczywolski, and later also with the king's physician. These contacts developed language skills of the green girl to such an extent that after a few months she would sit under a linden tree and spin amazing tales. She was listened to particularly by children and teenagers, for whom it was one of very few amusements in the manor house in the middle of swamps.

The green children are manifestations of symbiosis between humans and nature. The lifestyle of the youngest is a consequence of humans observing the laws of nature. It is synergistic, following the passage of the seasons, subjected to the natural rhythm of changes in the natural environment. The arrival of the two green creatures in Hajdamowicze acts as an activator of the environmental dimension. In the analyzed bizarre short story it is connected with the Utopian coexistence of humans with the elements – the earth, the Sun, air and water. Instead of faith in God or belief in taming nature with technological inventions to satisfy human whims and needs, the writer presents to the readers, particularly young representatives of the generation facing the climate crisis, a vision of close coexistence of humans and nature. Here two extensive fragments need to be quoted, as showing complete harmony of the green people with the natural environment.

The first fragment is a description of the moon world, from which the Crumb and her brother had emerged. The reader learns of a land in the middle of a forest, beyond swamps,

where the moon shines equally bright as the sun darker than ours [...] In that land people live on trees and sleep in tree hollows. During the moon day they wander onto the tree tops and there expose their naked bodies to the moonlight, from which their skin turns green. Thanks to that light they need to eat only very little and get by merely on forest berries, wild mushrooms and nuts. And since they do not have to till the land or build shelters, any work is done for pure pleasure (Tokarczuk 2018: 38–39).

The other important quote presents information on how the green people spend their winters. We get to know this story by the Crumb as reported by the young Ryczywolski to the king's physician so that he could scientifically describe this natural phenomenon:

I told him once to ask how this green people spent their winters. Ryczywolski brought back the answer the very same evening and squeezing my poor thigh he told me that they did not notice the coming of winter at all, since as soon as the first early frosts arrived they would gather in the largest hollow of the biggest tree and there, snuggling up together as mice would do, and they would fall asleep. They are slowly being covered by thick moss, protecting them against the cold, while large mushrooms would overgrow the entrance to the tree hollow so that they cannot be seen from the outside. Their dreams are special, because they are shared, which means that when somebody is dreaming the other ones can "see" this dream in their heads. In this way they are never bored. They lose much weight over winter and for this reason when the first warm spring moon rises, everyone would climb to the tree tops and there they expose their pale bodies to the moon rays until they turn healthy green again. They also have their own way of communicating with animals and because they do not eat meat or hunt, animals befriend them and help them. Supposedly they even

tell them their animal stories, thanks to which these people become wiser and know nature better (Tokarczuk 2018: 40).

From the notes left by William Davisson the reader learns some more interesting information on the customs of the green people. All the group members care for the children. They consider being useful to nature an important aspect of their existence. They treat their bodies as fruit, which after their death will be consumed by other living creatures. For this reason the green people offer corpses to be fed on by forest animals and birds. This is what happened to the Green Boy, whose remains were found hanging high up in a tree (Tokarczuk 2018: 43).

THE TALE OF THE GREEN PEOPLE AND PROBLEMS OF THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

The vision of the moon world made it possible for Olga Tokarczuk to show how much we, inhabitants of our planet, are ruthless towards the Earth, how unwise our actions are, showing an utter lack of imagination, respect for natural resources and biodiversity. The green children, who appeared unexpectedly in “the last circle of the world” (Tokarczuk 2018: 43), expose human stupidity and cruelty in our contacts with nature, while also indicating inertia and indifference to the fate of future generations. The writer presented this position already in her earlier works, in *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* and *The Moment of the Bear*. The imagery of the Nobel laureate helped her to create visions of symbiotic relationships of the green people with nature. It is a Utopian model, particularly in relation to the ecosystem of the 17th century Volhynia described in great detail, which Davisson left behind, “having enough of this manor house hidden in the middle of a forest and swamps, these rotting leaves, these flies, spiders, worms, frogs, beetles of all kinds, ever-present damp, the smell of silt, the thick intoxicating aroma of greenery” (Tokarczuk 2018: 41).

When presenting the customs of the green people Olga Tokarczuk points to the need to preserve the natural resources here and now. In this case literary fiction is a historical disguise to reflections on problems of the present-day world. The lifestyle of the title characters – the green children and the community from which they came, is a vision of good practices, which in the 21st century should constitute a package of solutions ensuring a better tomorrow. The environmental message of *The Green Children* is addressed to present-day teenagers. We need to consider to what extent this short story by Olga Tokarczuk may be of interest to the contemporary young generation. Thus a question arises: Is this work an important text for young conservationists, presenting a topical message in line with the environmental turn?

Positive answers indicate a high value of actions involving this work of fiction at lessons in the Polish language in secondary schools³. The subject of thorough reading followed by literary explication should not only include a comparative analysis with fragments of the 17th century *Memoirs* of Jan Chryzostom Pasek. It needs to be added here that Jan Chryzostom Pasek was a Polish diarist of the Baroque period, who presented a lively picture of 17th-century Poland. His *Pamiętniki* [Memoirs] were written around 1691–1695, towards the end of his life, but they describe his experiences as a young representative of the Polish Szlachta, the noble estate of the realm of Poland at that time (Pasek 1987)⁴. His *Pamiętniki* cover the years 1658–1688; however, in Polish textbooks for secondary schools students study primarily fragments concerning historical events of the 1650s. Pasek's memoirs present Poland during the Deluge – the Swedish invasion of Poland (1656), the Hungarian invasion by George Rákóczi (1657), the Russo-Polish war (1660–1666), as well as Lubomirski's rebellion. Pasek also described in detail the famous military raid of Denmark by the Polish army headed by Stefan Czarniecki (in the years 1658–1659). His *Pamiętniki* are first of all a monumental and realistic document of his times, particularly since its author was deeply convinced of the grandiosity of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and its unique role in Europe, as well as the superiority of Polish culture and the Roman Catholic religion.

Literary historians consider *The Memoirs of Jan Chryzostom z Goslawic Pasek* the most prominent diary of the Baroque era, constituting an invaluable source of knowledge on the 17th century life, customs and language, a source of inspiration for many writers and historians. *The Memoirs* have exerted a significant impact on Polish literature not only during the Baroque period, but also in subsequent centuries. The diary of Jan Chryzostom Pasek was admired by Adam Mickiewicz and inspired Polish writers of the 19 and 20th centuries, particularly Juliusz Słowacki, Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, Henryk Sienkiewicz or

³ The author focused on the discussion of the content within the primary research perspective: functioning of the environmental turn in the analyzed short story. It is the topic of particular interest for students living in the Anthropocene. The article included topic preferences of secondary school students, for whom *The Green Children* is a highly attractive text of the current literary corpus. For this reason the author does not discuss the form of *The Green Children* or the position of this short story within the structure of *Bizarre Stories*. Undertaking a discussion of these literary theory problems would require additional analyses and studies on teaching materials, being outside the scope of *The core curriculum of general education for general secondary schools, technical secondary schools and stage II sectoral vocational schools [Podstawa programowa kształcenia ogólnego dla liceum, technikum i branżowej szkoły II stopnia]*. Until 2024 *Bizarre Stories* were not included in the reading lists for this stage of school education.

⁴ The Memoirs were translated into English by Maria Świącicka-Ziemianek and published by The Kosciuszko Foundation (Pasek 1979).

Witold Gombrowicz, with Sienkiewicz's Trilogy constituting a homage to that 17th century diarist.

The Memoirs of Jan Chryzostom Pasek share the time and location of the narrative with *The Green Children* by Olga Tokarczuk, along with the detailed descriptions of everyday life and customs of the 17th century Poland, the diary form as an account of an eyewitness, presentation of events looking back in time, vivid interest in the surrounding world, presentation of diverse natural and climatic conditions.

The Green Children needs to be used as a teaching aid in the discussion on the narrative imagination of Olga Tokarczuk with students in the context of existential problems important for contemporary people. One of such topics, on which the Nobel laureate focuses is the promotion of coexistence between people and nature and prevention of climate disaster. This marks a common ground with innovative didactics of teaching literature. An action in line with the paradigm of present-day Polish studies is connected with the development of environmental awareness in view of sustainable tomorrow and future free from apocalyptic degradation of the natural environment. Development of learners' competences promoting innovativeness is a major trend in education also in lessons of the Polish language. It is worthwhile to read *The Green Children* by Olga Tokarczuk in secondary schools taking into consideration the need for the topical dialogue on preservation of the Earth's resources. Reading this short story will contribute to intensification of this highly important discourse in Polish schools. It may be hoped that it will promote in-depth discussion and reflections on climate change, while providing grounds for the implementation of good practices leading to positive changes, particularly those friendly to the Earth's ecosystem.

This short story by Olga Tokarczuk is an influential contribution to the multigenerational discussion on destructive global changes, a discussion becoming increasingly vital in the 2020s and 2030s. This is also a suggestive vision of transformations, which needs to be implemented to be able to satisfy primary existential needs of the future generations. The symbiotic character of the relationships between the title characters and nature is in line with the postulates of contemporary teenagers, representatives of the generation of Greta Thurnberg and Fridays for Future. This environmental manifesto corresponding with the position of activists and supporters of Youth Strike for Future. The vision of an alternative world presented by Olga Tokarczuk and based on the ingrained and undisputed respect of humans to flora and fauna of our common planet is a manifestation of the proposed green transformation free from exploitation of nature or other people, with no further degradation or depletion of natural resources, with no greenwashing of the Global North.

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