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**ECO-ACTIVIST IMAGERY IN LITERARY TEXTS FOR CHILDREN
(A CASE STUDY OF ENGLISH POSTMODERN FAIRY TALES AND SHORT STORIES)**

Alla Tsapiv

Doctor of Sciences in Linguistics, Associate Professor,
Kherson State University

(legal address: Kherson State University, University Street 27, Kherson, Ukraine 73003;
actual address: Shevchenko st., 14, Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine, 76018);

e-mail: atsapiv@ksu.ks.ua

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5172-213X>

Mariia Andrieieva

PhD student,

Kherson State University

(legal address: Kherson State University, University Street 27, Kherson, Ukraine 73003;
actual address: Shevchenko st., 14, Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine, 76018);

e-mail: mandrieieva@ksu.ks.ua

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9116-4056>

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Abstract

This research focuses on the eco-activist multimodal imagery in English postmodern fairy tales and short stories for children as a crucial tool in meaning-making. It is claimed that literary texts for children dynamically reflect current global trends in culture, environmental pollution, gender equality, and family issues. While some topics remain taboo for young readers, others are increasingly prevalent, gradually replacing magical worlds with more realistic, thought-provoking imagery. It has been observed that in recent years, the participation of young people and children in the eco-activist movement has been increasing. They advocate for environmental preservation and solving urgent environmental problems. Literary texts for children are essential tools for fostering a responsible attitude toward the environment at a young age. Due to them, child-readers are introduced to crucial eco-centric issues and ways of solving them and taught the consequences of their actions on nature.

The analysis of our case study reveals that the protagonists of eco-activist fairy tales are primarily children concerned about environmental issues. Shadow narratives and the point of view of the child-focaliser are realized by the visual means, i.e. visual metaphors, salience of definite objects on the pictures, interplay of colours and shapes. It has been observed that visual imagery expands, clarifies environmental protection issues and appeals to the better understanding of child-readers their role in preserving the planet and keeping it clean and safe for living. Visual components clearly show the child-reader the damage caused to the environment by human activity: polluted air, water bodies and cities, injured animals, and deforestation. Important meanings are embedded in the dominant colours of the illustrations: green and blue predominate in the illustrations of nature, while grey and black accompany the images of the results of anthropogenic activity. The victory of Good (nature) in fairy tales is represented by a shift from grey and black to green. Intertextual links between literary texts for children by the same author can be formed through illustrations. Thus, a single fictional world is created in which the eco-activist activity of a child-antagonist is not an isolated phenomenon.

Keywords: *child-reader, eco-activist fairy tale, eco-activist imagery, intertextuality, literary text for children, postmodern fairy tale*



1. Introduction

The number and severity of environmental problems have been increasing in the recent years, including a general rise in air temperature, the destruction of the ozone layer of the atmosphere, loss of biodiversity, unsustainable use of resources. These urgent problems caused the response in the form of the currently spreading eco-activism movement, with more and more participants, organisations, and media platforms joining it. Eco-activism is a form of participation in social and political campaigns to prevent environmental damage (Kraja, 2018). This movement is now a crucial component in the campaign against climate change and environmental degradation. It helps to raise people's awareness of the anthropogenic impact on the environment.

The issue of environment protection has led to the formation of different organisations, movements, environment preservation groups. Notably, the leading international organisation in environmental protection, the United Nations Environment Programme, was established on 5 June 1972. It aims at inspiring, informing and enabling countries and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising the well-being of future generations and at addressing the most pressing environmental challenges facing humanity – from restoring the ozone layer to protecting the world's seas and promoting a green, inclusive economy (UN Environment Programme, n.d.).

The non-governmental organisations that bring together activists from all over the world also play an essential role in the environmental movement, for example, the Centre for Biological Diversity (an organisation aimed at combating threats to endangered species and climate change), Greenpeace (an international non-governmental organisation whose goal is “to ensure the Earth's ability to nurture life in all its diversity”), International Union for Conservation of Nature (an association of governments and non-governmental groups aimed at economic development and nature conservation), National Wildlife Federation (a wildlife conservation group that also takes action in the areas of clean energy and climate change), World Resources Institute (that conducts research in climate, energy, food, water, forests, and equity), and others (Berkeley Library, n.d.).

Eco-activism is facilitated by eco-narratives embodied on various platforms: speeches at summits, protests, eco-centric literature, movies, installations, etc. An example of such narratives is Greenpeace's environmental videos. They indirectly raise awareness of environmental issues through narratives highlighting climate threats, combining emotive imagery with factual material to create compelling stories. Greenpeace's eco-storytelling aims to strengthen the emotional and intellectual connections with nature, using emotional appeal to generate empathy and urgency. By connecting the climate crisis directly to people's lives and well-being, these videos evoke emotions, inspire viewers to feel concerned, and motivate them to take action (Krysanova, 2024, p. 37).

Recent years have been characterised by the active participation of young people in eco-activism and even their leadership in the fight for climate justice. In particular, the school climate strikes of 2018-2019 became history's most extensive global climate mobilisation. The Fridays for Future movement began after the well-known Swedish activist Greta Thunberg protested for three weeks in front of the Swedish parliament in 2018 to draw attention to the climate change emergency. Inspired by her example, other students worldwide have begun to organise their protests and demand that politicians do more to recognise the reality and seriousness of climate change and take action to address it. These regular marches have united young people in over 100 countries. In 2019, this global student movement was awarded the Champions of the Earth Award, the United Nations' highest environmental honour. These mobilisations have paved the way for more ambitious and equitable climate action, raising the issue in public discourse and adding momentum to new climate policies (Gormann, 2023; UN Environment Programme, 2019). Given this, it is essential to study postmodern fairy tales with eco-activist themes and their multimodal aspects, as they form children's views on such important theme as care for the environment.

For postmodern fairy tales, typical fairy tale attributes such as magic, supernatural characters, metamorphoses are not enough to interest a modern child-reader. Contemporary heroes, such as eco-activists, are often real people actively working to change the world for good. One such

example is Greta Thunberg, whose appearance in the media caused a huge resonance in the public sphere. Therefore, the characters in postmodern fairy tales represent people who preserve the environment, develop alternative energy sources, prevent pollution, and protect animals. Postmodern fairy tales introduce child-readers to crucial eco-centric issues: air and water pollution, deforestation, reuse of materials, plastic recycling. This way, children learn to be aware of the consequences of their actions on nature and take care of the world around them.

Our study *aims* to analyse the eco-activist imagery in English postmodern fairy tales. Accordingly, we set the *tasks* to find out the specific purposes of multimodal imagery in eco-activist fairy tales, to determine the relations between the eco-activist imagery and the verbal component of the literary texts for children, to identify intertextual multimodal relations between the fairy tales/short stories, and to outline the role of colours in the eco-activist imagery. *The subject matter* of our study is eco-activist sense-making by means of verbal and visual components of the eco-activist fairy tales and short stories, as well as the intertextuality and colour symbolism of the eco-activist imagery in the texts for children. A *case study* of the research has been constituted by four English postmodern fairy tales of the eco-activist thematics: *Greta and the Giants* (Tucker, 2019), *The Green Giant* (Cottle, 2019), *The Blue Giant* (Cottle, 2020), and *The Tale of a Toothbrush: A Story of Plastic in our Oceans* (Leonard, 2020).

2. Theoretical background and method

Multimodal narratology has been developing recently through foundational research by scholars from Europe (Bell, 2019; Doloughan, 2010, 2011; Gibbons, 2016; Herman, 2010; Nørgaard, 2010; Ryan & Thon, 2014; Toolan, 2016) and Ukraine (Bieliekhova & Tsapiv, 2023; Izotova, 2018; Krysanova, 2024; Leshchenko, 2018; Shevchenko, 2023, 2024; Tsapiv, 2020, 2022; Vorobyova, 2021; Zhabotynska & Brynko, 2022). Significant contributions have been made by G. Kress and T. van Leeuwen in multimodal discourse analysis (2001) and grammar of visual design (2006), as well as by N. Nørgaard with her works in multimodal stylistics (Nørgaard, 2018). Numerous studies have focused on contemporary fiction, including the postmodern period. Digital storytelling (Bell, 2019), comics (Cohn, 2013; Eisner, 1985; Kukkonen, 2013), picture books (Doonan, 1996) and graphic novels (Ewert, 2004; Ghute & DeKoven, 2006) demonstrate the art of creating stories using text, images, signs, colours, and the interplay of size and shape. The power of narratives within their ability for transformation and realization in different media creates a special focus of interest on their enormous potential to combine art forms and modes for creating senses (Bruhn, 2016; Elleström, 2019). These elements create meanings that must be interpreted by an engaged reader, capable of analysis. Picture books for children showcase a unique blend of images and words to create meanings that young readers can decode (Doonan, 1996; Hahn, 2017).

Multimodal narratology has provided a platform for developing ideas and strategies about how different modes create meaning (Page, 2010). Today, children are more drawn to visual and audiovisual content, yet picture books remain popular, as they address important, contemporary issues in ways that resonate with children (Arizpe & Styles, 2016). Multimodal narratives convey deep meanings, moral lessons, values, and rules in a clear and accessible way for younger audiences.

Picture books are increasingly moving away from fantasy and imaginary creatures, instead reflecting images of the real world, effectively serving as an “ABC” for children’s future adult lives. Digital storytelling, cartoons, 3D-augmented reality images, and digital tools that bring characters to life spark children’s curiosity and encourage them to explore and discover objects in the real world.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Uncovering world’s problems. Revealing hidden meanings

The fairy tale *Greta and the Giants* by the English writer Z. Tucker (2019), inspired by the Greta Thunberg campaign, is dedicated to the problems of deforestation and forest degradation as some of

the most severe environmental threats. Forests cover almost a third of the land on our planet; they are home to many species, purify water and air, protect us from infectious diseases, and mitigate the effects of climate change. Nowadays, forests worldwide are threatened by deforestation and human activities such as agriculture, logging, grazing, road construction, and more (World Wildlife Fund, n.d.). Deforestation is an urgent problem for humanity, so it is reflected in postmodern fairy tales.

The story clearly shows the influence of Greta Thunberg's biography, her environmental and political activities, and the *Fridays for Future* movement. The main character of the fairy tale, a little girl named Greta, lives in a beautiful forest that the Giants threaten. When the Giants first came to the forest, they cut down the trees to build their houses. That was not enough, so they kept cutting down more trees until almost no forest was left, and no one could stop them. But then Greta bravely decided to stay on their daily path with a "Stop!" sign. The Giants initially ignored her, but more animals and people joined her. The crowd became so large that it forced the Giants to stop.

The illustrations are essential to the fairy tale, revealing hidden meanings and implementing shadow narratives (Tsapiv, 2020, p. 202). They portray the anthropic protesters as children, while the fairy tale antagonists, the Giants, are depicted as adult men and women constantly engaged in industrial activities (see Fig.1). Thus, the Giants represent the world leaders to whom Greta Thunberg addressed her most famous speech, delivered on 23 September 2023 at the UN Climate Action Summit in New York (National Public Radio, 2019).



Fig.1. Eco-activists have finally attracted the attention of the Giants
(*Greta and the Giants* by Z. Tucker).

In this way, the point of view of the child-focaliser is created with the help of a multimodal metaphor (Tsapiv, 2022). From the children's point of view, adults (the giants) are too busy (tall) to always hear what children tell them. For adults, metaphorically presented as giants, problems that are of great importance to children are unimportant and too tiny for their attention. The image of the giants (adults) does not entirely fit the size of the illustrations, demonstrating that children are out of their consideration. This way, it is portrayed that they cannot see the problems of those who suffer from their industrial activities. This is precisely what Greta Thunberg accused politicians and businesspeople of in her speech. Like the story's protagonist, it can be difficult for eco-activists to communicate their position to people. However, the story asserts that change is possible, and everyone can contribute to a better world.

The interplay of character sizes in the book's illustrations creates a contrast between childhood and adulthood, emphasizing the importance of children being heard. Adults are metaphorically depicted as giants, and the gap between them and children is visually represented by their height. Children are shown standing hand in hand with animals, symbolizing a unified ecosystem that suffers from a lack of awareness regarding its needs.

3.2. Illustrating the level of pollution. Clarifying and expanding the information, creating new meanings

Illustrations of postmodern fairy tales contain additional information that may be outside the verbal component of the text. In particular, illustrations of fairy tales of the eco-activist thematic clearly show the child-reader how much the environment (mainly air and water bodies) is polluted by human waste. This topic is implemented in two fairy tales by the British author and illustrator K. Cottle (2019, 2020) and in the fairy tale *The Tale of a Toothbrush: A Story of Plastic in Our Oceans* by M. G. Leonard (2020). The protagonists of both stories by K. Cottle are little girls. This narrative construction of the text allows the child-reader to put themselves in the shoes of the heroines. The protagonist of the fairy tale *The Green Giant* (Cottle, 2019), Bea, visits her grandfather in the countryside. There, she meets a Giant made of greenery and plants. He used to live in the city, but human activity has made the city and its air unfit for the Giant. Meanwhile, the protagonist of the fairy tale *The Blue Giant* (Cottle, 2020), a girl named Meera, and her mother are asked by the Blue Giant to clean up the ocean and save marine life from plastic pollution.

Through illustrations, these fairy tales show the impact of anthropogenic factors on nature: smog and grey polluted cities, as well as fish, birds and other marine life affected by the abundance of plastic in the ocean. This way, a child-reader is introduced to the problems of air, sea, ocean pollution, and proper waste management. The text of the stories may contain general information (for example, that Meera and her mother help the animals one by one). At the same time, the illustrations provide information on how animals suffer from plastic overload in water bodies: a crab cannot get out of a tomato can, a seagull has its beak tied, and a whale cannot free itself from fishing nets stuck to it (see Fig.2).



Fig.2. Marine animals suffer from ocean pollution by human waste
(*The Blue Giant* by K. Cottle).

The problem of water pollution and plastic recycling is also central to the fairy tale *The Tale of a Toothbrush: A Story of Plastic in Our Oceans* (Leonard, 2020). The story is about Sammy the Toothbrush, which becomes unnecessary for his owner, Sophia, and the girl's mother throws him away. Despite this, Sammy wants to return to his owner. During his journey home, he faces different environmental pollution with plastic waste: toothbrushes, bottles, bags, and plastic straws (see Fig.3). This variety of plastic waste shows a child-reader the diverse ways the environment can be polluted, the state of environmental pollution, and its severity. This encourages the readers to be more critical of their actions. In such narratives, the images are often more realistic and, at times, more 'expressive' than the text itself. The plot, featuring a toothbrush as the main character, conveys unnatural or abstract ideas, while the illustrations remain objective, depicting the real consequences of pollution.

Given this, the illustrations in postmodern eco-activist narratives create meaning by realistically portraying environmental issues while keeping children at the centre of the story, highlighting the urgency of pollution.



Fig.3. The expansion of the visual capabilities of the protagonist-focalizer and the child-reader (*The Blue Giant* by K. Cottle).

In addition to clarifying and expanding the information presented in the verbal component of the narrative, illustrations can create new meanings that are not mentioned in the text. For example, the text of the narrative episode of Sammy's meeting with the albatross does not contain information about the level of pollution in the water around them. However, the close-up illustrations and salience of the albatross show the terrible state of the ocean: the surface is filled with empty plastic bottles, containers, nets, bags, and wrappers, when birds are under constant danger. When the albatross soars into the sky, the visual capabilities of the protagonist-focalizer and the child-reader are expanded. It becomes apparent that this degree of pollution is not specific to the location of the narrative episode but extends further, even beyond the horizon (see Fig.3). Thus, the illustrations in eco-activist fairy tales expand the information provided in the verbal component or can carry utterly new information for the reader.

3.3. Intertextuality of eco-activist imagery in postmodern fairy tales

Like any other literary text, a fairy tale reflects a cultural and historical epoch (Tsapiv, 2018, p.61). One of the most prominent features of postmodernist poetics is intertextuality (Babalyuk, 2010, p.7; Bekhta, 2002, p.216), also reflected in postmodern fairy tales. For example, some of R. Dahl's literary texts for children are combined by intertextual connections into a joint fictional world. Intertextuality in the author's fairy tales is implemented by transmitting attributes and characters from one literary text to another (Andrieieva, 2024, p.14). In K. Cottle's eco-activist fairy tales, multimodal means create a joint fictional world. When Meera, the protagonist of *The Blue Giant* (Cottle, 2020), realises that the pollution level of the ocean is too high for her to eliminate, she returns to the sea repeatedly to clean up the rubbish. More and more people follow her suit, similar to Greta's movement (Tucker, 2019). As depicted in the illustrations, the number of people cleaning the ocean shore is growing. In addition, one of the illustrations, which shows how children help the environment, also depicts Bea, the heroine of the previous story by K. Cottle (2019).



Fig.4. Intertextual usage of the imagery in eco-activist fairy tales (*The Blue Giant* by K. Cottle)

In Figure 4, Bea and her grandfather are planting greenery in his garden. In the verbal component of the narrative, there is no information that Meera and Bea know each other or live in the same fictional world. However, a child-reader familiar with the previous story can easily recognise Bea and her grandfather by their appearance and the attributes of the corresponding literary text: the greenhouse, the garden, and the vegetation. While blue shades mostly dominate the illustrations relating to Meera's environmental activities as she fights against ocean pollution, Bea's illustration is dominated by green colour, as her activities in the previous story are aimed at greening cities and cleaning the air. This way, the child-reader is shown that helping nature is not uncommon, and more and more people, particularly children, are taking active steps to save the environment.

As part of the general regulatory function of the fairy tale, this encourages the child-reader to participate in the eco-activist movement.

3.4. The binary opposition of the background colours (green/blue vs. grey/black)

The traditional fairy tale confrontation of Good and Evil in eco-activist fairy tales is realised through the opposition of nature and anthropogenic activity. This opposition is also reflected at the multimodal level, in particular through the colours of the background, namely green/blue (nature) and grey/black (the results of human activity). At the same time, the victory of Good over Evil in fairy tales is implemented in the illustrations through the change of colours from grey to green. For example, Bea (Cottle, 2019) spends the summer with her grandfather in the countryside, surrounded by nature and greenery. When she returns to the city, she notices how grey and sad it is and plants the seeds given to her by the Green Giant. This way, she brings nature back to the city, which is accompanied by the colour change from grey to green in the illustrations (see Fig.5).



Fig.5. Bringing nature back to the city
(*The Green Giant* by K. Cottle).



Fig.6. Colour change depicts nature's victory over human activity
(*Greta and the Giants* by Z. Tucker).

The same tendency persists in other eco-activist fairy tales. In particular, in the fairy tale *Greta and the Giants* (Tucker, 2019), the city built by the Giants is depicted in black and grey. The air in the city is dark and polluted by smog from industry. In contrast to the forest where Greta and her friends live, the houses in the city also look dull and dark. However, nature triumphs due to the protests when the Giants cease their activities, stop cutting down the trees, and move into the forest. The no longer inhabited city is engulfed by greenery, the sky becomes clear and transparent, and green shades begin to prevail in the illustrations again (see Fig.6). These contrasting illustrations symbolize the dominance of nature and its ability to regenerate despite destructive human activities. However, to do so, the help of characters (in fairy tales) and a child-reader (in the real world) is needed.

4. Conclusions

Eco-activist multimodal narratives for children create a unique combination of realistic characters and pictures with metaphorical meanings, created by means of verbal and visual modes. It has been proven that the child-focaliser's perspective is developed using visual metaphors, image salience, and the interplay of size and shape. The opposition between childhood and adulthood often symbolizes the contrast between the environment and pollution.

This research enhances our understanding of new character types who lack magical powers but represent real-world figures, like Greta Thunberg, known for their eco-activist movements. Another type includes anthropomorphized objects, like a plastic toothbrush, symbolizing environmental issues such as pollution. Birds, animals, and sea creatures are depicted as children's friends who need protection, with a strong focus on their vulnerability.

In postmodern eco-activist narratives, illustrations expand and clarify the meanings reflected in the text, vividly demonstrating the consequences of environmental pollution. Visual metaphors, object salience, and contrasting colours engage child readers, encouraging a deeper understanding of environmental safety and the harmful effects of pollution.

Eco-activist fairy tales of the same author can be integrated into a joint fictional world by intertextual connections on the visual level. This emphasizes the scale of the eco-activist actions taken by children to save the environment and encourages the child-reader to follow the steps of the characters.

The dynamic interaction between words and images not only enhances meaning-making but also encourages readers to actively interpret the stories. By presenting eco-activist themes in an accessible yet thought-provoking way, postmodern fairy tales teach young readers about the impact of human activities on the environment, urging them to take an active role in preserving nature, which may be of particular interest for *further analysis*.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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ЕКОАКТИВІСТСЬКА ОБРАЗНІСТЬ У ХУДОЖНІХ ТЕКСТАХ ДЛЯ ДІТЕЙ (НА ПРИКЛАДІ АНГЛІЙСЬКИХ ПОСТМОДЕРНІСТСЬКИХ КАЗОК ТА ОПОВІДАНЬ)

Алла Цапів,

докторка філологічних наук, доцентка,

Херсонський державний університет

(юридична адреса: вул. Університетська, 27, м. Херсон, 73003;

фактична адреса: вул. Шевченка, 14, м. Івано-Франківськ, Україна, 76018);

e-mail: atsapiv@ksu.ks.ua

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5172-213X>

Марія Андрєєва

аспірантка,

Херсонський державний університет

(юридична адреса: вул. Університетська, 27, м. Херсон, 73003;

фактична адреса: вул. Шевченка, 14, м. Івано-Франківськ, Україна, 76018);

e-mail: mandrieieva@ksu.ks.ua

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9116-4056>

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Анотація

Дослідження присвячено екоактивістській мультимодальній образності в англійських постмодерністських казках та оповіданнях для дітей як важливому інструменті створення смислів. Літературні тексти для дітей динамічно відображають сучасні глобальні тенденції в культурі, проблему забруднення навколишнього середовища, гендерної рівності та питання родинних стосунків. Деякі теми все ще залишаються табуованими для юних читачів, тоді як інші набувають все більшого поширення, поступово замінюючи чарівні світи на більш реалістичні й образи, що спонукають до роздумів. Останнім часом дедалі збільшується участь молоді та дітей в екоактивістському русі. Вони виступають за збереження довкілля та розв'язання нагальних екологічних проблем. Одним із засобів формування відповідального ставлення до середовища у юному віці є художні тексти для дітей. Завдяки ним читач-дитина знайомиться з важливими екоцентричними проблемами та шляхами їх вирішення, а також вчиться усвідомлювати наслідки своїх дій щодо природи.

Проведений аналіз показує, що головними героями екоактивістських казок є переважно діти, стурбовані екологічними проблемами. Тіньові наративи та точка зору дитини-фокалізатора реалізуються за допомогою візуальних засобів, таких як візуальні метафори, салієнтність певних об'єктів на ілюстраціях, взаємодія кольорів і форм. З'ясовано, що візуальні образи розширюють і уточнюють сенси захисту довкілля, спонукаючи юних читачів краще розуміти їхню роль у збереженні планети та підтриманні її чистоти й безпеки для життя. Візуальні компоненти наочно показують читачу дитині рівень шкоди, завданої довкіллю діяльністю людини: забруднені повітря, водойми та міста, постраждалі тварини, вирубані ліси, та інші результати людської діяльності. Важливі смисли закладені у домінуючих кольорах ілюстрацій: зелений та синій кольори переважають на ілюстраціях природи, натомість сірий та чорний супроводжують зображення результатів антропої діяльності. Перемога Добра (природи) у казках супроводжується переходом від сірого та чорного кольорів ілюстрацій до зеленого. Через ілюстрації можуть створюватися інтертекстуальні зв'язки між художніми текстами одного автора. Таким чином, утворюється єдиний художній світ, у якому екоактивістська діяльність персонажа-дитини не є поодиноким явищем.

Ключові слова: екоактивістська казка, екоактивістська образність, інтертекстуальність, постмодерністська казка, художній текст для дітей, читач-дитина.