
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Beyond Delight: Environmental Ethics and Early Ecological Thought in Potter's Picturebooks

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| ABSTRACT

Beatrix Potter's legacy in children's environmental literature goes beyond charming tales and commercial success; her picturebooks subtly embed ecological consciousness that remains relevant today. Her literary and artistic creativity reflects a deep respect for nature, portraying anthropomorphic animals as emotionally relatable characters navigating human-dominated environments. Amid Britain's industrial expansion and urban encroachment, Potter critiques environmental degradation through image and text, crafting a nuanced relationship that reveals power reversals and evokes empathy for nature under threat. This paper presents an ecocritical reading of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, challenging reductive views of Potter's work as merely entertaining. It argues that the story serves a dual purpose—entertaining and educational—by critiquing anthropocentrism and promoting ecological literacy. Through ecocritical theory and picturebook analysis, this study decodes Potter's implicit messages and positions her work within early environmental thought, underlining its enduring relevance to contemporary ecological issues.

| KEYWORDS

Ecological Literacy; Anthropomorphism; Children's Environmental Literature; Ecocriticism; Anthropocentrism.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 01 August 2025

PUBLISHED: 22 September 2025

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2025.8.9.21

1. Introduction

Beatrix Potter was born and raised in London in 1866 to a Victorian upper middle-class family. She was mainly taken care of by governesses and had a lonely childhood. From her juvenile years, she developed an interest in animals and would spend hours examining her unusual pets, like rabbits, frogs, lizards, mice, and hedgehogs, which populated her upper floor room. She keenly observed them, painted them, and enjoyed their company. The abundant fauna and flora of her summer residence in Scotland ignited her passion for her natural environment.

Despite the fact that Potter was mainly popular as an authorstrator, her debut was neither in writing nor in painting. She was a scientist who had a profound curiosity about fungi, lichens, and mushrooms. In fact, she conducted scientific experiments, using a microscope to study spore germination and create data-based findings. With scientific precision, she painted hundreds of illustrations featuring mushrooms, jelly fungi, boletes, and more. Her room was "halfway between the atelier and the botanical laboratory" (Lepri, 2020, p. 291). However, Potter's interest in mycology was hindered by the patriarchal society of her time, which did not readily accept women in scientific disciplines. Despite her ground-breaking research on lichens and fungal spores, Potter faced rejection when attempting to gain admission to the male-dominated Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew. "Potter lands on Children's literature after being pushed away from the adult world: a man's world". (Lepri, 2020, p. 296)

Nevertheless, the challenges and rejections in the scientific world only fuelled her creativity in the realm of literature. Importantly, her early scientific interests evolved into a lifelong commitment to environmental conservation. She later became a prominent land preservationist in the Lake District, acquiring and conserving farmland to protect the region's flora, fauna, and traditional

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landscapes. This deep ecological ethic, rooted in both science and direct experience with nature, would go on to inform her literary work.

Potter channelled her artistic and literary muses and produced her first picture book, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. Publishing as a female author was not an easy path, and her manuscript faced rejections from six publishers. However, Beatrix Potter's unwavering determination and resilience shone through. In 1902, Frederick Warne published *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, and within a year, 50,000 copies were sold. Her tales rose beyond linguistic and geographical borders, fascinating readers worldwide. Potter's interdisciplinarity as a scientist, a painter, a writer, a farmer, and an environmentalist shaped not only her career but also the ecological undercurrents of her children's literature. The anthropomorphic representation of her characters, the setting of her picturebooks, and her artistic ingenuity draw the child reader closer to the natural habitat of her flora and fauna.

During the Victorian era, environmental concerns were not a central focus. Despite this, Beatrix Potter's profound love for nature and her deep connection to the natural environment allowed her to recognize the looming danger posed by humanity's hostile attitude towards nature over a century ago. As a result, she is regarded as a forerunner in the realm of environmental protection and green interests. "Her legacy has ensured the survival of the Lakeland landscape and way of life that she loved so well, and which she immortalized in her books" (The National Trust, 2009, p. 32).

Beatrix Potter's profound love of nature is vividly evident not only in her biographies, diaries, or in her investment in farming, but also across her collection of picture books. In *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, for instance, the anthropomorphized animals, the natural setting, and Potter's distinctive perspective impart a delightful appreciation for nature and instil a sense of responsibility to preserve, cherish, and love the natural world within the minds of children. Her pioneering efforts in this regard make her a visionary figure in the realm of environmental conservation and education. It was the strong bond she shared with nature that ultimately became her source of compensation. Most of her twenty-three tales are set within the natural environment she held in deep reverence.

This paper challenges the prevailing notion that Beatrix Potter's tales are merely entertaining, arguing instead that they play a crucial educational role. Critics like Margaret Lane and Anne Carroll Moore have suggested that Potter's stories lack educational value and serve only to amuse. However, a deeper examination reveals that Potter's works, particularly *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, instil a profound sense of wonder and respect for the environment in young readers. Through the use of anthropomorphism, Potter skilfully bridges the gap between the human and natural worlds, making flora and fauna relatable and endearing to children. This technique not only captivates young imaginations but also serves as an influential conduit for ecological literacy.

2. Literature Review: An Ecologist Ahead Of Her Time

Beatrix Potter's conservationism has been highly lauded in the review of literature on the topic of environmental protection. The seminal work of Linda Lear, *Beatrix Potter: A Life in Nature* (2007), is a comprehensive biographical chronicle of Potter's ardent love of nature where Lear meticulously portrays Potter's journey from a curious naturalist to a successful author and dedicated land conservator, emphasizing her lasting impact on ecological preservation. Lear posits "Through her passionate and imaginative guardianship of the land, she challenged others to think about preservation, not just of a few farms or fells, but of a regional ecology, of a distinct farming culture" (428). Potter's artistry becomes a testament to her pioneering role in environmental conservation, urging us all to embrace eco-literacy and safeguard the delicate balance of our planet. According to Lear, what is suggested in her drawings is that "her observation of the natural world and the relationship between nature and art" gradually became "more sophisticated" (64). Potter's love of nature manifests itself in her collection of picture books. In *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, she anthropomorphizes her bunnies both physically and emotionally, and she personifies her plants by attributing feelings of agony and distress when disturbed by humans (44). She seems to "dance with the earth body", which, according to Kate Rigby, conveys a profound, harmonious connection with the natural world, a way of living that is deeply attuned to the rhythms and needs of the Earth. Embracing an "Earthian identity" involves recognizing Earth as our shared home and valuing its interests and agency (Rigby 47). Potter's perspective resonates with Rigby's, they both see nature as a living entity with intrinsic value and deserving care and consideration, not a resource to be exploited. A century after the publication of Potter's works, it is even more pressing to promote a more sustainable and compassionate approach to living, one that honors our relationship with the Earth and promotes ecological responsibility.

On textual and pictorial levels, Potter's works reflect a profound connection to the natural world and a recognition of her reverence for it. Johnson argues that "Potter's personal relationship with nature and her conservation efforts are inextricably linked to her storytelling; as such, she is a perfect model for integrating academics and nature experiences" (38). By portraying nature with its flora and fauna in her fiction, Potter delightfully encourages young readers to appreciate and revere their natural environment. This perspective highlights the ethical and blissful aspects of living in

harmony with nature and underlines the importance of ecological awareness in Potter's picturebooks. She believes that we need to overcome "the ontological error of assuming that only humans have existential access to value as such" (Burchett 126). Potter's portrayal of her animals as emotional beings with their own opinions, moods, and inherent value challenges the traditional anthropocentric view that only humans possess intrinsic value and agency. Through words and pictures, she invites readers to acknowledge that humans are not the only ones that have their own unique worth. Her viewpoint corresponds with the necessity to surmount the ontological bias that undermines the intrinsic worth of non-human entities. Potter's bunnies and plants are not just characters, but representatives of a more vibrant and broader ecological tenet that promotes a more inclusive and environmentally sentient worldview. Lepri argues that in Potter's artistic production "it is possible to recognize an explicit environmental sensitivity" (295). This environmental sensitivity is not only apparent in the visual texts but also in the verbal texts and in the relationship between words and pictures. In fact, Potter's conservational affinity has mostly been addressed through accounts of her life rather than through a reflective reading of her works. It is this research gap that this paper tries to fill.

Potter's oeuvres are engaging pictorial and verbal narratives that capture the children's imagination, engage their senses, and create emotional connection with the natural world. In Peter Hunt's terms, they are a blend of "instruction and delight", not merely delightful as Margaret Lane argued: "Beatrix Potter's commitment in children's literature is authentic and takes the form of a production devoid of educational intent, resulting from the pleasure of narrating through an expressive richness capable of giving voice and figuration to the ineffable" (Lane 59). Lane's interpretation of Beatrix Potter's works as purely delightful, devoid of any educational intent, overlooks the profound depth that underlies Potter's narratives. While Lane argues that Potter's storytelling is driven solely by the pleasure of narration, this perspective fails to acknowledge the subtle, yet powerful, educational undercurrents within her tales. Potter's picturebooks are more than just charming stories; they are immersive experiences that engage a child's imagination, senses, and emotions, nurturing a deep connection with the natural world. This connection is inherently educational, cultivating an awareness and appreciation for nature that aligns with the principles of environmental preservation. Philip Pullman asserts that:

All stories teach, whether the storyteller intends them to or not. They teach the world we create. They teach the morality we live by. They teach it much more effectively than moral precepts and instructions. We don't need lists of rights and wrongs, tables of do's and don'ts. We need books, time and silence. 'Thou shalt not' is soon forgotten, but 'Once upon a time' lasts forever. Carnegie Medal Acceptance Speech.

Pullman's quote is quite relevant in this context where moral responsibility plays a crucial role in determining our connection to nature. Messages delivered through storytelling are much more effective than enforcement through rigid instructions. Through pictorial and textual interplay, Potter's works inculcate into young minds a deep love and respect for the natural world. Her works have a subtle instructive nature which is far from traditional didacticism: they aim at a better connection and understanding of the environment. Thus, contrary to Lane's view, Potter's picturebooks are not merely delightful but are also instructive in their ability to nurture a sense of environmental responsibility and a lifelong appreciation for the natural world. This blend of "instruction and delight" demonstrates the unique power of Potter's storytelling to educate through enchantment.

Beatrix Potter's narratives, rich in symbolic complexity and ecological foresight, align with the principles of participatory and experiential learning, offering a nuanced critique of Victorian educational norms while subtly advocating for environmental consciousness. Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* stimulates the child emotionally, intellectually, and culturally. Peter dares eat when hungry, smile when merry, and weep when blue. He ventures to listen to his inner self, and nature grants him this inner force. It is in the abundance and the amplitude of the wild that adventurous Peter is both thrilled and dismayed. David Orr suggests that "Real learning is participatory and experiential, not just didactic" (*Ecological Literacy* 91). This is at the core of Potter's narratives: the space given to Peter to learn life lessons in the garden allows him to grow up and develop his agency. The little rebel does not abide by his mother's earlier didacticism, a realistic depiction of childhood curiosity that nurtures his experiential learning. His connection with the natural world enhanced his resourcefulness and he managed to outvie McGregor while his father failed. Aligning with J. J. Rousseau's views on childhood and nature, F. Mathews (128) asserts that we can only be fully self-realized when we maintain our ecological connections, as they form the basis of our existence and well-being.

Potter seems to adhere to J. J. Rousseau's views of childhood: "a child educated by Nature will be self-reliant and use reason to guide his action... Through this natural form of education, the child will develop his own ideas and be governed by his own will, not the will of others" (qtd in Peckover 88). It is in this exploration of the world around him that the child evolves, becomes resourceful, and realizes his natural self, just like Peter's experience in McGregor's

garden. According to F. Mathews, this self-realization is closely linked to ecological literacy where essentially speaking, my true self is

constituted by my ecological relations with elements of my environment – relations in the image of which the structures of my body and consciousness are built. I am a holistic element of my native ecosystem, and of any wider whole under which that ecosystem is subsumed. Since this is part of my essence, I cannot be said to flourish, to actualize the potentialities of my nature – in a word, to be fully self-realized – unless I do stand in these relations. (qtd in Peckover 90).

Beatrix Potter challenges the anthropocentric ontological predilection of the Edwardian and Victorian eras. In a time when children's literature is adult-centered and promotes didactic worldviews, Potter emerges as a forerunner in contesting anthropocentric views that place man at the center of the universe, dominating rather than coexisting with nature. By depicting Peter's experience in the garden as a way of self-development, she consolidates the role of nature as outer space that teaches as much as formal education. Potter writes in codes that necessitate hermeneutic skills to be deciphered: Hollindale argues that "She is a specialist in concealment, a person not habitually disposed to show her hand" (qtd in Heather and Watson 96). Potter's views pertaining to environmental protection are ahead of her time. She is an "Ante Litteram Ecologist" whose art is "imbued with figures and allusions to nature as an almost sacred, divine place, a place with power to inspire, surprise, frighten, cure, make live 'true' experiences, of growth, of initiation, of discovery and of finding oneself" (Lepri 295). She had to conceal her progressive perspectives beneath a range of codes to appeal to the Victorian readership, who may not have felt the threat of environmental challenges.

Like Linda Lear, Margaret Lane is more regarded for her extensive biographical work on Beatrix Potter than for a close reading of her pictorial and verbal narratives. Similarly, Anne Carroll Moore, a longtime critic of Potter's works believes that Potter's stories were primarily amusing and did not offer substantial moral or educational value (Encyclopedia Britannica). Potter's anthropomorphic delightful characters do not merely entertain the child. They promote ecological literacy and affinity towards nature. Child readers realize their own selves in the framework of an ecosystem. Victorian formal education discourages exploration and discovery by subscribing to rules to keep children safe within doors.

Beatrix Potter's integration of ecological themes within her narratives reflects a deep-rooted belief in the interdependence of personal development and one's relationship with the natural world, a concept that aligns closely with Mathews' perspective on self-realization through ecological connections. The natural setting of her tales and her own connection to nature exemplify the idea that nurturing one's relationship with the environment is essential for personal growth and fulfilment. Potter has a "pervasive influence on the modern animal story", Hollindale affirms: "It is natural for young animals to explore their surroundings, to leave their nest and their mother's protection, to play away from home" (Qtd in Montgomery & Watson 99). The subversive Potter draws young readers into the realm of her animals so close to nature, mirroring a Romantic ideology and actively engaging young readers in the world of her animal characters, which are intricately woven into the fabric of nature. Through her pictorial and textual narratives, she invites readers to immerse themselves in these natural settings, promoting a deep appreciation for the beauty and complexity of the natural world. In doing so, Potter not only entertains, as Lane and Moore suggest, but also educates—without being didactic—instilling in her audience a sense of wonder and reverence for the environment and its flora and fauna.

3. Methodology

The methodology employed in this paper entails a thorough reading of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* with an eco-critical lens. Potter's deep connection to wildlife forms the basis of her ecological awareness, which is reflected in her literature. The aim is to delineate her skillful employment of anthropomorphism as a powerful tool for promoting this awareness, alongside her idealization of the bond between children and nature. Potter's storytelling and illustrations encourage critical engagement with environmental issues and cultivate ecological literacy from a tender age. By creatively crafting environmentally conscious children's literature, Potter plays a significant role in shaping children's attitudes, enhancing their knowledge, promoting empathy toward the natural world, and inspiring them to become responsible agents of the environment.

This study adopts Edward Wilson's ecocritical theory which calls for a deeper understanding of the representation of ecological concepts in literature and art. Wilson's perspective on ecocritical theory is closely related to his views on biophilia and the need for humans to reconnect with nature. Biophilia suggests that humans have an innate, biological connection with nature and an inherent attraction to the natural world. In his seminal work *Biophilia*, Wilson addresses the inherent human affinity for nature and living organisms: "The biophilic tendency is ... evinced in daily life and widely distributed as to deserve serious attention. It unfolds in the predictable fantasies and responses of individuals from early childhood onward" (85). Wilson indicates that our connection with nature is not something acquired later in life

but is present from a very early age. This insight is crucial for educators, as it highlights the importance of developing this connection with nature in children to promote a lifelong appreciation for the environment.

Exploring the broader discourse of anthropocentrism, the views of Edward Wilson, David Orr, and Jean Jacques Rousseau resonate with Beatrix Potter's literary concern against acute interference with the natural world. Orr recognizes the importance of integrating ecological awareness into education and societal values. He contends that literature plays an important role in shedding light on the human relationship with nature. He illustrates how literature reveals the dangers of humanity's pursuit of dominance over nature, drawing parallels with characters like Marlowe's Faust, Shelley's Frankenstein, and Melville's Captain Ahab, who embody the destructive consequences of unrestrained human ambition. (*Earth in Mind* 8).

Similar to contemporary environmentalists, J.J. Rousseau observes that while nature in its original state is inherently good, human intervention often corrupts and degrades it, transforming what is natural into something harmful. "God makes all things good; man meddles with them, and they become evil" (qtd in Peckover 84). Wilson and Orr, both modern ecological theorists, appear to build on the foundational ideas of J.J. Rousseau, who, in the eighteenth-century, critiqued the destructive impact of human interference on the natural world and laid the groundwork for later ecological critiques. Wilson and Orr extend this critique by specifically condemning anthropocentrism, the worldview that places human interests above those of other species and the environment. Their work, which emerged in the late twentieth-century, echoes Beatrix Potter's earlier literary caution against excessive human interference in nature, illustrating a continuity of thought that spans centuries.

4. Discussion

In a consumerist society that often prioritizes consumption over conservation, Beatrix Potter rises as a preservationist whose profound scientific interest in botany and mycology significantly affected her artistic ingenuity. Through her visual and literary art, Potter delineates a picturesque, yet true-to-life landscape, where her delightful anthropomorphic animals forge a deep emotional bond between the reader and the natural world. Potter's verbal and pictorial narratives exude a Romantic influence in various aspects. Her keen observation of the intricate details of nature, her aesthetic ability to capture the beauty of the natural world, and her celebration of childhood and innocence through relatable and endearing animal characters, strongly connect her to Romantic ideals. Karl Kroeber argues that "British Romanticism is proto-ecological, its poets believed that humankind belonged in, could and should be at home within the world of natural processes" (qtd in Moore and Strachan 291). Potter was influenced by Romantic ideals but extended her commitment beyond Romanticism. She actively engaged in preserving the beauty of the English natural landscape, not just through her storytelling and illustrations and their impact on readers but also by investing in the agricultural economy to preserve the landscape of the Lake District, and by raising funds to save woodland and meadow from "imminent" risk of disfigurement by extensive building and town extension. (Lear 338).

Her interdisciplinary pursuits revolve entirely around the natural environment as she seamlessly balances botany, storytelling, painting, farming, and conservation. According to Lepri, "The stratified and complex authorial identity" of Beatrix Potter today needs "a critical rereading for the effects it has produced in the long run" (292). Kutzer affirms that Potter's tales are "Far from being simple tales of runaway bunnies and kittens, they are miniature novels of emotional weight and depth. Their miniature size is deceptive" ("A Wildness Inside" 206). This depth is exemplified in the way Potter's works simultaneously entertain as well as educate, instilling a sense of wonder and reverence for the environment in her readers. Her detailed illustrations and compelling narratives serve as powerful tools for promoting ecological awareness and literacy, demonstrating her forward-thinking approach to environmental issues long before they became a global concern. Potter's legacy as an artist and conservationist continues to inspire and educate new generations about the importance of living in harmony with the natural world.

5. Ecological Insights through Anthropomorphism

The anthropomorphic representation of flora and fauna in Potter's tales makes animals and plants more relatable to every child and creates a deeper bond between them and the child. From the cover page of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, the protagonist is clad and shod like humans and is bestowed with a male proper name. The code of posture shows him on his hind legs appropriating a human erect posture, bound on some mischief foreshadowing his youthful curiosity, a trait that is shared by children. Peter's protruding ears, crossed arms, and stealthily wide pace set the motion of an adventure that sounds quite familiar to every child. The opening page of the tale introduces Peter's family pictorially represented in its natural state and habitat (Potter, p.3). Anthropomorphism here is neither at the level of gesture, nor at the level of behavior yet the rabbit family shares with humans their social identity, the concept of 'family' that often connects its members with bonds of love, warmth, and care. The code of size expands the sizes of both the mother and the home, highlighting the protective parental nature that kindles the spirit of the child. As for their home, sheltered under the huge fir-tree, offers safety, refuge, and connection with beloved ones. The text of the opening scene complements the illustration with pet names of the female little rabbits, while their brother's male name resonates with child readers as common as grass. From the onset, the child reader puts himself in the boots of Peter with his

multi-layered human identity. Kutzer posits that "Peter is ennobled with a human name and will have adventures that resonate with human children" (Into the Garden 39).

Conversely, McGregor's family is briefly represented through Mrs. Rabbit's warning to her children not to dare step into their garden. Her justification is that their father was "put in a pie by Mrs. McGregor" (p.11). The brevity of the textual message is complemented by an illustration of the McGregor family where the father is invisible, but his big hands are set over a dining table, holding a fork and a knife and ready to devour the large pie presented by Mrs. McGregor. Their child's head is popping behind the mother and in his left hand a fork, while the dog's head is held up so close to the dish, sniffing the delicacy and claiming his portion too. In the pictorial narrative, Potter seems to dehumanize McGregor by purposefully not showing his face nor his body in the illustration. He is metonymically represented to connote his brutality against nature which makes him less than a human. This cruelty extends to the rest of the family, who rejoicingly share with him his prey that is mercilessly hunted down by him, cooked by his wife, and is ready to be devoured by the whole family. In *The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies*, "Mrs. McGregor sounds even more bloodthirsty than her husband" ("Into the Garden", 56). Indeed, she wants to use the rabbit skin for her clothing and asserts "I shall skin them and cut off their heads" (Potter, 50). She mercilessly competes with her husband who has another plan for the children bunnies.

Looking back at the representation of both families, Potter has anthropomorphized Peter's family bestowing them with human characteristics, while dehumanizing the human family by depicting them as brutal hunters taking over the life of Peter's father for having stepped into his territory, hunting down his son Peter, and trapping his grandchildren Flopsy's children. The illustration on page ten of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* had been removed from a few editions as unsuitably violent for child readers, but Potter's original edition is a deliberate message of a tale as old as time—the conflict of man versus nature. Man's recurrent attempts to subdue nature surface from Peter's background story of his ultimate orphan status. This tragic background of the loss of Peter's father and the continued threat to his family, serves as a cathartic moment that reawakens in the child reader an innate emotional bond with nature—a bond that, as E.O. Wilson argues in his biophilia hypothesis, must be nurtured from early childhood, just as Potter does through her emotionally resonant, ecologically conscious storytelling.

On the subsequent page of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, anthropomorphizing continues as the entire rabbit family is dressed as humans and given voices. The gradual humanization of the rabbits is a strategic move by Potter to create a connection between the readers and the rabbit family, particularly with Peter. As Scott (1994) notes, "Almost every picture features Peter close up and within touching distance" (p.83). This close proximity in the illustrations helps to forge a bond between Peter and the reader, making his experiences and emotions more relatable and engaging. Potter's use of anthropomorphism not only brings her characters to life but also serves as a conduit for readers to connect emotionally with the natural world. By humanizing her animal characters, Potter bridges the gap between human and animal experiences, promoting a deeper understanding of nature. This technique is central to her storytelling, allowing her to convey subtle messages about the importance of respecting and protecting the environment.

In their natural habitat, these animals are recurrently disrupted by humans, who display aggressive conduct towards them as depicted in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, its direct sequel *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*, *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck*, and *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin*. At the level of characterization in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, the portrayal of the human antagonist from the onset of the tale with his conflictual and exclusive relationship with the animal protagonist prompts readers to take a stance, and to nurture compassion towards the vulnerable and endearing little bunny. When *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* was read to kindergarten children, and they were asked about what it is that they liked most about the tale, the unanimous answer was that they admire Peter for outwitting McGregor. Textual and verbal narratives invite even juvenile readers to question anthropocentrism which considers humans the most significant entities in this universe, and advocate for more ecocentric or biocentric perspectives that prioritize the interconnectedness and value of all life forms and ecosystems. Potter's characterization of flora and fauna serves as more than just literary or visual elements; it symbolizes a broader ecological principle. Her animals and plants stand as representatives of a more encompassing and environmentally sentient worldview that highlights the interconnection of all living beings and the importance of valuing and preserving the natural world.

Potter masterfully uses vivid and sometimes unsettling imagery to critique humanity's destructive relationship with nature. She illustrates the conflict through both her textual narrative and illustrations which engage readers on multiple levels and invite deeper ecological reflection. In his attempt to escape McGregor's rake, the frightened Peter is sketched running away towards the reader's bosom for protection from the antagonistic gardener who does not spare a rake (p. 29), a sieve (p.38), nor a shoe (p.45), to catch or even crush the little soul under his sole. The reader does not fail to notice where Potter stands, despite her playfulness with words and pictures. It is through the allegorical value of her verbal, and mainly her visual texts, that the different representations of the protagonist/antagonist surface. Potter's metaphors are deliberate: they represent a scathing criticism of man's conflictual relationship with nature. Potter draws the readers into Peter's world stimulating their empathetic connection.

Through a skillful interplay of text and illustration, Beatrix Potter creates a multilayered narrative in *Peter Rabbit* that enriches the reader's understanding and engagement. She blends linear storytelling with complex visual symbolism to convey deeper ecological and emotional insights. Maria Nikolajeva and Scott argue that "conventional signs are often linear, while iconic signs are non-linear and do not give us direct instruction about how to read them. The tension between the two functions creates unlimited possibilities for interaction between words and image in picturebooks" (2006, p.1-2). While Potter's text provides a straightforward narrative, her illustrations offer deeper, layered meanings that invite multiple interpretations. This interplay creates a dynamic experience, enhancing the reader's engagement and understanding by blending clear instructions with visually rich, interpretive elements. The text provides a clear narrative structure: sentences and paragraphs guide the reader through Peter Rabbit's adventure in a straightforward manner, giving direct instruction on the sequence of events. The illustrations, on the other hand, are iconic signs that add depth and layers to the story. For instance, the image of Peter Rabbit hiding under a bush from Mr. McGregor (p. 54) might simultaneously convey his fear through his facial expression, the intensity of the chase as it momentarily halts his escapade, and the fertility of the garden, which shelters him like his own rabbit home under the fir tree—all of which contribute to the narrative in a way that text alone might not capture. This nuanced use of visual symbolism in Potter's multilayered narrative conveys broader ecological themes and deepens the readers' experience.

Beatrix Potter's nuanced depiction of role reversal and anthropomorphism in *Peter Rabbit* serves as a sophisticated critique of human dominance over nature: it challenges hierarchical power structures and promotes deeper ecological literacy. At many reprisals, McGregor is pictured either like a shadow who is hardly visible, or smaller than Peter in size, or lower in position to the more confident Peter who manages to overrule him. Role reversal is also revealed through playfulness with codes when Peter confronts McGregor for the first time in the garden. (Potter, p. 26) Although the code of size contracts the frightened bunny and magnifies his opponent, the code of position subverts this image by depicting the anthropomorphized Peter standing on his two hind legs while the dehumanized McGregor is groveling on his four limbs. Peter Rabbit's anthropomorphized comportment bridges the gap between humans and animals, making him a relatable character. This can encourage young readers to empathize with Peter's dilemma and view animals as sentient beings with their own experiences and emotions. Ecological literacy involves promoting empathy for the natural world, and this portrayal helps establish that connection. Wilson believes that "the natural world is the refuge of the spirit, remote, static, richer even than human imagination." and that "we are killing the thing we love, our Eden" (p.12). McGregor's relatively bigger size symbolizes the domination of humans over nature however the role reversal challenges this power dynamic. His dehumanized horizontal posture on all fours, juxtaposed to the vertical standing of Peter on two, indicates that even small creatures like Peter can momentarily disrupt the perceived hierarchy. This portrayal reflects the idea of ecological literacy, which encourages understanding the intricate balance of power and interdependence in ecosystems.

Whereas Potter's picturebook implicitly addresses environmental concerns, Will Gluck's film *Peter Rabbit* (2018) delves more explicitly into themes of ecological literacy and the conflict between humans and nature. According to E. Hawley (2022), children's films are rarely classified as "Eco cinema" yet they have significantly influenced the portrayal of nature in cinema. Recognizing children's films within the framework of Eco cinema would not only broaden the scope of ecological criticism but also emphasize the importance of early environmental education through media. Gluck's semi-faithful adaptation of the original story emphasizes the ongoing conflict between humans and nature in the representation of old Mr. McGregor and his great-nephew Thomas McGregor, who share a deep-rooted dislike of wildlife. Just as the wrathful old McGregor thrusts a sieve over Peter and threatens to bake him in a pie, he dies of heart attack. This scene is highly metaphoric of nature's resilience against human aggression. The depiction of Thomas McGregor, the new heir of the mansion and of his great-uncle's antagonistic conduct, is also symbolic of the generational rise of hostility towards the natural environment. His attempt to eradicate the bunnies from his garden only wreaked havoc upon him and instead of empathizing with Peter, the audience start to feel sorry for Thomas McGregor, which implies nature's retaliation to man's exclusive comportment. Like Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, the movie is not merely entertaining, it is also educational as the ending suggests that coexistence with nature creates harmony. It is through Bea—the diminutive form of Beatrix who shares with her the love of nature and art—that this reconciliation materializes.

6. Potter's Art: A Medium for Ecological Education

Beatrix Potter's tales transcend simple storytelling and serve as sophisticated vehicles for ecological education. Her artistic imagination can be interpreted as a critique of man's recurrent menace to his natural world. The pictorial depiction of Peter narrowly escaping his antagonist through a window illustrates the vulnerability of the natural world to human actions, with McGregor's cactus-skinned shoe representing a significant threat to both plants and animals. The chaotic scene of scattered pots and a terrified Peter leaping for his life accentuates this environmental threat (Potter, p. 45). Though deeply personal in style, Potter's art evokes empathy and a sense of stewardship towards the environment across diverse audiences. The power of her art lies in its ability to surpass cultural boundaries, tapping into fundamental human values such as compassion for the innocent and respect for nature.

Beatrix Potter's illustrations, particularly in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, serve as powerful visual narratives that align with Maria Montessori's philosophy, portraying nature as a protective refuge that promotes a deep connection and responsibility towards the environment. Montessori believes that every plant is "dear to us" and helps us in "maintaining our intimate personality" (2004, p. 77). In *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, the illustration of Peter dashing underneath the bushes and hiding from Mr. McGregor and the dreadful sound of the hoe is a powerful depiction of nature as a refuge (p. 54). The rich detail emphasizes the density and complexity of the foliage that shelters Peter: the dense bushes, illustrated all around him, envelop him with heartening protection against his pursuer. His crouching with a fearful facial expression creates empathy towards the frightened little figure. This scene not only illustrates Peter's immediate need for safety but also subtly conveys a broader message about the importance of preserving natural habitats. By depicting nature as a nurturing and protective space, Potter instills in her readers a sense of wonder and esteem for the environment, encouraging a deeper connection with and responsibility towards fauna and flora.

Just as Montessori's appreciation for each plant enhances our understanding of nature's role in human development, Wilson's perceptions into the creative process of the artist provide insight into Potter's work. He asserts that "the intensity of the artistic process allows the great artist to transfer feeling with surgical precision, creating works that are personal in style but universal in effect" (p. 62). Potter's meticulous and affectionate depictions of nature exemplify this principle, achieving a universal resonance through their detailed and emotionally precise portrayals of flora and fauna. Kutzer adds that Potter's "botanical illustrations are both beautiful and accurate" (Into the Garden 36). At the onset of Peter's slipping into McGregor's garden, he is portrayed standing on his hind legs with one foot upon the other, enjoying his hearty meal of freshly picked radishes, French beans, and lettuces (Potter 22). His contented expression and relaxed posture are juxtaposed with the more vigilant robin perched in the garden spade beside him with his head up in the air as if watching over Peter. The detailed roots and leaves of the plants around Peter reflect Potter's botanical precision, and a more realistic natural setting that is both nutritive and threatening. By creating vivid and immersive natural settings in her tales, Potter introduces young readers to the beauty and complexity of the natural world, instilling a sense of connection with and responsibility towards this world.

Potter's perspective that nature withstands man's destructive actions is more clearly portrayed through her illustrations. With the ability of Peter to outvie McGregor, she further ridicules the latter by depicting him in a shrunken and hazy position, almost the size of Peter's jacket that is hung as a scarecrow to frighten the blackbirds (p. 61), a reference to his fading authority. Furthermore, the visual narrative discloses that birds are not scared by these items, which reveals a critical ecological message: human attempts to control and manipulate nature often fail to understand or respect the actual workings of the natural world. The birds' indifference to the scarecrow made from Peter's clothing highlights the futility and misguided nature of human interventions. This illustration serves as a powerful reminder of nature's resistance, subtly teaching young readers about the repercussions of anthropocentrism. Orr underlines the need to challenge the hidden educational curriculum that promotes human domination over nature. He argues, "We will have to challenge the hubris buried in the hidden [educational] curriculum that says that human domination of nature is good," and affirms that "the ecological crisis is a test of our loyalties and of our deeper affinities for life" (Orr, 1994, p.23).

This perspective aligns closely with the themes Potter explores in her tales. The garden, meticulously illustrated, represents a natural habitat that is both alluring and dangerous for Peter. The human influence, embodied by Mr. McGregor, creates a setting where nature is both cultivated and controlled. A particularly important moment occurs when Peter gets trapped in the toolshed: McGregor, intent on capturing Peter, turns over pots and tools in search of him (Potter, p. 43). This scene vividly illustrates the clash between Peter's natural instincts to hide and the human imposition on nature. The detailed illustration shows Peter's protruding ears and the rest of his damp body hidden in the can, further stresses his vulnerability (Potter, p. 42). This moment not only evokes empathy from readers but also reflects the constant threat animals face due to human actions. Furthermore, Potter's metonymical imagery enhances the illustration where only part of McGregor's big hands are visible, gripping a sieve in an attempt to trap Peter (p. 38). Potter's choice to reveal the hands and not the entire figure in the illustration serves as a metonymic function to represent his authority and control. In his effort to protect his garden, he is ironically destroying it.

Through these illustrative choices, Potter challenges the notion of human supremacy over nature, questioning the ethics of human control over natural spaces. Anthropocentrism sparks a counterreaction, akin to karma, where hostility toward nature leads to nature's retaliation. The visual narrative induces empathy for Peter and condemns McGregor's actions, delivering a message to children to connect with Peter as a symbol of nature and view human aggression as vain and destructive.

7. Conclusion

Beatrix Potter's emotional storytelling engages young readers and instills a lasting appreciation of the natural world beyond the didactic approach of dos and don'ts. Through visual and textual narratives, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* transcends sheer entertainment and promotes early ecological literacy by nurturing the child's intrinsic connection with nature. Her tales offer a

nuanced critique of the anthropocentric predilection that places man at the center of the universe in his attempt to dominate rather than coexist with his natural world. Potter's anthropomorphic representation of her characters within their natural habitat, and her artistic precision of illustrating flora and fauna, serve as an educational tool that does not only enhance children's imagination but embed lessons of empathy and responsibility towards their natural environment. Despite the fact that it is published over a century ago, it still resonates with contemporary ecological crisis and the ongoing call for conservation conferences today. More than a century after its publication, her work remains pedagogically relevant, offering an enduring model for integrating ecological awareness into children's education at a time when cultivating environmental preservation is more urgent than ever. It is no wonder, then, that her works have transcended the page to reach broader audiences through adaptations in film, theatre, merchandise, and other media—testament to their enduring cultural and educational resonance. The twenty-first-century child, facing a more threatening planetary climate change, largely driven by anthropocentrism, needs to be more ecologically literate than ever.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Acknowledgement: This research was supported and funded by the research sector, Arab Open University – Kuwait Branch, under decision number 24151.

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