

# Reading Literary Texts with an Ecocritical Consciousness in the Anthropocene

**La lectura de textos literarios con conciencia ecocrítica en el Antropoceno**

**La lectura de textos literaris amb consciència ecocrítica a l'Antropocé**

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## Abstract

Analyzing empirically the responses of undergraduate students to the short stories they read in an elective English course, this paper interrogates the effect of guided reading on students' comprehension of the reading material and compares their initial responses to the texts with those given after the lecture. The instructor of the course prepared a syllabus that mostly includes stories of the Anthropocene, theoretically the last geological era which points to excessive human control of the ecosystem. It was observed that students' lack of knowledge about the term caused them to miss the ecological concern of the stories and make textual analysis focusing mostly on thematic characteristics. Individual reading, reading after the lecture and discussions in class revealed that guided reading questions helped students familiarize with the concept and develop new perspectives during reading. They reread the texts with a new concern about ecological collapse, environmental ethics, as well as animal and plant rights. The ambiguity of the stories lies in the fact that they are neither stories of hope nor dystopian narratives, but rather texts that portray the individual as the responsible agent. Therefore, re-reading the texts of the Anthropocene with the help of guided reading questions enabled students to question their own responsibility in ecological collapse and to come up with new questions as to the steps to be taken. The use of guided reading questions also made it possible for the instructor to bridge the gap between scientific and literary accounts of the Anthropocene. Another positive outcome of the course was that the students were motivated to make ecocritical readings of classical narratives they were already familiar with in addition to readings of more recent stories.

**Key words:** Anthropocene, guided reading, ecocritical literature, non-human, active reading.

## Resumen

A través del análisis empírico de las respuestas del alumnado universitario a los cuentos cortos que leyó en un curso electivo de inglés, este documento interroga el efecto de la lectura guiada en la comprensión del material de lectura por parte de los estudiantes y compara sus respuestas iniciales a los textos con las dadas después de la clase. La profesora del curso preparó un plan de estudios que incluye principalmente historias del Antropoceno, teóricamente la última era geológica que señala el control excesivo de los humanos sobre el ecosistema. Se observó que la falta de conocimiento de los estudiantes sobre el término hizo que pasaran por alto la preocupación ambiental de las historias y realizaran un análisis textual centrado principalmente en las características temáticas. La lectura individual, la lectura después de la clase y las discusiones en clase revelaron que las preguntas de lectura guiada ayudaron al alumnado a familiarizarse con el concepto y a desarrollar nuevas perspectivas durante la lectura. Se volvió a leer los textos con una nueva preocupación por el colapso ecológico, la ética ambiental, así como por los derechos de los animales y las plantas. La ambigüedad de las historias radica en el hecho de que no son ni historias de esperanza ni narrativas distópicas, sino más bien textos que retratan al individuo como el agente responsable. Por lo tanto, volver a leer los textos del Antropoceno con la ayuda de preguntas de lectura guiada permitió a los estudiantes cuestionar su propia responsabilidad en el colapso ecológico y plantear nuevas preguntas sobre los pasos a seguir. El uso de preguntas de lectura guiada también permitió a la profesora cerrar la brecha entre los relatos científicos y literarios del Antropoceno. Otro resultado positivo del curso fue que el alumnado se sintió motivado para realizar lecturas ecocríticas de narrativas clásicas con las que ya estaban familiarizados, además de las lecturas de historias más recientes.

**Palabras clave:** Antropoceno, lectura guiada, literatura ecocrítica, no-humano, lectura activa

## Resum

A través de l'anàlisi empírica de les respostes d'estudiantat universitari als contes curts que van llegir en un curs electiu d'anglès, aquest document qüestiona l'efecte de la lectura guiada en la comprensió del material de lectura per part de l'alumnat i compara les seues respostes iniciales als textos amb les donades després de la classe. La professora del curs va preparar un pla d'estudis que inclou principalment històries de l'Antropocé, teòricament l'última era geològica que apunta al control excessiu dels humans sobre l'ecosistema. Es va observar que la manca de coneixement dels estudiants sobre el terme va fer que passaren per alt la preocupació ambiental de les històries i realitzaren una anàlisi textual centrada principalment en les característiques temàtiques. La lectura individual, la lectura després de la classe i les discussions a classe van revelar que les preguntes de lectura guiada van ajudar l'estudiantat a familiaritzar-se amb el concepte i a desenvolupar noves perspectives durant la lectura. Es va tornar a llegir els textos amb una nova preocupació pel col-lapse ecològic, l'àtica ambiental, així com pels drets dels animals i les plantes. L'ambigüitat de les històries rau en el fet que no són ni històries d'esperança ni narratives distòpiques, sinó més prompte textos que retraten l'individu com a agent responsable. Per tant, tornar a llegir els textos de l'Antropocé amb l'ajuda de preguntes de lectura guiada va permetre a l'alumnat qüestionar la seu pròpia responsabilitat en el col-lapse ecològic i plantejar noves preguntes sobre els passos a seguir. L'ús de preguntes de lectura guiada també va permetre a la professora tancar la bretxa entre els relats científics i literaris de l'Antropocé. Un altre resultat positiu del curs va ser que l'estudiantat es va sentir motivat per fer lectures ecocrítiques de narratives clàssiques amb les quals ja estaven familiaritzats, a més de les lectures de històries més recents.

**Paraules clau:** Antropocé, lectura guiada, literatura ecocrítica, no-humà, lectura activa.

## 1. Introduction

An act as early as human existence, reading has occupied an essential part in the lives of individuals for various reasons. People have read for entertainment, instruction, and profession. As the social and cultural conditions have changed, the nature of reading has also taken different forms. Notwithstanding the motives behind it, reading has always included a subtle interaction between the reader and the writer of a text. In this respect, it is not merely an act of deciphering meaning “given in advance” but recreating it through “interaction between writers and readers as participants in a particular communication situation” (Harris, 2005, p. 214). This interactive nature of reading also makes it judged as an act of meaning-making. Texts are rewritten in every single reading since the expectations as well as the cultural and ideological background of every single reader vary.

When reading literary texts, in particular, cultural and national barriers between the reader and the writer are evaded when the former realizes that the call of literature is beyond language. In other words, reading literature arouses new questions and creates new meanings about the condition of being human. As the act of reading and the conditions determining it undergo tremendous changes, reader perceptions and how they approach the current reality around them change accordingly. The modes of reading alter quite rapidly with the rise of electronic texts and computer-assisted reading practices. People find themselves as readers amidst a bombardment of various texts on screens, billboards, news, electronic and printed books as well as magazines and newspapers. It is frequently acknowledged that technological advances widen the gap between the text and the reader, particularly for those resistant readers who still desire printed books in their hands. Contrary to what Roger Chartier (1992) points at as the third element in the text-reader relationship, the book as a material product is no longer in the hands of the reader. In addition to the “meaning” as well as the social and historical factors that determine the reading process, the book as a “material production” also influences the “actualization” of texts (p. 50). Currently, however, the physical affinity of the reader to the text is challenged by the rapid spread of tablets, e-readers and e-books. This virtual relationship of the reader with the text reveals the distanced position of the individual in every aspect of life, starting in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. People have gradually distanced themselves from their family members, friends and neighbors and started to live more secluded lives. Remote working and distance learning opportunities have led to a more individualistic way of life with limited sharing and interaction. Getting more and more distanced from groups and gatherings while becoming more accustomed to screens indoors has cut their ties with Nature as well. People have forgotten the very basic fact that they are an integral part of the large ecosystem together with

non-human beings like animals, plants, and non-living entities in the environment. The “recent rupture” used by many Earth System scientists to address the extensive human impact on ecology can metaphorically be used to refer to the deepening rifts between Nature and human beings (Hamilton, 2016, p. 77). In this respect, the literature of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries presents an alternative medium to reconsider Human-Nature relations.

Considering that literature is all about existence and that it is a never-ending attempt by human readers to comprehend life, it is not unusual that literature provides answers while complicating the reality even further. Within the havoc of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is no longer possible to find solace in readings of Nature as the Romantics once did, nor is it possible to reflect human experience on the pages as the 19<sup>th</sup> century realists did. Contemporary literature today inevitably turns its face to beings other than human as it adopts a more earth-centered approach. Interrogating the relationship of human with the non-human, a new concern with ecology is found in the literary texts of the last decades. Although there are arguments that readers are tempted to question whether it is possible to consider human characters as “antagonists” to Nature, ecocritical literature questions this premise by avoiding oppositions like Human/Nature and Human/Non-human (Struck, 2017, p. 17). Ecocritical readings of canonical texts abound together with the emergence of new texts and genres, which necessitate new readings mindful of the issues addressed by the Anthropocene epoch.

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This article presents undergraduate engineering students’ receptions of literary texts from an ecocritical perspective in the ‘Short Stories’ course focusing on their initial reactions to the texts and responses to close reading and guided reading questions just after class discussion. It is obvious in this one-term study that student receptions of the texts change significantly during in-class practices, which also reveals that:

- students are not quite familiar with the concept of neither ecocriticism nor Anthropocene.
- they have an anthropocentric approach to works of literature.
- reading literature from an ecocritical perspective makes them question their relation to Nature and non-human beings.
- readings of literary texts are not necessarily limited to distanced textual analysis.

## 2. Ecocritical readings in the age of the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene is defined as a new and the latest geological era determined predominantly by human beings. Focusing on the effects of the climate change, studies about this epoch try to underline the human impact on ecology and human-related causes of natural disasters. Although the definition is just a proposal, therefore an unofficial one, it has already aroused tremendous interest in academia. Crutzen and Stoermer's article 'The Anthropocene' (2000) is regarded as the first study to argue that the Holocene has ended and human beings now live in a new epoch called the Anthropocene. This article was followed by similar articles such as 'Geology of Mankind' (Crutzen, 2002), 'The Anthropocene: a new epoch of geological time?' (Zalasiewicz et al., 2011), and three scientific journals: *The Anthropocene*, *The Anthropocene Review*, and *Elementa* (Lewis & Maslin, 2015). Notwithstanding the disagreements about when the Anthropocene started or whether the current epoch can be officially defined as the Anthropocene, studies in Social Sciences and the Humanities have already started to document human impact on geology. Literature, Arts and Cultural Studies, similarly, have engaged with this concept and reflected how human beings view themselves in relation to Nature. The literature of the Anthropocene era is challenging as it defies previous human-centered approach of many writers and readers to the texts:

We are used to narrative trajectories – indeed, we make sense of the world through narrative trajectories – that operate on the human scale, curtailed temporally (usually within the lifetime of a single human being; certainly, only very rarely extending beyond two or three generations), spatially (being focused through one location at any given narrative moment) and existentially (with meaning defined in human terms). The Anthropocene challenges us to think beyond these perspectives, to think beyond the human even though we inevitably cannot escape that subject position. (De Cristofaro & Cordle, 2018, p. 3).

As Cristofaro and Cordle underline, one significant characteristics of Anthropocene literature is its turn from human to the planet, from the official history of individuals to the history of the Earth. It encompasses literary works ranging from science fiction to climate fiction produced particularly after the 2000s. Anthropocene literature refers to the literature produced with the consciousness that we –human beings– have a tremendous impact on the planet. Therefore, it is dystopian and dark in nature. Ecocritical literature, on the other hand, has a longer history dating back the 1970s. Encompassing nature writing and environmental criticism, it requires readers to reconsider their relationship with nature and non-human beings. The term

'ecocriticism' was coined by William Rueckert in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* in 1978 in which he defined the readers and critics as "responsible planet stewards" (114). This essay is found in one of the most cited

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books about ecocriticism, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. As early as in the 1996, Glotfelty (1996) listed environmental studies among the "hot topics of the late twentieth century" together with race, class, and gender (p. xvi). The prolific 1990s were also the years when Greta Garrard published her books *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (1993) and *Ecological Politics: Ecofeminists and the Greens* (1998), both

of which provoked questions about environmental ethics and the rights of the environment. Ecocritical readings of canonical texts, classical tales as well as contemporary novels, short stories and poems have increased in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in line with the rising popularity of Anthropocene literature. As an era of environmental crisis and disasters, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has made it necessary both to turn to Anthropocene fiction of the last two decades and to reinterpret fictions of the previous decades and centuries from an ecocritical perspective. Ever since the Romantic period, which regarded Nature only in harmony with human mind and senses, the tendency to conceptualize Nature as a cultural, social and political structure has been questioned. Despite the attempts to conceptualize it as an ideological structure particularly within the formalist, new historicist and even deconstructivist movement, Nature has now emerged as a physical body, an entity and a character itself in works of literature. As Laurence Coupe has emphasized in his book *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (2000), this approach has enabled to invite Nature to language from an ethical point of view (pp. 2-4). While the culmination of an anthropocentric approach to the texts is required, literary texts have also aroused new questions about the agency of human beings. Literary texts that place human beings at a responsible position mostly use elements of fantasy to present either dystopian narratives or narratives of escape and alienation. Most of these stories inevitably avoid a definite end, leaving it to the readers to finish the story in their mind.

### 3. Methodology

The study conducted during the fall term of an undergraduate elective course at Istanbul Technical University focuses on 18 engineering and 4 Genetics and Molecular Biology department students' receptions of short stories and literary narratives that can be read from an ecocritical perspective as well. Among ecocritical narratives, students read *The Boy Who Talked with Animals* (1977/1982) by Roald Dahl and *Beyond the Woods* (2021) by Aslı Karataş. Furthermore, the syllabus also included classical narratives open to ecocritical readings. In this category, they read *The Giving Tree* (1964/2014) by Shel Silverstein and *The Day Boy and the Night Girl* (1882) by George MacDonald. Julius Lester's *Let's Talk About Race* (2008) was analyzed with the purpose of underlining the relation between ecocriticism and postcolonial studies. The short story *She Unnames Them* (1985) by Ursula K. Le Guin further helped students elaborate on ecofeminism.

The course is divided into two sections. In the first section, the students were asked to write a brief response to the story they had read by answering the questions "What are the ecocritical elements in this story?" and "How is nature exemplified in the text?". Since these responses were collected before class discussion, they reflected the genuine reactions of the students to the written and visual material. These responses have unveiled that students have different reading strategies when they read a literary text themselves and when they are guided to reread it from a certain perspective – ecocritical or ecofeminist and by giving specific attention to the use of literary devices such as metaphors in the text.

After collecting written student responses, the instructor gave a fifteen-minute break to have a quick look at the responses. In the second session, she used guided reading questions which entailed students to give direct references to the stories during in-class discussion. The students were divided into informal groups of 3 or 4 to share their ideas with each other. They were asked to find certain passages which demonstrate human-non-human interaction, animal exploitation, land destruction as well as important symbols and nature imagery. In some weeks, students used notecards to write their group ideas while in some other weeks, multimedia tools such as Mentimeter or Ninova were used to post their ideas instantly.

Comparing the responses of students written at the beginning of the lesson with those given to guided questions, it was found that the former were highly general and did not reflect the ecocritical concern in the texts whereas guided reading questions enriched the discussions and helped students comprehend the literary theory with specific examples from reading materials. The written responses also indicated that students were unable to read a literary text in line

with a literary theory themselves even after the introductory lectures on the theory. Consequently, guided reading questions functioned as supplementary materials distributed every week to relate the story to ecocritical literary theory. They were answered orally during class discussions and mostly focused on finding certain passages revealing ecocritical concern and understanding the elements of story, particularly the style of the author. The use of informal and formal small groups as well as multimedia tools such as mind maps and polls increased interaction and lessened the anxiety of some students to talk in public.

#### 4. Responses from students

It is important to note that none of the 22 students in the class have heard the term ecocriticism before and it is revealed during the study that their lack of information about ecocritical theory affected their reading experience to a large extent. Firstly, most of them reported that they did not expect the texts to arouse discussion about human-nonhuman relation. It is not surprising considering that ecocriticism has only recently become a subject of academic study in Turkey. The number of published articles interrogating human/non-human relation and representations of nature in literary texts is quite limited. The number of institutions and centers that foster ecocritical studies in different departments is not sufficient either. Secondly, the answers of students to many of the after-reading questions changed after the instructor's brief lecture on ecocritical theory. Understanding what ecocriticism addresses enabled them to reconsider the texts they had read before from a new perspective. The reevaluation of classical texts, in particular, from an ecocritical perspective has necessitated to reconsider characterization, organizational structure and language patterns in the texts.

##### 4.1. The Boy Who Talked with Animals (Dahl, 1977/1982)

Roald Dahl's short story, published in his collection *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar and Six More* (1977/1982), revolves around the exploitation of a giant turtle by humans and a boy's dedicated efforts to save it. Set in a Jamaican island, the story has a number of characters such as a hotel owner, tourists visiting the island, a small boy and his family, and a fisherman. As an ecocritical narrative, it includes a number of important passages that reveal the conflict between human and nonhuman beings. The written answers the students gave at the beginning of the lesson revealed that they read the text as an adventure story in which a small boy bravely stands out as the savior of a helpless turtle. In none of the papers there was a direct reference to ecocriticism although the students pointed at the bad treatment of the turtle by the tourists on the island. The responses were mostly summaries of what happens in the story, lacking in-depth

analysis of the text, characterization and the setting. There was almost no reference to the supernatural end of the story, which is actually open to many different readings.

The instructor used active reading tools to draw the attention of students to the passages describing the boy in conflict with the tourists and the hotel owner, thereby elaborating further on the ecocritical aspect of the narrative. Since the electronic version of the text was distributed to the students together with its hardcopy, it became possible to apply social annotation (SA) tools to make comments on the text. The instructor reflected the electronic document on the board, divided the students into six groups of three and asked them to underline important passages that revealed the tension between the child protagonist and the people on the island. Influenced by the extensive literature review by Novak et al. (2012) listing the positive impacts of SA tools in Higher Education, the instructor experimented with highlighting and annotating on a given electronic text in a physical setting. The students found it easier to underline and write comments on the electronic text than to verbally express themselves in the class. They underlined the words used by the author to present an unfavorable portrayal of the tourists. Three out of seven groups found the same words and pointed at the same passages.

Second, the instructor wanted to hear the responses of students about the end of the story. The disappearance of the boy on the back of the giant turtle obviously carries supernatural elements and these unrealistic characteristics of the story, which includes significantly realistic descriptions of the setting and characters, gave way to quite different readings. At this point the instructor used the message box on Ninova in order to invite students to synchronously share their comments about the ending. Reading the comments of their peers enables the students to revise their thoughts, think of follow-up questions to ask, thereby improving their “critical thinking” and “evaluative” skills (Johnson et al., 2010, p. 1498). While some students interpreted the end as the boy’s reaction to the cruel reality of animal exploitation and an escape story into an alternative reality, four students related it to suicide and the boy’s death. It is significant to note that all the students read the story as a dark narrative with a sad ending. The guided reading questions the instructor used obviously motivated the students to join the discussion about ecocritical literature, an area they did not feel familiar with. The questions also made them consider the notion of “eco-social hierarchy” by drawing attention to the different attitudes of adults and a child towards the turtle. Since the adult characters do not show any sign of empathy, even after the persuading speech of the boy, the narrative does not promise a happy ending. Rather, it underlines the persistent power dynamics that places human at the top of the hierarchy and the nonhuman in service. Focusing on Dahl’s preference to use long descriptions of the setting with a particular emphasis on the coexistence of different life forms as well as the

discussions regarding the end of the story made it possible for the students to relate the text to ecocritical theory and read the story from a less human-centered perspective.

#### 4.2. The Giving Tree (Silverstein, 1964/2014)

Shel Silverstein's (1964/2014) canonical book has long been read by readers of all ages and aroused controversies among readers and critics. It is about the relationship between a tree and a boy who grows to be an old man in the narrative. Although the boy and the tree are friends at the beginning of the book, the narrative takes a quite saddening tone as the boy gradually grows more and more self-centered, always demanding new things from the tree. The tree, referred as "she" by the author, consents and does whatever the boy/man wants to the extent of self-sacrifice. Students were given this picturebook in class in Week 5 –just after *The Boy Who Talked with Animals*– and they were asked to read the lines and analyze the illustrations in 20 minutes. When they completed their reading, the instructor firstly asked whether they had read a picturebook before. Among 22 students, only 3 gave a positive answer, which also reflected the early childhood reading culture of young adults (18-22 ages) in Turkey. Considering that they were unfamiliar with the genre, the instructor explained the main features of picturebooks, stating that they make extensive use of imagery and have limited use of texts. She also asked them to consider why picturebooks are actually read with great interest by not necessarily children but adults as well. One of the students who previously had picturebook reading experience stated that picturebooks convey their messages more powerfully than words and they are memorable. The instructor's question "What is one thing that sticks to your mind after reading the book?" received the same answer from almost all the students. Giving their answers via an interactive multimedia tool (Mentimeter), the students typed "the tree" as their answer. The follow-up question "What makes the tree memorable for the reader?" was answered similarly with a common focus on the self-sacrificing attitude of the tree and its decreasing physical presence in the illustrations. These three after-reading questions gave ample idea to the instructor about students' reception of the book. They all read it as a story of loss as the tree constantly and willingly gives whatever the boy demands to the extent of self-annihilation. However, the oral and written responses of the students reflected thematic analysis and did not refer to the visual aspect of the book.

In order to relate the book to ecocritical studies the instructor encouraged students to make visual reading and focus on iconic representations of the tree on the pages. Previous lectures on ecocriticism helped them to make a critical reading of the text; however, most of them failed to

interpret the illustrations as visual texts. They could not, for instance, give any answer to "Why certain pages are left blank by Silverstein?". Neither could they decipher the details on the page properly, which very clearly reflected what Nodelman (1999) described as the fate of picturebooks to remain "beneath serious critical notice" (p. 70). Students' lack of picturebook reading experience caused them to undermine the organizational structure of the text which predominantly relies on illustrations rather than text. It became clear during the discussions that

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students had read the story in a very short time focusing only on the text and neglecting to interpret the drawings. The instructor, therefore, gave students fifteen minutes and asked them to think about the pictures they encountered everyday about ecological issues such as natural disasters, climate crisis, animal exploitation, and deforestation. She particularly led students to realize the abundance of visual material in daily life, which Gombrich (1972) rightly calls "a visual age". Underlining Gombrich's assertion that people were living in "a historical epoch in which the image [would] take over from the written word" (p. 82), the instructor wanted students to remember sample images that warned people about climate crisis and ecological collapse. At the end of fifteen minutes, students mentioned a number of advertisements seen on billboards around the city, conference and seminar handouts with eye-catching visuals in the campus and visual alerts prepared by non-governmental organizations. A relatively long discussion about the effects of such images on people's perception of ecological disasters motivated students to reinterpret the illustrations in Silverstein's (1964/2014) book as a visual text.

Iconic representations on the pages were elaborated during class discussion with the purpose of leading students to make visual reading rather than getting stuck in the literal meaning of the text. The tree was considered as an iconic character with its trunks that look like arms holding the boy and hugging him with care and affection. Personification of the tree in the narrative serves two ends. Firstly, the distinction between human and nonhuman is erased by showing the tree as no different from the boy. Secondly, iconic representation helps the reader be a part of narrative reality, which subtly places the boy at a responsible position for the loss the tree experiences. In this way, the iconic representations in the book necessitates a critical reading at the end of which the reader questions his/her role as the agent of environmental crisis.

#### 4.3. She Unnames Them (Le Guin, 1985)

The discussion of the ecofeminist short story *She Unnames Them* (1985) by science-fiction and fantasy writer Ursula K. Le Guin followed the lecture on *The Giving Tree* (Silverstein, 1964/2014) in the light of the discussions held before about ecocriticism and ecofeminism. The instructor opened the discussion by reminding the students of ecofeminist readings of Silverstein's (1964/2014) book referring to the tree as "she" and portraying it as the source of motherly love. The parallelism between the exploitation of nature and women, a point which ecofeminist literature both underlines and criticizes, formed the background of the in-class discussions. Since the story presents a rather difficult reading experience, it was necessary to start with a quick plot summary to check students' comprehension of the text. The warm-up questions "Did you find the story dark or hopeful?" and "What is the tone of the story?" divided the class into two: One group of students expressed their dislike of the story due to the complicated sentence structure it includes and to the conveyed premise that human beings are vulnerable to the manipulative power of language. The second group, on the other hand, underlined the use of metaphors in the narrative which enables the reader –as well as the writer– to experiment with language. The discussion of Le Guin's story revealed how the title of a literary text determines the expectations of the reader. The verb "un-name" obviously led the students to focus on the deconstructive act of taking names back. The female character of the story, Eve of the creation story, unnames the animals and gives her own name to Adam as well. The students mostly focused on the gender dynamics in the story, defining Eve's act of unnaming as a sign of defiance and rebellion against Adam, who obviously represents the male rule-making authority. The ecofeminist undertones of the story; however, were not discerned by the students. It was only after the instructor guided them to read Eve's decision of unnaming animals as an attempt to unite with them that human/non-human relation was analyzed. The instructor decided, at this point, to use informal small groups to foster active reading in the classroom. The students were divided in pairs and they were asked to find passages or lines that reflect Eve's attempts to unite with Nature. This small group activity enabled the whole class to make a closer reading of the text by focusing on power dynamics in Nature.

Another benefit of the small group activity is to engage the students who came to the class without having read the story in advance or who hesitated to share their receptions of the text. Using Lyman's (1981) "think-pair-share" strategy to foster active reading, the instructor initially wanted students to individually find and underline the passages that show Eve's unity with Nature. At the end of five minutes allocated for this task, she asked them to turn to one of their classmates and share the lines underlined. Another five minutes were given for this second

phase. The pair were then asked to point at the lines they had chosen with reasons and explanations behind their choice. This close reading of the story with the participation of the whole class enabled complete engagement as well as “immediate gauge of the degree and quality of student understanding of course content” (Cooper & Robinson, 2000, p. 18). Listing an extensive number of approaches to teaching in college classrooms, Cooper and Robinson’s article in *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* emphasizes the role of active learning strategies in engaging college students in discussions and productive work. The use of different prompts, group work, and short written assignments all encourage students to actively participate in class rather than being passive recipients of the lectures. Formal and informal group activities, in particular, foster pair learning and instant feedback both from their friends and the instructor. In this way, they have a different learning experience and realize that there are multiple readings of the same text. Informal small group choice of the instructor relieved the students who had difficulty in reading and understanding *She Unnames Them* (Le Guin, 1985) by leaving them time and space to listen to how others had read it. In other words, the ambiguity of the text is lessened as there is more sharing.

#### 4.4. Let's Talk About Race (Lester, 2005)

American writer Julius Lester's picturebook *Let's Talk About Race* (2005) invites readers of all ages to a lyrical account of racial history. Starting with the literary premise “I am a story”, the book makes readers view their lives as stories worth telling. Pointing at common characteristics of human existence such as a particular day and place of birth and a given name, Lester (2005) also mentions certain elements of each person's stories like favorite food, color, time of day, religion and nationality. All these elements and common traits of existence subtly hints at the notion of equality present at birth for every human being. However, when it comes to talk about the issue of race, the similar stories of different people turn into a story of dominance. The twist, also a literal plot twist in the narrative, divides human stories into two: stories before and after race. The instructor opened the lecture with a question, given as a prompt to raise questions about different forms of exploitation. She asked students to think about different forms of dominance. Among the responses, sexual and economic dominance were the most quickly given ones. There were also a few students who referred to political dominance and dominance related to age. This warm-up question was followed by two other questions designed to stimulate class discussion about race and its relation to ecocritical theory. Giving the students ten minutes to think, the instructor asked a challenging question that is not easy to answer in public: Have you ever thought your life as a story? Not surprisingly, almost all the students

remained silent at the end of the given time. One of the students expressed that his life was a story of struggle since he had coped with a difficult illness and economic hardships. Another student referred to moments of success in her life and defined her life as a story of dedication. The lack of answers could be attributed to unwillingness to talk about one's life or the failure to find moments worth mentioning. Restating the difficulty to talk about one's life, thereby showing empathy to the students, the instructor divided students into formal groups of four and asked them to write a short paragraph answering why Lester refers to race as a story too.

Considering the possibility "to reconceive classes as the unique social places [...] where students and teachers interact in personally and intellectually stimulating ways", the instructor used half of the lecture time as a social gathering to alleviate student anxiety and increase interaction (Smith & MacGregor, 2000, p. 77). The paragraphs written collaboratively by the four members of the group were shared via the message box of a multimedia tool used by all departments in the campus, Ninova. Reading five paragraphs shared without names, the students were asked to briefly restate what they had read and find common points in the lines. They shared the view that perceptions about race were all subjective and imposed ideologically by power mechanisms in society. The emphasis of students on power dynamics was highly important since the instructor had planned to introduce the students with the notion of postcolonial ecocriticism. The same groups were kept and the instructor asked the students what concepts they could think of when they heard postcolonial ecocriticism. A concept map was used and groups wrote down words they associated with this new concept. Since postcolonial ecocriticism refers to the second wave Ecocriticism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is quite recent and unknown concept for many readers of literature. Therefore, using a concept map helps familiarize the subject and forms links with the previously discussed theory. Students wrote words that revealed the parallelism between postcolonial and ecocritical literary theories: exploitation, suppression, dominance, and hierarchy.

The illustrations by Karen Barbour in this picturebook are quite minimalistic. There are just a boy who is growing on every page and the tree, which is portrayed as his childhood friend at the outset. Previous discussions about the effect of iconic representations in picturebooks were remembered in class and students found parallelisms between the roots of trees and people's roots in their homelands. Reading personal histories as stories of racial exploitation is the main concern of postcolonial literature. Reading these stories as exploitation of one's homeland with its animal and plant species; however, complicates the issue and makes the subject less human-centered. The emphasis of students in the concept map on hierarchy and exploitation was elaborated by the instructor to underline the fact that forceful exploitation of one's land results

in the displacement of not only people but also non-human beings. Different from the design of the previous lectures, the instructor asked the formal groups to do research on postcolonial ecocriticism until the following week and come up with ideas about which books/stories/films could be analyzed with both postcolonial and ecocritical concerns. The suggestions were collected under the title of “suggested reading list”, which gave the students a chance to design the syllabus of the following term. Among the books, stories and films suggested by students, Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things (1997) was suggested by three groups, which is not surprising considering that the Turkish translation of the novel had long been in the best sellers list. Students underlined the environmental dimension of the text as it documents devastation and exploitation as a direct consequence of colonialism. Among the films suggested, Okja (2017) by Bong Joon-Ho was suggested by two groups as an example of dystopic movie demonstrating the horrors of meat industry. Moreover, the students emphasized animal exploitation as not different from land degradation.

#### **4.5. The Day Boy and the Night Girl (MacDonald, 1882)**

Believing in “the perfection of humankind” through “compassion for other human beings and nature”, Scottish writer George MacDonald wrote The Day Boy and the Night Girl (1882) as a modern fairy tale about the harmonious existence of people and Nature. The story was analyzed

**The story was analyzed towards the end of the term after sufficient analysis of classical fairy tales with a new emphasis on the ecocritical elements they include. Previous discussions of fairy tales made students realize that natural settings such as forests, riverside or countryside could also be considered as characters in the narration.**

towards the end of the term after sufficient analysis of classical fairy tales with a new emphasis on the ecocritical elements they include. Previous discussions of fairy tales made students realize that natural settings such as forests, riverside or countryside could also be considered as characters in the narration. It was also suggested during class discussions that the quest motif in fairy tales, which generally involves the heroine to face and then overcome the obstacles

on her way with the help of others, can also be accepted as a quest for identity. What is important at this point is to realize that Nature acts as a facilitator or even a partner accompanying the journey of the protagonist and helping her identify with herself. Furthermore, the long-held dualisms between animals and people are challenged, the former being now regarded also as the main characters of the narrative. Just after the long lecture on Angela Carter's wolf trilogy in her well-known book The Bloody Chamber (1979) and discussions on the

reasons why so many classical fairy tales have been rewritten recently, MacDonald's 19th century fairy tale reintroduced the notions of harmony, coexistence, and unity in a relatively classical text.

The instructor opened the discussion by asking the major themes students had found while reading the tale in order to understand whether they had read it with a similar concern. Listing other themes like empathy, symbiosis, and peace as well, the responses of the students demonstrated that they had read the tale as a story of friendship rather than a quest.

The second warm-up question was designed to evaluate how the title shaped reader expectations. Since the title includes two oppositions – day/night and boy/girl – it was quite probable that the tale was expected to be structured in a conventional way at the end of which there are those rewarded and punished. Presenting a question with two choices in an online poll, the instructor asked students what they had expected when they read the title. 13 students chose "I expected it to be a tale of rivalry/conflict between the boy and the girl" whereas only three students chose "I expected it to be a tale of negotiation/harmony between the boy and the girl". The poll clearly showed that the title had a significant impact on reader expectations. The fact that three students had expected the tale to be a tale of harmony revealed that the act of reading was also influenced by previous knowledge of the reader about the genre, the writer and the time period. The students stated that they had made research about George MacDonald before they started reading the tale and found out that the writer wrote mostly about people's harmonious coexistence with Nature. This in-class discussion about the impact of the title on reader expectations of a text revealed that prior research or readings had a larger impact on how a title was received.

Analysis of Macdonald's tale ended with a written in-class activity which required the students to analyze the ecocritical aspect of the text. The one-paragraph responses of the students were collected and evaluated by the instructor in order to give them written personal feedback. Since it was just two weeks before the final exam and the last story discussed in the class, the instructor tried to make students have an insight regarding the exam structure and question types.

## 5. Conclusion

In 2022 Fall, the elective 'Short Stories' course focused on ecocritical criticism and the Anthropocene. Students read both classical fairy tales and modern short stories as well as a number of secondary sources that helped enrich the discussions in class. Since the course was

designed with a particular emphasis on ecological issues, it was important to analyze the reading experiences of students when they were asked to read a text from a certain standpoint. The fact that the Anthropocene, as a concept, was an unfamiliar term among students and their ecological concerns were limited to climate crisis and species extinction were the main challenges of this experience. It was observed that insufficient knowledge of a literary theory and unfamiliarity with basic concepts of a subject hindered in-depth analysis of literary texts, restricting them to plot summary and textual analysis of themes, motifs and writing style. Consequently, detailed explanations of the theory with examples were found of high importance in reading courses designed around a specific subject. Since one of the main aims of the course was to raise awareness about ecological issues and make students reconsider their relationship with Nature, it was necessary to make extra readings and lectures on the meaning of the Anthropocene, the increasing human impact on Earth and concepts such as 'ecocriticism', 'ecofeminism', 'non-human', 'rupture', and 'exploitation'. Even with the integration of theoretical lectures, it was still difficult for many students to express their opinions in class, which entailed additional tools to ease the comprehension of the texts and the discussion process. Formal and informal groups were created in all of the lectures that introduce a new text. Group dynamics facilitated the emergence of various new interpretations and increased interaction in the class. Guided reading questions, which were generally asked after collecting the initial and therefore authentic responses of the students at the beginning of the lectures, fostered active reading as they enabled the readers to reread a given text from another perspective. Comparing their initial responses to the texts with those given after guided after-reading questions, the students also acknowledged that reading a text though the lens of a literary theory was quite different from reading it just to understand what it is about.

**It was observed that insufficient knowledge of a literary theory and unfamiliarity with basic concepts of a subject hindered in-depth analysis of literary texts, restricting them to plot summary and textual analysis of themes, motifs and writing style**

This study provided the instructor with an insight about the challenges students faced in reading literary texts. Although the style and language of the authors were important factors determining the comprehension of texts, having theoretical information about literary theories and background information about particular issues were observed to play a no less important role. With a purpose to ensure active reading throughout the term, the instructor used teaching tools such as formal/informal groups, prompts and warm-up questions, response papers, guided questions and writing tasks. Student surveys given at the end of the term supported the findings of the instructor in that the students shared their satisfaction with group study in lectures, which

obviously fostered collaborative learning. They also indicated that discussing a literary text in pairs or groups and later as a whole class was an indispensable part of reading process as it allowed new ways of reading and reminds multiple interpretations of the same text by the same reader at different times. It is the shared pleasure of students and the instructor's observations of active reading adopted as a reading strategy that might lead researchers believe that reading literary texts is a fruitful challenge.

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