

Panel Proposal

The Secret Life of Things: Controversial Challenges of Anthropocentrism in Children's Literature

Our panel explores the controversial dimensions and sociopolitical significance of children's literature in confronting young readers with perhaps the greatest challenges of the modern world: environmental catastrophe and accelerated technological progress, both caused by human activity in the Anthropocene era. We wish to argue that the non-human protagonists of the children's books we study – objects, AI, toys, and plants – urge us to rethink our notion of human subjectivity and recognize the mutually enriching potential of the interrelatedness of all 'living things' and other types of beings conjoint by a "vibrant materiality" (Bennett 2010) in line with theories of Posthumanism, Thing Studies, Ecocriticism, and Bioethics. This is a useful lesson for our postmillennial age marked by the haunting imminence of climate emergency and techno-(moral)-change that children are increasingly anxious about. We study how efficiently these children's books can "address [and perhaps transcend] anthropocentrism" (Bradford et al 2008) and ask if they can help youngsters build resilience in times of crisis.

Keywords: posthumanism, thing studies, ecocriticism, bioethics, controversies of the post-Anthropocene era

Key theoretical references:

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke UP, 2015.

Bradford, Clare, Kerry Mallan, John Stephens, Robyn McCallum. *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature. Utopian Transformations*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Goga, Nina et al. *Ecocritical Perspectives on Children's Texts and Cultures*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Haraway, Donna. *When Species Meet*. U of Minnesota P, 2008.

Jacques, Zoe. *Children's Literature and the Posthuman. Animal, Environment, Cyborg*. Routledge, 2015.

Morton, Timothy. *Humankind. Solidarity with Non-human People*. Verso, 2017.

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Abstracts

Joanna Dybiec-Gajer

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“Look at me, here I stand.” Posthuman transformations in ‘recycled’ children’s literature

Using the methodology of Translation Studies, the paper addresses the issue of modernizing rewritings and reillustrations of classical texts for children, created to suit new sensitivities of contemporary readers, and to address social and environmental topicalities. Transformations of controversial source texts are especially telling, because their (re)creators need to take a stand on issues that cause discussion and disagreement, thus succinctly revealing ideologies, norms, conventions and poetics prevailing in a society and culture at a given historical time. The case in point is the newest reillustration and adaptation of Heinrich Hoffmann’s classic *Der Struwwelpeter* into Polish (*Złota różdżka*, Egmont 2017). Hoffman’s 19th-century book has been considered controversial, or even „pathologic” (Canham 2010) because of the drastic, exaggerated punishment that befalls its child protagonists for their rather minor misdemeanors, and thus because of its pedagogical and psychological implications. The publication under consideration is a very innovative and eclectic enterprise, with a host of professional translators rendering individual poems in the collection to fit a new set of illustrations, following a creative brief of modernizing the text to appeal to a modern child audience. Analysing the text-image dynamics, the paper investigates how this award winning publication uses contemporary postanthropocentric and postmodern aesthetics to mediate the 19th-century controversial cautionary content. It focuses on how the human protagonists are decentered and dehumanized in a playful, carnivalesque and surrealistic way, and asks whether this “decentering” is “useful” as Joe Zagues argues (2015: 11). The implications of applying posthuman aesthetics will be illustrated with results of a literacy experiment conducted with a group of child readers. Finally, the paper shows the lasting influence of the first Polish translation of *Złota różdżka* (1858), arguing that the content and form of the 2017 edition was initiated and to a large extent mediated by translation rather than the original German source text.

Keywords: children’s literature in translation, posthumanism, picturebook, Struwwelpeter, *Złota Różdżka*

Joanna Dybiec-Gajer is a translation scholar, educator and practitioner, and an Associate Professor at the Pedagogical University of Kraków, where she is Head of the Chair for Translator Education. Her main research interests concern translation for young audiences, translator education and translation as a profession. She has published extensively in the field of translation studies. Her recent book publications include the translation history of Hoffmann's classic *Der Struwwelpeter* in Poland (*Złota Różdżka. Od książki dla dzieci...*, 2017) and *Negotiating Translation and Transcreation of Children's Literature. From Alice to the Moomins* (coedited with R. Oittinen and M. Kodura, 2020). She also coauthored *Słownik polskiej terminologii przekładoznawczej* (2020).

Anna Kérchy

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„I’m not a stick. I’m Stick Man.” Controversial Ecocritical Encounters with Plant Kin in Contemporary Picturebooks

The paper conjoins the methodological apparatuses of Picturebook Studies and Critical Plant Studies to explore the ecocritical logic of contemporary picturebooks featuring plant protagonists. These unique works of children’s literature extend the notion of subjectivity beyond the category of humanity by picturing the performative power of plants and exploring the “philosophy of vegetal life” (Marder 2013). They playfully invite young readers to realize the responsibility and joy held in building “interspecies bonds” (Haraway 2008). In line with theoretical assumptions of posthumanist/thing studies, these imaginary plants refute their decorative or utilitarian servitude. They surpass their subordinate status as background, and reclaim their agency as “storehouses of memory” (Bennett 2015), as witnesses participating in history, material essences shaping whoever touches them. Throughout the subversion of anthropomorphic representational conventions, plants emerge as creative animate actants with a capacity to make a difference in the world. Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree* (1967) offers a lesson in environmental ethics in the form of an exemplar about self-sacrifice and/or a cautionary tale about abusive interspecies relationship, while Sarolta Szulyovszky’s *The Grateful Flower* (2018) teaches about the mortality of all living things, the gift and grief of remembrance, relatable to “solastalgia” (Albrecht 2007). Julia Donaldson’s *Stick Man* (2009) tells the picaresque journey of a piece of wood who refuses to be identified as an object and celebrates eco-philosopher Timothy Morton’s message about “mutual aid” and “kindness” being “the zero-degree cheapest coexistence mode” between species. Alessandro Sanna’s *Pinocchio: The Origin Story* (2016) an alternative prequel to Collodi’s classic, a wordless genesis myth of ‘the wood that became Pinocchio,’ explores “what it means to think about our composition as human beings from the point of view of energy and cosmic matter.” I read these picturebooks as trauma narratives and map the controversial dimensions of their posthumanist/therapeutical agenda.

Keywords: plant studies, ecocriticism/ interspecies bonds, picture books, trauma, solastalgia

Anna Kérchy – PhD Dr habil, Associate Professor in Literature, member of Gender Studies research group at the University of Szeged, Hungary. Interested in Victorian and postmodern fantastic imagination, transmedial and material, corporeal narratological dimensions of children's/YA literature. Authored *Alice in Transmedia Wonderland* (2016), *Body-Texts in the Novels of Angela Carter* (2008), *Essays on Feminist Aesthetics, Narratology, and Body Studies* (in Hungarian, 2018). Edited collections include *Postmodern Reinterpretations of Fairy Tales* (2011), *The Fairy-Tale Vanguard* (with Stijn Praet, 2019), *Transmediating and Translating Children's Literature* (with Björn Sundmark, forthcoming). Recent publications include a chapter on analytical approaches to Children's/YA literature in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Fairy-Tale Cultures*.

Anna Bugajska

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“I’m not a teapot.” The Controversy of (Post)humanity and Sentient AI in Neil Shusterman’s Novels

In the face of the anthropological crisis reactive to technologies allowing for the prospective creation of artificial life and sentient artificial intelligence, it is vital to ask how literature brings up with the young readers the problems of posthumanity and what are the possible future models of interaction that are promoted or rejected (Applebaum 2009, Flanagan 2014, Jaques 2015, Mendlesohn 2009, You 2018). Keeping up with the cutting edge of technology, Neal Shusterman in his novels astutely portrays the dilemmas relating to posthumanity, giving them “face” and “name”, which allows for a deeper insight into the possible post-human nature, and for the development of empathy towards posthuman otherness in the readers (Middleton 2015, Roduit 2018). In the first part of the paper I outline the fault lines of the anthropological crisis caused by the technological development, concentrating on the destabilization of the notions of human and person, especially in relation to the contexts of applied ethics. In the following parts I focus on two characters: Camus Comprix from the *Unwind Dystology* and the Thunderhead from the *Arc of a Scythe*. The author directly addresses the problems that preoccupy today’s philosophers of technology, its makers and users: the autonomy of ALife (Advena-Regnery et al. 2018, Roden 2015), the ontology of objects (Shaviro 2014, Harman 2018), the rights of posthuman life (Roduit 2016, Evans 2015, Wuerth 2017), the justifiability of (Enlightenment) humanism (Harrison 2019), the models of consciousness (Churchland 1984, Roden 2015), gendering of posthumans (UNESCO 2019) and many others. He shows that it is possible and necessary to develop what may be called a “trialogue” (Shusterman 2018): such an attitude and social order that will accommodate for the existence of new kinds of life that start to appear.

Keywords: posthuman, Neal Shusterman, biotechnology, ethics, utopia

Anna Bugajska – Ph.D. in English literature studies, an Assistant Professor at the Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow. The head of the Modern Languages Institute and the Language and Culture Studies Department; a member of the General and Applied Ethics Department. A member of the Utopian Studies Society-Europe. The author of *Engineering*

Youth: the Evariantopian Project in Young Adult Dystopias (2019). Interested in biopolitics, bioethics, philosophy of science and technology, and crossover and fantastic fiction.

Beatrice Moja

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A Human Sensibility Within the Animal Toy: Posthuman Reflections Upon Margery Williams' *The Velveteen Rabbit* (1922), A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926), and Russell Hoban's *The Mouse and His Child* (1967)

Toys with non-anthropomorphic features in children's literature raise controversial thoughts and emotions. Their uncannily troubling difference as inanimate objects is usually counterbalanced by a behavioural and psychological characterisation that reflects typical human features such as the capacity to use language and reasoning, and to submerge in a "civilised" life-style. These controversies are highlighted by contemporary interpretations of "toy stories" in children's literature through the filter of animal studies and posthumanism. Posthumanist philosophy can be easily connected to childhood studies insofar as both fields examine what is beyond the physical and psychic boundaries of human subjectivity that is normally associated with adulthood. Both are interested in identities formed in relation to the surrounding environment, and the cultural construction of otherness (the Child, the Thing, the less/more than human entity). As Victoria Flanagan argued, this technique "brings 'otherness' to the forefront of the narrative and allows the concept of humanity to be deconstructed from a non-human perspective" (2018, 41). The toy brought to life by children's imagination challenges the dualisms in Western culture, including the human person/animal creature, and inanimate things/animate being divide. It places human sensibility within the artificial material body of the toy object. Yet how can children benefit from such narratives? An ecocritical philosophical pedagogy implied in the dual interpretation of the present/absent soul in toys may educate young readers to relate empathically to every potentially sensitive creature. Moreover, since children do not always respond to the adult stimuli according to expectations, the unsuspected insubordination of the animal-toys may also provoke rebellious readings and allow ground for children's independence. In the presentation, I focus on "animal-toy" characters in children's classics: the rabbit-toy in *The Velveteen Rabbit* (1922) by Margery Williams, the bear-toy in *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926) by A. A. Milne, and the mice-toys in *The Mouse and His Child* (1967) by Russell Hoban.

Keywords: animal toys, othering, moral philosophical pedagogy, posthumanism, affective identification

Beatrice Moja earned her PhD from Università degli Studi di Milano (Italy) in 2019. Her thesis explored toys as comfort objects and behavioural role models in children's literature. Her research interests include children's cultural memory, Victorian food and fashion, animals and philosophy, and gender studies in children's/YA literature. Her publications include "Charles Dickens and the Child Narrator: Literary and Sociolinguistic Reflections on *A Holiday Romance* (1868)" (*Bookbird*, 2018), and entries on children's films in *Encyclopedia of Racism in American Films* (2018). She is a Milan Greeter, and editor of the bilingual (English/Italian) travel section in the Italian cultural magazine *VivaMag*.