

A Comparative Analysis of Lauren Wellbank's "The Boy and The Tree" and Steven Moe's "The Apple Tree": Ecocriticism Approach

Tiffani Willin Nanyan

Language and Arts Faculty, Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana, Salatiga, Indonesia

392021009@student.uksw.edu

Abstract

Humans have a very important role in maintaining the balance of the earth's ecosystem. Human actions that are not wise in maintaining and caring for nature have resulted in damaging the ecosystem and giving impacts such as natural disasters that occur in Indonesia and abroad these days. Lauren Wellbank's "The Boy and The Tree" and Steven Moe's "The Apple Tree" highlight the connection between humans and trees, emphasizing human influence on nature and the significance of protecting and maintaining the natural environment. This paper aims to analyze the human-nature interactions and the impact of human actions depicted in the two stories. This research shows that the consequences of overexploitation of natural resources have resulted in many adverse impacts on the climate, wildlife habitats and wider environmental damage. The environmental damage that continues today puts the health of our planet at risk. Thus, the personification of trees, depicted as a living being that can speak and feel, leaves a message to remind humans of their ecological responsibilities to protect and preserve nature.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Lauren Wellbank, Steven Moe, short story, Nature

INTRODUCTION

Humans are inherently dependent on nature but this dependence makes environmental changes such as loss of biodiversity contributes to increased natural disasters (World Health Organization, 2021: p. 1). One of the crucial ecosystems for maintaining biodiversity are forests (Latterini, at al., 2023). Logging can lead to changes in light, humidity, and wind speed, and. The loss of local biodiversity due to timber extraction can compromise the long-term resilience of forests, which in turn can lead to reduced ecosystem services, and ultimately affect human well-being, (Latterini, at al., 2023).

Nature is a mirror that reflects our deepest wounds and seeks to heal them. In "The boy and the tree," Lauren Wellbank crafts a heartbreaking tale that illustrates how uncontrollable emotions can be detrimental and give long-term impact. The story follows a young boy who, driven by his anger, lashes out at a tree in a clearing, only to return as

an adult to find the tree decaying and dead. This narrative structure serves as a powerful metaphor for the cyclical nature of pain and the importance of redemption and remorse. Similarly, Steven Moe's "The Apple Tree" is a heartwarming story that delves into themes of intergenerational impact and emotional connection. The story is taken from the perspective of an apple tree that grows and wonders about its purpose. Moe's inspiration comes from his own experiences, specifically the apple tree planted by his grandfather in the Sierra Nevada mountains, which continued to produce apples even after his grandfather passed away. This personal connection and the idea of intergenerational impact is at the heart of the story.

These two stories, "The Apple Tree" and "The Boy and The Tree," explore the complex relationship between humans and nature. The contrasting depictions of environmental interactions led to a deeper analysis through the lens of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is a field of study in literary studies, which examines the

relationship between literature and the natural environment, (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996: xviii). Meeker (1972) and Rueckert (1997) explain that Ecocriticism is an idea called "literary ecology" and later referred to as "-ism" (Gladwin, 2017). Glotfelty and Fromm further explain that ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies and all ecological criticism share the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the natural world, affecting it and being affected by it. Joseph W. Meeker in *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in literary Ecology* (1972) introduces the term literary ecology which represents "the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works. It's simultaneously an attempt to discover what roles have been played by literature in the ecology of the human species," (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996: p. xix). Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher, developed the idea of "Deep Ecology" which "emphasizes the basic interconnectedness of all life forms and natural features and presents a symbiotic and holistic worldview instead of an anthropocentric one," (Mambrol, 2016).

Cheryll Glotfelty's three-stage ecocritical framework provides a comprehensive approach to analyzing the relationship between literature and the environment. The first stage is "image of nature" focuses on "how nature is represented in literature," (Glotfelty, 1996: p. xxiii). This stage needs to understand the questions posed by Anne B. Dobie (2012) written in glotfelty's book: "Does the setting function merely as background, or does it play an active role in the narrative? How is nature affected by humans in the text? How are humans affected by nature? . . . Does the text raise the reader's awareness of the natural world and his or her relationship with nature?" (p. 243). The second stage highlights neglected nature-oriented writings; this process increases people's environmental awareness. And finally, the third stage is concerned with "examining the symbolic construction of species. How does literary discourse define humans?" (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xxiv).

As ecocriticism has evolved, there are several articles that have examined short stories that personify nature or explore human-nature relationships. For instance, Catarina Sofia Martins Ferreira's study "From Willow to Ents - How the personification of Trees in Fantastic Fiction Raises Awareness of Mankind's Destructive Attitude towards the environment." She analyzes how the author's personification of trees represents the abusive relationship between human and nature and how it's used to raise awareness for the climate crisis through stories. Her study highlights nature as a center of attention to create lasting emotional

relation between reader and nature which allows the reader to question mankind's behavior that has been affecting nature throughout the story. Also, the genre of Fantasy fiction and magic can be a great space for development of ecological awareness and employ it to important social matters such as eco-criticism. It can influence readers to look at their environment through different lenses and it will influence the readers to act upon the climate crisis.

This brings us to the main argument of this analysis: "Lauren Wellbank's 'The Boy and The Tree' and Steven Moe's 'The Apple Tree' highlight the relationship between humans and trees, emphasizing that human influence and perception of nature can have a profound and sometimes unexpected impact on the environment. Through personified tree narratives, these stories underscore the need to protect and nurture the natural environment. This paper aims to analyze how nature is depicted in both stories and how human interactions with nature show the impact of human actions on the environment.

METHODS

This research employs a qualitative descriptive method, using close reading techniques to examine the interaction of humans and nature in Steven Moe's "The Apple Tree" and Lauren Wellbank's "The Boy and the Tree". The data sources consist of specific sentences, words and phrases in the texts that describe the interaction between human characters and natural elements, especially trees. This approach allows for a detailed exploration of how writers represent the relationship between humans and nature through language and imagery.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section will compare how the both stories personify the trees as a representation of nature and how humans interact with the tree' characters. The humans in these two stories have different characters. The character John in "The Apple Tree" is introduced as a "little boy" who frequently visits the apple tree that he and his grandfather planted in the Sierra Nevada mountains. This shows an early connection with nature. The story "The Apple Tree" has a strong emotional connection with the tree which represents the complex human relationship with nature.

The character of the boy in "The Boy and the Tree" is portrayed as an anxious little boy. From the beginning of the story, the boy is overwhelmed by intense anger and emotional turmoil. He uses the tree as an emotional outlet for his anger and pain. Repeated abusive behavior and destructive actions such as attacking the tree, punching, kicking, and yelling at it occurred over the years. This shows an early and poor relationship with nature. By applying Cheryl Glotfelty's ecocritical framework, we can find deeper insights into how the stories show images of nature, orientation towards nature, and human relationships with nature. Here's the complete analysis:

Image of nature

Steven Moe's "The Apple Tree" is taken from the perspective of an apple tree. The apple tree in this story is personified as living creatures that have feelings and speak like humans. Personification is related to anthropomorphism where non-human entities are discussed as if they have human feelings and motives, (S Taber, 2023).

Through this personification, we can see how nature is represented through this quotation,

"I was planted by them beside this slow-moving stream that drifts lazily by, tossing light back up into my branches like confetti."

This part shows that the narrator is an apple tree that has been planted by humans near a stream. The initial positive interaction between humans and nature is shown through the quote "planted by humans." This shows the initial bond between humans and apple trees was formed. The phrase "I was planted by them beside this slow-moving stream" and "light back up into my branches like confetti," creates a visual image that brings the scene to life, showing the interaction between water, light, and the tree. Through this line, nature is represented as interconnected.

The next phrase also highlights the interconnectedness of the natural elements,

"The stream itself babbles constantly but cannot hold much of a conversation, speaking instead over and over of rocks and sand, fish, and frogs, of eddies and flows."

This line continues to use personification to bring the natural world to life. In this line "The stream - cannot hold much of a conversation," the tree is made to seem as if it can think and talk like a human, in which it assumes that the stream has the ability to "babble" and "talk," a metaphorical representation of speech. This is also in line with the

definition of anthropomorphization of nature - it refers to the imbuing of imagined or real behavior in nature with human-like characteristics, intentions, emotions, and motivations, [Epley, et al., 2007]. The narrative of the tree's "speech" that mentions the stream - rocks and sand, fish, and frogs, of eddies and flows - paints a detailed picture of the stream's ecosystem, highlighting the interconnectedness between nature's elements.

Besides highlighting the interconnectedness between nature elements, the next line shows the image of nature through the changing seasons,

"As time went by the seasons were my only companions- In winter the snow that fell chilled me deeply but the serene silence that resulted was worth it. Spring saw me grow again and push out new blossoms, each one representing a possible future. In summer, my apples grew and grew larger in the sun. I was proud of them and as the days grew shorter, they began to fall from me. Autumn is when I was most upset, for by taking part of me away"

This section presents images of nature through the changing seasons that capture the cyclical nature of the natural world, from the quiet stillness of winter to the growth and renewal of spring, summer and fall. Through the personification of the tree undergoing change in this paragraph, it makes the natural process feel more real and allows the reader to feel the change as well.

On the other hand, "The Boy and the Tree" is taken from a third perspective. This story shows the image of nature starting from a child's encounter with an oak tree in a clearing. The image of nature in "The Boy and the Tree" described through the following lines,

"A long time ago there was a tall, strong tree. It stood separate from all the other trees alone in the clearing---He looked around the clearing and his almond-color eyes fell onto the big oak."

The opening of the story begins with the description of the oak tree in the line above. In this passage, the tree is described as "tall and strong," which suggests a sense of majesty and power. Unlike "The Apple Tree," the tree in this story stands alone in the clearing highlighting its unique existence and emphasizing individuality in the natural landscape.

The following lines visualize the nature around it,

"The grass felt cool on his hot back as he stared through the tree's leaves and into the clear sky."

This line visualizes nature as calm and natural. The phrase "the grass is cold" can be interpreted as a mild form of personification, which associates the human sensation of feeling cold with an inanimate object (grass). "The leaves of the trees" and "the clear sky" also clearly show the natural surroundings, and imply that nature is an integral part of the scene.

In this story, the image of nature is also shown by seasonal change in the following line,

"It rained, it got cooler, and night came on earlier. Fall had officially arrived."

In this section, the rain, cooler temperatures, and earlier nightfall all create a vivid image of nature undergoing a seasonal change. The rain symbolizes renewal, the cooler temperatures signify a shift in climate, and the earlier nights underscore the shorter days of autumn. "Although ecosystems, plants and animals cannot adjust easily, they have evolved to make changes that help them survive the seasonal conditions caused by Earth's rotation around the sun," (NOAA, 2019).

Nature-oriented

The story of "The Apple Tree" adopts an ecocentric viewpoint by placing the apple tree at the center of the narrative. By narrating from the tree's point of view, the story decenters human experience and instead focuses on the natural world itself. This following quotation will focus on nature in the story "The Apple Tree",

"I cannot tell you much about the next few years as I emerged from seed to leaf to small tree."

Through this personification, the phrase "emerging from seed to leaf to small tree" succinctly describes the natural growth process of a tree. This focus on the life cycle of a tree reflects ecocriticism's interest in how literature represents natural processes and cycles. Another nature-oriented in "The Apple Tree" story can be seen in this part,

"This tree has no way of looking beyond this valley, seeing past its own limited view. It has no way of knowing that for miles and miles down from here the stream is lined with apple trees and that they all have come from this one source."

The line depicted is most likely set in a landscape where the trees are part of a larger ecosystem. The ecological context here includes

the relationship between trees, rivers, and other apple trees. This context underscores the interconnectedness of natural elements and their impact on each other.

In "The Boy and the Tree," the nature-oriented stage can be seen in this sentence,

"Spring had begun in the forest. Everywhere was alive with color. The leaves were returning and the ground had thawed making room for the fresh sprouts to grow."

The forest and its changing seasons serve as a backdrop to show the arrival of spring, giving a sense of nature's new beginning.

Human-nature relationship

The complex and often fraught relationship between humans and nature appears in "The Apple Tree." This quotation shows how human-nature interactions occur in the story,

"I was planted by them beside this slow-moving stream that drifts lazily by, tossing light back up into my branches like confetti."

The tree is given a voice, telling its own story. This literary device bridges the gap between humans and nature, allowing readers to empathize and understand nature from an insider's perspective. This line, "I was planted by them" indicates direct human interference with nature. Humans deliberately placed this tree in a specific location, indicating a form of control or management of the natural environment. The following line shows the contrast between humans and nature in terms of understanding,

"This tree has no way of looking beyond this valley, seeing past its own limited view. It has no way of knowing that for miles and miles down from here the stream is lined with apple trees and that they all have come from this one source."

This section highlights the contrast between human knowledge and the perceived limitations of nature. It shows that humans have a broader understanding of ecosystems than the individual elements within them. The phrase that all apple trees come from the "same source" emphasizes the interconnected nature of the ecosystem, which is recognizable to humans, but not to the trees themselves.

The interaction between humans and nature also appeared in this line,

"John returned during the summer and pruned me as I grew larger. He would often just sit there beside me or lean against me as I grew."

John sitting next to or leaning on the tree shows the friendly relationship between man and nature. Trees are not just a resource, but also a living entity that provides comfort and companionship. The phrase "as I grow larger" emphasizes the passage of time and the ongoing nature of the human-tree relationship. It shows the long-term commitment and connection between John and the tree.

Whereas in the story "The Boy and the Tree," the human-nature interaction is seen from the following data,

"One day a little boy came into the clearing— Taking a deep breath, he walked toward the tree. Once he was directly in the shade from its leaves, he looked up the massive trunk—Stepping back he took another deep breath, and then began pummeling the trunk with his small fists."

The initial human-nature interaction starts from this line. The boy is looking for an object to vent his emotions and the tree in the clearing is the one he chooses. This implies that the natural world, represented by the tree, is seen as a deliberate destination for human emotional expression. The tree's silence and lack of resistance make it an easy target for humans to do as they please. This highlights the vulnerability of nature to human actions, no matter how small the human may be. Followed by this line,

"He screamed at the tree and kicked it as hard as he could. Little flecks of spit flew out of his open mouth and onto the tree's rough bark. He said horrible things to the tree. He called it childish names and told the tree that it was stupid. He punched it until the bark was red with blood and his hands were raw."

The descriptions of "little flecks of spit flew out of his open mouth" and blood on the tree create a visceral image of human and nature contact, emphasizing the physical reality of their interaction. The tree serves as a silent recipient of the boy's intense emotions, suggesting that humans may see nature as a safe space to express feelings, even destructive ones. The boy's verbal abuse of the tree ("childish names", calling it "stupid") implies a perception of nature as a living entity capable of understanding and being hurt by words because nature is vulnerable to the bad actions of humans. The boy's actions also result in injury to himself, suggesting that damaging nature can ultimately

harm humans. The bad actions of the little boy continued,

"A few weeks went by— The boy returned, consumed by anger. He attacked the tree in the same fit of blind rage. Screaming. Spitting the words out like some vile taste in his mouth. Using his fists to pound the hate from his young body and into the tree."

"Not even a full week passed before he was back. His hands wrapped in new gauze and one encased in a clean cast. This time he walked into the clearing with a baseball bat at his side."

The description of the boy as being "consumed by anger," using the tree to "pound the hate from his young body," and the boy's repeated return to the tree establishes a pattern of using nature as an outlet for emotions, showing the ingrained behavior of returning to nature in times of distress. In addition, the use of the baseball bat shows the human behavior of treating the tree more as an inanimate object than a living being. The boy's altered physical condition and increased aggression contrast sharply with the unchanged presence of the tree, emphasizing the difference between human behavior and the stability of nature. In the end he regretted everything he did to the tree, as can be seen from the following quote,

"Only, the massive oak was now on its side, the roots partially sticking into the air like some gaping mouth with crooked teeth. Tears streamed down his wind burned cheeks as he stumbled over to the tree and began crying in earnest. Not the tears that he usually fertilized the tree with, but tears of remorse--- The magnitude of his loss had not even begun to fully take shape as the wind picked up and howled around the dead tree. The howl sounded like the tree's own cries of remorse. The man rose and left the clearing, never looking back at the shell of the oak."

The man's actions in the past have caused trees to die, highlighting how environmental impacts may not be immediately apparent. The fallen tree represents irreparable damage to nature, showing that some forms of environmental damage cannot be undone. Although the tree is initially strong, it eventually falls, emphasizing the limitations of nature in withstanding continued abuse. The man who leaves the clearing "never looking back" suggests a disconnection with nature, perhaps out of guilt or an inability to face the consequences of his actions. The tree that was once a target of aggression is now a source of deep loss, indicating a shift in how man values nature. The mention of tears that "used to fertilize trees" hints at an aspect that previously nurtured their

relationship, in stark contrast to the current situation.

Based on the findings, the human-nature interactions and the impact of human actions depicted in "The Apple Tree" and "The Boy and the Tree" present contrasting perspectives on the relationship between humans and nature. These stories highlight the use of personification to bring nature to life in the narrative. Through this personification, we can see positive human interventions with nature. Cheryll Glotfelty's three-stage ecocritical framework provides a valuable lens for analyzing these stories. The first stage, "images of nature", focuses on "how nature is represented in literature" (Glotfelty, 1996: p. xxiii). This stage is particularly relevant to the personification used in both stories and helps us understand how nature is portrayed as an active participant in "The Apple Tree" and a passive recipient in "The Boy and the Tree."

Steven Moe's "The Apple Tree," which begins with the human action of planting an apple tree near the river, shows the positive and nurturing interaction between humans and nature sets a tone of harmony and mutual benefit. The act of humans planting trees is a crucial moment in this story. It represents a deliberate decision by humans to cultivate nature, which shows foresight and intention. This depiction aligns with Glotfelty's first stage, which answers the question posed by Anne B. Dobie (2012): "How is nature affected by humans in the text? How are humans affected by nature?" (p. 243). The story clearly shows the positive mutual impact between humans and nature.

The friendship that the tree provides to John illustrates the emotional and psychological benefits that nature can provide to humans. This image of John spending a lot of time with the apple tree highlights that nature is not only a resource that can be used, but also a source of comfort and attachment. This implies that humans can find other benefits of nature as a place to comfort themselves and make it a friend that makes the human-nature connection deeper and more personal. Through this positive connection we can create a clean and positive environment because of the growing sense of respect for nature as we respect our fellow humans. This aspect of the story relates to Glotfelty's second stage, which highlights nature-oriented writings to raise environmental awareness. "The Apple Tree" fulfills this purpose by promoting a positive and nurturing relationship with nature.

In contrast, "The Boy and the Tree" shows a predominantly negative and destructive interaction between a boy and a tree, in stark contrast to the nurturing relationship seen in "The

Apple Tree". The narrative explores the dark side of the relationship between humans and nature, showing how humans can treat and abuse nature, often without immediate consequences. The story serves as a cautionary tale about the potential for human actions to cause lasting damage to nature.

One of the story's main themes is the boy's usage of trees as a way to vent his resentment and fury. This kind of behavior is indicative of a flawed perception of nature as a passive being that exists to fulfill human needs—even harmful ones. The youngster views trees as tools to express his feelings rather than as sentient beings deserving of respect. This viewpoint draws attention to the gap that exists between nature and humans, wherein the inherent worth of natural phenomena is either disregarded or overlooked. Throughout the narrative, there is an increase in the intensity of physical attacks on trees, from punching to wielding baseball bats. These acts clearly demonstrate the possibility of aggression by humans against the natural world. This development emphasizes the cumulative effects of repeated negative actions against the environment. This depiction relates to Glotfelty's third stage, which is concerned with "examining the symbolic construction of species" and how "literary discourse defines humans" (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xxiv). In this story, humans are symbolically constructed as a potentially destructive force, capable of seeing nature as a mere object.

The tree's role as the silent, passive recipient of the boy's aggression is particularly poignant. Unlike in "The Apple Tree," where the tree has a voice, this tree cannot defend itself or express pain. The tree's passivity also serves to highlight the one-sided nature of this destructive relationship, as while the boy takes his anger out on the tree, the tree offers no resistance, reflecting how nature often absorbs the damage caused by humans without any immediately visible consequences. This depiction aligns with Glotfelty's first stage, specifically answering Dobie's question: "Does the setting serve only as a backdrop, or does it play an active role in the narrative?" (p. 243). In this case, the tree, despite being the center of the story, is depicted as a passive backdrop to the boy's actions.

This portrayal of the relationship between humans and nature in "The Boy and the Tree" is a metaphor for greater environmental problems. It is an example of how human behavior, motivated by our desires and emotions, can have negative, long-lasting effects on the environment. The narrative invites readers to consider the effects of viewing the natural world as lifeless objects as opposed to a living, breathing system deserving of respect and care.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this comparative research shows how literature can influence how we perceive the natural world and our role within it. The divergent stories demonstrate how our perceptions of nature have a big impact on how we interact with it. While 'The Boy and the Tree' provides a more objectified and exploitative image of nature, 'The Apple Tree' invites us to perceive nature as a living, linked system and presents a more symbiotic relationship. By exploring these different points of view, we may create a more thorough, sympathetic, and progressive strategy for environmental sustainability. This is particularly crucial in light of the current ecological crisis and climate change when rethinking our relationship with the environment is not only advantageous but also necessary for the future.

REFERENCES

- Buell, L. (1995). *The environmental imagination: Thoreau, nature writing, and the formation of American culture*. Harvard University Press.
- Dobie, A. B. (2015). *Theory into practice: An introduction to literary criticism*. Cengage learning.
- Ferreira, C. S. (2021). From Willows to Ents – How the Personification of Trees in Fantastic Fictions raises Awareness of Mankind's Destructive Attitude towards the Environment. Laiden University.
- Gladwin, D. (2019, June 3). *Ecocriticism*. Oxford Bibliographies.
- Glotfelty, C., & Fromm, H. (Eds.). (1996). *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology*. University of Georgia Press.
- Mambrol, Nasrullah. (2016, November 27). *Ecocriticism: An Essay - Literary Theory and Criticism*.
- Meeker, J. W. (1974). *The comedy of survival: Studies in literary ecology*. Scribner.
- Moe, S. (2023, November 8). *The apple tree*. The Empty Square.
- NOAA. (2019, February 1). *Changing seasons | National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration*.
- Rueckert, W. (1996). *Literature and ecology: An experiment in ecocriticism*. *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology*, 108.
- Wellbank, L. (2016, March 29). *The boy and the tree - a short story*.
- World Health Organization. (2021). *Nature, biodiversity and health: an overview of interconnections*.
- Latterini, F., Mederski, P. S., Jaeger, D., Venanzi, R., Tavankar, F., & Picchio, R. (2023). The influence of various silvicultural treatments and forest operations on tree species biodiversity. *Current Forestry Reports*, 9(2), 59-71.
- S Taber, K. (2021, December 23). *Personification - Science-Education-Research*.