

## 16. Literary Representations of Trees: Anthropomorphism and Ecological Empathy<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article examines anthropomorphic representations of trees in literary texts from an ecocritical perspective. Attributing human-specific qualities such as thinking, feeling and communicating to trees is considered not only as an aesthetic preference but also as an ethical strategy that aims to establish an empathic relationship towards nature. The study first presents the concepts of matter-centered approaches and anthropomorphism that form the basis of ecocritical theory as a theoretical framework. The "anthropomorphic subjectivation model" developed by Alissa Kautz offers three basic indicators (corporeality, emotionality, language) and three modes (reflection, manifestation, hybridity) to systematically analyze such representations. This model allows us to understand how non-anthropocentric perspectives are structured in literary works. In the applied section of the article, Richard Powers's novel *The Overstory* is analyzed in depth within the framework of this model. The novel positions trees as intellectual and ethical subjects rather than passive background figures. The depiction of trees with human qualities such as shame, love, and communication deepens the reader's environmental awareness and empathy, and invites us to re-evaluate our relationships with nature. In conclusion, the article argues that anthropomorphism is a transformative narrative strategy that can be used to develop a non-anthropocentric way of thinking about nature, beyond merely humanizing it. These literary approaches carry political and pedagogical qualities as well as aesthetic dimensions, revealing the transformative potential of literature in overcoming environmental crises. In this context, the role of literature in the development of ecological consciousness is re-emphasized.

**Keywords:** Ecocritical theory, anthropomorphism, environmental empathy, tree representations, non-human subjectification

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## Ağaçların Edebi Temsili: Antropomorfizm ve Ekolojik Empati<sup>3</sup>

### Öz

Bu makale, edebi metinlerde ağaçların antropomorfik temsillerini ekokritik bir perspektiften incelemektedir. Ağaçlara düşünme, hissetme ve iletişim kurma gibi insana özgü niteliklerin atfedilmesi, yalnızca bir estetik tercih olmanın ötesinde, doğaya yönelik empatik bir ilişki kurmayı hedefleyen etik bir strateji olarak ele alınmaktadır. Çalışma, öncelikle ekokritik kuramın temelini oluşturan madde merkezli yaklaşımlar ve antropomorfizm kavramlarını kuramsal çerçeve olarak sunar. Alissa Kautz'un geliştirdiği "antropomorfik özneleştirme modeli," bu tür temsilleri sistematik olarak analiz etmek için üç temel gösterge (bedensellik, duygusallık, dil) ve üç kip (yansıtm, tezahür, melezlik) sunar. Bu model, edebi eserlerdeki insanmerkezci olmayan bakış açılarının nasıl yapılandırıldığını anlamamıza olanak tanır. Makalenin uygulamalı bölümünde, Richard Powers'ın *The Overstory* adlı romanı bu model çerçevesinde derinlemesine çözümlenmektedir. Roman, ağaçları pasif birer arka plan figürü olmaktan çıkarıp, onları düşünsel ve etik öznel olarak konumlandırır. Ağaçların utanma, sevgi, iletişim gibi insana özgü niteliklerle betimlenmesi, okuyucunun çevresel farkındalığını ve empatisini derinleştirmekte ve doğayla olan ilişkilerimizi yeniden değerlendirmeye davet etmektedir. Sonuç olarak, makale antropomorfizmin, doğayı yalnızca insanlaştırmının ötesinde, insan merkezci olmayan bir düşünme biçimi geliştirmek için kullanılabilir bir dönüştürücü bir anlatı stratejisi olduğunu savunur. Bu edebi yaklaşımlar, estetik boyutlarının yanı sıra politik ve pedagojik nitelikler de taşımakta, çevresel krizlerin aşılmasında edebiyatın dönüştürücü potansiyelini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu bağlamda, edebiyatın ekolojik bilincin gelişimindeki rolü yeniden vurgulanmaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Ekokritik kuram, antropomorfizm, çevresel empati, ağaç temsilleri, insan-dışı özneleşme

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## Introduction

Trees, throughout human history, have become entities that are endowed with not only physiological but also symbolic and cultural meanings. In a wide range of discourses, from mythology to sacred texts, from folk tales to contemporary novels, trees have often been represented as entities that speak, feel, think, or establish emotional relationships with humans. A significant number of such representations are constructed with anthropomorphic narrative strategies stretching the boundaries between nature and humans. Especially with the deepening of the environmental crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ecocriticism, a field in which new forms of sensitivity towards nature are investigated, has opened such narrative strategies to examination on both literary and ethical levels.

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach in which the relationship between nature and culture is analysed through literary representations. Lawrence Buell defines ecocriticism “as [the] study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis.” (Buell 430). In this context, endowing trees with human qualities can be considered not only as an aesthetic choice but also as an ethical strategy to arouse empathy towards nature in the reader. As Eduardo Kohn argues in his work *How Forests Think* (2013), recognition of the intellectual or emotional capacities of non-human entities is a prerequisite for establishing a non-anthropocentric ontology (Kohn, p. 16).

Anthropomorphism has often been criticized as a kind of reductionism or romanticization of nature. However, this approach has been re-evaluated with new materialist and post-humanist approaches. Material ecocritics, especially Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, argue that agency can be attributed to matter by going beyond the nature-culture dichotomy. In this context, the representation of a tree in a narrative as a thinking or speaking being is not an attempt to liken nature to humans; it can also be read as a way of accepting nature's potential for subjectivation. Indeed, in her article titled “An Ecocritical Toolbox for Anthropomorphic Agency,” Alissa Kautz states that anthropomorphic representations of trees offer not only an emotional tool but also a multi-layered critical reading practice (Kautz, p. 175).

This article aims to examine the human characteristics attributed to trees (thinking, speaking, feeling, etc.) with an ecocritical perspective. It aims to reveal both the functions of these characteristics in literary representations and their roles in creating environmental awareness. The basic questions of the research are as follows:

1. What thematic and formal patterns do anthropomorphic representations of trees reveal?
2. What kind of environmental consciousness or ethical relationship model do these representations construct in the reader?
3. What kind of philosophical/ecological discussions do anthropomorphic narratives bring to the agenda in the context of the subjectivation of non-human creatures?

In this context, the article will be divided into three main parts. First, the relationship between ecocritical theory and anthropomorphism will be evaluated and a theoretical framework will be created around the concept of “anthropomorphic agency.” Second, anthropomorphic representations of trees in selected literary texts—especially in Richard Powers’ *The Overstory*—will be examined through close reading. Finally, the transformations these narratives suggest in terms of environmental empathy, responsibility,

and ethics will be discussed.

The underlying assumption of ecocritical studies is that literature not only reflects the world but also shapes the way it is perceived. In this context, literary works that represent trees as sentient, speaking or thinking beings invite us to rethink our relationships with nature. This article aims to address both the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of this invitation.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Ecocriticism, Anthropomorphism, and the Tree Subject

In order to address the human characteristics attributed to trees, three basic theoretical fields must first be examined: ecocritical theory, anthropomorphism, and the concept of the nature in the context of material ecocriticism. These conceptual axes are functional not only in the analysis of literary representations, but also in the questioning of ethical relationships established with non-human beings.

### 2.1 The Rise of Ecocritical Theory

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary field that emerged in Anglo-American literary criticism in the early 1990s and quickly transcended the boundaries of cultural studies. According to Cheryl Glotfelty's classic definition, ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty, p. xviii). However, this definition has expanded over time, and approaches that transform literature from a means of representation of nature to a constitutive narrative element have developed. In this vein, Lawrence Buell, while listing the basic characteristics of environmental texts, argues that "nature" is not merely a background but an active and transformative element that functions as a character (Buell, p. 7).

In this context, the representation of trees not only as descriptive but also as decisive and transformative actors in the progression of the narrative is central to ecocritical analysis. In recent years in particular, this approach has been reshaped around the concept of "nonhuman agency."

### 2.2 The Conceptual Problem of Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is the tendency to attribute human characteristics to non-human entities (animals, plants, objects, etc.). This tendency has a long history in both children's literature and religious mythologies. However, in modern environmental theory, anthropomorphism has a dual character: on the one hand, it carries the danger of anthropocentric understanding of nature, while on the other hand, it can function as a tool to increase environmental empathy. As Tam, Lee, and Chao argue, "Anthropomorphism of nature fosters conservation behavior. Moreover, when nature is anthropomorphized, people feel more connected to it; this sense of connectedness mediates the association between anthropomorphism of nature and conservation behavior" (Tam, Lee, and Chao, p. 514).

At this point, an important distinction within ecocriticism focuses on the intention and context of anthropomorphism. Donna Haraway's concept of "companion species" or Eduardo Kohn's idea of "thinking forests" suggest that nonhuman beings are not only symbolic but also ontologically thinking, feeling, and affecting beings (Haraway, p. 16; Kohn, p. 19). Such approaches argue that anthropomorphism is not reductionist but rather produces new forms of relating. Alissa Kautz systematizes this situation under the title of "anthropomorphic agency" and suggests three main markers: physicality, sentience, and language. She identifies three modes of representation based on

these: projection, manifestation, and hybridity. This framework offers the opportunity to analyse the degree to which trees are anthropomorphized in literary texts (Kautz, p. 174–178).

### 2.3 Material Ecocriticism and the Tree Subject

The evaluation of anthropomorphic representations from a new materialist perspective allows nature to be not only a symbolic structure but also an active subject. In their study *Material Ecocriticism*, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann conceptualize nature as “storied matter.” According to them, nature is both the subject of narrative and also produces narrative which can be seen “...producing configurations of meanings and discourses that we can interpret as stories.” Even (Iovino and Oppermann, p. 7). This situation transforms trees from passive representations of nature into story-making actors.

For example, in Richard Powers’s novel *The Overstory* (2018), trees are not only symbolic figures, but also entities that determine the basic logic of the narrative, transform the characters, and give rhythm to the narrative. At one point in the novel, one of the characters says the following: “The most wondrous products of four billion years of life need help” (Powers, p. 205). Such narratives require trees to be accepted as intellectual and ethical subjects. This allows the relationship with nature to be rewritten as a mutual interdependence rather than a one-way domination.

In another example, Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* also follows a similar line, arguing that even seemingly inanimate objects can have agency, and that trees can therefore be not only biological but also ethical and political subjects: “Thing-power gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness...” (Bennett, p. xvi).

### 2.4 Critical Perspectives

Of course, criticisms of anthropomorphism should not be ignored. Theorists, especially Timothy Morton, argue that anthropomorphism reduces nature to humans and obscures environmental difference. As Morton asserts in *Ecology without Nature*, “there is a need to acknowledge irreducible otherness, whether in poetics, ethics, or politics” (Morton, p. 151). Although such criticisms draw attention to the potential dangers of anthropomorphism, when combined with new materialist perspectives, they also show that these representations do not have to be reductionist, but can open the door to non-human ethical thinking.

## 3. Classification and Theoretical Model: Reading Anthropomorphic Tree Representations

The attribution of human characteristics to trees in literary narratives has mostly been analysed at an intuitive or metaphorical level. However, systematically classifying these representations reveals not only the narrative aesthetics but also the ethical meanings attributed to nature in a more profound way. In this context, the model developed by Alissa Kautz called the “ecocritical toolbox for anthropomorphic agency” offers a powerful theoretical tool for analysing the human characteristics attributed to trees.

### 3.1 Structure of the Model: Signs and Modes

Kautz’s proposed model is based on two axes: first, three basic markers that determine anthropomorphic features; second, three modes that define how these signs function in the narrative.

## Markers

1. Physicality: Trees physically exhibit behaviours similar to human actions (e.g., moving, hugging someone, shedding tears, etc.).
2. Sentience: Trees are shown to have emotions such as pain, happiness, loneliness.
3. Language: Trees speak, write, or communicate symbolically.

## Modes

1. Projection: The reflection of human characters' emotions onto trees; the tree functions as a passive surface.
2. Manifestation: The tree itself reveals an emotion or thought; there is a direct narrative of its agency.
3. Hybridity: Representations in which human and tree characteristics are intertwined, blurring the boundaries (for example, half-tree-half-human beings or transformation narratives).

These combinations make it possible to analyse the ways in which trees are anthropomorphized in literary texts on both an aesthetic and an ethical level. As Kautz notes, "Anthropomorphisms are a valuable phenomenon for (material) ecocritics to study as they bring the potential to heighten understanding of agency beyond the human." (Kautz, p. 183).

### 3.2 Applied Categories: Explanations with Examples

#### A. Physicality + Projection

In such representations, the tree becomes a surface on which the human character reflects his/her inner world. In Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*, the moment Lily Briscoe spends in the shade of a tree symbolizes her inner loneliness and stillness. The tree does not move or speak, but it expresses the character's emotional state. In this usage, anthropomorphism is at a passive reflection level.

#### B. Sentience + Manifestation

Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* (1964) is an example of this category. Although it is just a children's book, it is a great example for this marker. In the book, the tree gives its fruit, trunk, and even its stump out of love for the child. The representation here is based on the assumption that the tree is a being that can feel pain, sacrifice, and love. This situation establishes an ethical narrative that triggers empathy: "And the tree was happy" (Silverstein np). This happiness comes at a price; the tree consumes itself. Here, the tree not only has emotions, but is also positioned as an emotional agent.

#### C. Language + Hybridity

In Richard Powers' novel *The Overstory* (2018), trees do not speak, but they engage in a kind of silent communication throughout the narrative. Even the structural order of the novel is circular and growing, similar to the rings of trees. Powers searches for a kind of language in the silence of the trees: "Her ears tune down to the lowest frequencies. The tree is saying things, in words before words." (Powers, p. 3). Hybridity here not only transcends the boundaries of communication between humans and trees, but

also turns nature into a new narrative subject.

A similar example of hybridity is encountered in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* series: Ents are trees that talk, walk, and think. The character Treebeard represents the memory of the forest, and with statements such as "I don't like to rush, we trees have different relationships with time," he questions not only people but also time itself (Tolkien, p. 470).

### 3.3 Critical Applications of the Model

Kautz's model provides great convenience for analysing anthropomorphic narratives, especially those frequently seen in children's literature and ecological fables. However, the model not only poses a representative problem but also raises an ethical issue: Does humanizing nature make it closer or does it produce another form of domination?

Kautz's answer to this question is striking: "Iovino and Oppermann actively counter the criticism of anthropomorphism by concluding that it 'can even act against dualistic ontologies and be a "dis-anthropocentric" stratagem meant to reveal the similarities and symmetries existing between humans and nonhumans' (p.8)." (Kautz, p. 183). In other words, instead of reducing nature to humans, such representations reinforce the idea that humans also belong to nature.

## 4. Applied Analysis: Literary Analysis of Anthropomorphic Tree Representations

This section presents a detailed analysis of *The Overstory* in which trees are attributed human characteristics. These analyses are conducted within the framework of the axes of the Kautz's model (Physicality, Sentience, Language & Projection, Manifestation, Hybridity) detailed in the previous section; thus, the structure and function of anthropomorphic representations in texts are explained. Examples from *The Overstory* (2018) demonstrate both the diversity in representation and the differences in the production of environmental empathy. Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018) invites us to rethink the relationship between humans and nonhumans by placing trees and nature at the centre of the narrative. In this novel, trees cease to be mere background elements and become characters. The author humanizes the trees, giving them voice, emotion, and story. Ecocritical approaches indicate that anthropomorphism can be a powerful tool for developing empathy for nonhumans; however, it has been observed that this tool is sometimes underestimated in literature on the grounds of sentimentalism (Buell, p. 134; Garrard, p. 154). In response to this debate, Alissa Kautz (2024) proposed a theoretical toolbox that includes three "markers" and three "modes" to analyse anthropomorphic representations (Kautz 174), which are explained in detail in the previous part. According to this framework, anthropomorphic markers define which human aspect the non-human subject reflects; modes explain how this humanization is realized in the narrative (Kautz, p. 176). In this section, the ways in which trees are humanized in the novel *The Overstory* will be examined in the light of these markers and modes, and how anthropomorphic representational strategies serve the narrative and ecological awareness will be discussed.

### 4.1 Markers of Physicality and Sensitivity in *The Overstory*

According to Kautz's definition, the Physicality marker refers to the presentation of the bodily characteristics of the non-human subject as similar to humans (Kautz, p. 176). In *The Overstory*, this type of physical anthropomorphism is relatively limited; rather than directly attributing human faces, arms, or legs to trees, the author prefers to describe them with metaphorical comparisons. The main

emphasis in the narrative is given to the Sentience marker. The Sentience marker means attributing consciousness, emotion, and perception abilities specific to humans to non-human beings (Kautz 177). Powers' narrative uses this marker frequently by attributing reactions and emotions similar to human psychology to trees. For example, in the novel, the narrator states that a pine tree is "embarrassed on behalf of humans"; the tree is described as if it is ashamed of what humans have done to nature (Powers 123). This statement actually reflects the mistakes of humans in their relationship with nature by attributing a human sense of shame to a hemlock tree. This type of narration exemplifies what Kautz describes as the Projection mode: a human emotion is attributed to the tree, but this characteristic is presented as a reflection of the human perspective rather than the tree's own experience (Kautz 180). Similarly, the fact that a couple who cannot have children in the story see the chestnut tree they planted as their "child" (they consider the tree as part of their family) is an example of anthropomorphic sensitivity (Powers 98). This narrative element, which is the projection of human love and parenting onto a tree, invites the reader to empathize with the trees. *The Overstory* aims to develop a more empathetic attitude towards the trees around it by operating on the idea that trees can also suffer, feel, or form meaningful relationships with humans (Powers, p. 185).

#### 4.2 Language and Communication Markers in *The Overstory*

The Language marker of anthropomorphism involves the equipping of a non-human subject with the ability to communicate and use language (Kautz, p. 178). Powers uses this marker strikingly in the opening section of the novel. The female character leaning against a tree in the forest feels the trees around her speaking to her with "words before words"; the trees are depicted as a chorus whispering that "if your mind were a little greener, we would drown you with meaning", indicating that humans cannot fully comprehend nature (Powers, p. 4). In this scene, the forest appears as an active subject speaking directly to the human; that is, the language marker emerges from the level of Projection and manifests itself in the mode of Manifestation (Kautz, p. 181). Since the words of the trees are presented not as the product of the woman's imagination but as a real "gift of the forest," the narrative embodies the existence of a non-human consciousness. However, such direct dialogues are rare throughout the novel; rather, the theme of the characters trying to understand the language of the trees is emphasized. Indeed, scientist Patricia Westerford's discovery that plants "communicate" with each other through chemical signals demonstrates the existence of non-human communication on a scientific basis, while also making the reader accept the idea that trees may have their own language (Powers, p. 202). As Kautz states, anthropomorphic narratives expand the human mind's imagination to comprehend the language of plants (Kautz, p. 179). *The Overstory* overcomes the communication barrier between humans and trees on a fictional level by showing that trees speak or transmit messages in a way, and encourages listening to the voice of nature (Powers, p. 5).

#### 4.3 Hybridity and Blurring of Boundaries in *The Overstory*

*The Overstory* also exhibits approaches reminiscent of Kautz's Hybridity mode with its narrative strategies that combine the human and tree worlds. Hybridity is a situation where the boundaries between the human and the non-human are blurred, and the two are integrated in a hybrid form (Kautz, p. 182). Although there are no direct human-tree mixed physical beings in the novel, there is a symbolic and mental union between humans and trees. For example, the adoption of a tree by a couple who cannot have children is a hybrid relationship that blurs the boundaries between humans and trees within the concept of family (Powers, p. 99). This approach breaks the anthropocentric hierarchy and allows nature to be seen as a subject. Indeed, Olivia, one of the activist characters in the novel, becomes the human



representative of trees after her mystical experience; she tries to convey the message of trees to society with her human body (Powers, p. 310). Thus, the narrative builds a bridge between the trees' voices and our world by telling their story in human form (Kautz, p. 183).

#### 4.4 Contribution to Narrative and Ecological Awareness

Powers' ways of humanizing trees serve to increase the narrative richness of the novel as well as to create ecological awareness. Anthropomorphic representation is seen as a "dis-anthropocentric" strategy that challenges the duality between nature and humans (Iovino and Oppermann, p. 8). *The Overstory* emphasizes the similarities and interdependence between humans and trees by shifting the reader's perspective away from the human centre and toward the perspective of trees (Powers, p. 503). In the scene of the trees speaking in chorus in the forest, the narrator targets what he calls humanity's "root problem," the misconception of seeing nature as separate and inferior (Powers 6). Many anthropomorphic scenes—for example, a tree feeling ashamed of humans' attitudes or the forest giving advice to humans—suggest humanity's responsibility for environmental destruction on a different level, thus provoking moral questioning in the reader (Powers, p. 124). As a result, *The Overstory* multilayers its story by consciously using anthropomorphic narrative techniques; it allows the reader to establish an emotional connection with trees by attributing human characteristics to them and conveys a strong ecological message by emphasizing that non-human creatures are also "subjects" (Powers, p. 485).

### 5. Empathy and Environmental Attitude: Ethical Effects of Anthropomorphism

The human qualities attributed to nature—especially trees—in literary narratives are not merely an aesthetic strategy; these representations also have ethical functions such as creating environmental empathy in the reader, transforming attitudes toward nature, and even directing them toward ecological behaviours. In this respect, anthropomorphism closes the gap between nature and humans and calls for a rethinking of interspecies relationships. In this section, the effect of anthropomorphism on environmental attitudes will be analysed in light of both literary theory and psychological research.

#### 5.1 Anthropomorphism and Empathy Theory

Anthropomorphic narratives are frequently used, especially in children's literature and popular science, to make nature seem "closer" and "more understandable." It has long been argued that such narratives encourage empathy in readers. Psychologist Adam Waytz and his colleagues have demonstrated that individual differences in anthropomorphism significantly predict moral care and concern for nonhuman entities. As Waytz, Cacioppo, and Epley (2010) argue, "The more something is anthropomorphized, the more moral care and concern it typically receives" (p. 221).

Their research identifies three key motivations that drive anthropomorphism: elicited agent knowledge (past experiences with humans), effectance motivation (the need to understand or predict), and sociality motivation (the desire for social connection), which collectively lead to mentalizing, affective empathy, and ethical concern (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007). These mechanisms are particularly evident in literary narratives in which trees speak, feel, or think. For example, in *The Giving Tree*, the tree's sadness, joy, and selfless giving allow the reader to establish a deep emotional bond with the tree, transforming it into an object of ethical concern.

These narratives carry empathy not only to an emotional but also to an ethical level. An experimental study conducted by Tam, Lee, and Chao (2013) found that anthropomorphizing nature enhances

people's sense of connectedness to it, which in turn motivates conservation behaviour. When nature is represented as a sentient "subject," individuals feel a stronger sense of ethical responsibility and greater guilt about harming the environment (Tam, Lee, & Chao, 2013).

## 5.2 Reader-Nature Interaction: From Literary Empathy to Ecological Action

Anthropomorphic strategies in literary texts offer opportunities to identify not only with the character but also with nature. Suzanne Keen's concept of "narrative empathy" is important in this context. Keen states that readers can empathize not only with human characters but also with non-human beings and that this empathic bond can evolve into political activism: Keen argues that while *fictional worlds provide a safe zone for readers' feeling empathy*, they do so *without a resultant demand on real-world action* (2007, p. 4).

In this context, Powers' novel *The Overstory* can be considered a turning point. The way trees shape the narrative in the structure of the novel invites the reader to see nature not as an object but as a subject. The novel has the power to change the people's perspective to look at trees with different eyes after it demonstrate the power of literature to create ethical transformation. The book presents the cutting down of a tree not only as a physical destruction but also as the end of a narrative, an existence. In this context, the tree becomes an empathic subject.

The effects of anthropomorphism in children's literature have been examined in a similar way. Tam, Lee, and Chao (2013) conducted an experimental study demonstrating that participants who were exposed to anthropomorphic representations of nature—such as trees or rivers depicted as thinking, feeling, or speaking—developed significantly higher levels of nature connectedness. These individuals also reported a stronger desire to protect the natural environment. The study shows that attributing human-like characteristics to nature enhances emotional bonding and encourages pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours (Tam, Lee, & Chao, 2013, p. 516).

## 5.3 Criticisms of Anthropomorphism: Empathy or Reduction?

There have also been those who have opposed the idea that anthropomorphic representations promote environmental empathy. One of the most frequently voiced criticisms is that these representations distort the reality of nature and confine it to an anthropocentric discourse. Timothy Morton argues that such narratives are representations that "romanticize" nature, detaching it from its specific existence. According to him, "If we turn all of nature into subject then we lose its otherness. If we turn it into object then we lose its nonreified quality" (Morton, p. 179).

While these criticisms are important, researchers such as Kautz and Iovino argue that anthropomorphism, rather than reducing nature, can serve as a gateway for humans to nature. According to Kautz, "to present the nonhuman as more human-like can have positive effects on human-nonhuman relations" (Kautz, 2024, p. 174). This interpretation allows us to understand anthropomorphism not only as an aesthetic game but also as a political intervention.

## 5.4 The Place of Anthropomorphism in Education and Politics

Anthropomorphic nature narratives have not only literary but also pedagogical and political functions. Especially in global issues such as climate change, deforestation and species extinction, the concretization of abstract concepts and their presentation in emotionally appealing forms are effective

in terms of environmental communication. George Marshall argues that emotional connection is of critical importance in discourses on climate change. Her argues that facts alone do not move people to action; stories and empathy do (Marshall, 2014).

In education, anthropomorphic narratives also enable the establishment of nature-related thought structures at an early age. Elementary school students in particular learn their sense of responsibility and compassion towards nature through such stories. For this reason, although anthropomorphism has aspects that are open to criticism, it still continues to be one of the most powerful tools in terms of environmental education.

## Discussion 6: Theoretical and Ethical Limits of Anthropomorphic Representation

The previous sections of this article have demonstrated how the human qualities attributed to trees operate at both literary and ethical levels with various examples. In particular, the anthropomorphic representation model developed by Alissa Kautz has shown that such representations are not only a narrative strategy but also an ethical tool that promotes environmental empathy. However, these findings also raise some theoretical uncertainties and critical questions about the levels of representation. In this section, the power, applicability and limitations of this model will be evaluated.

### 6.1 The Power of Kautz's Model: Structural Clarity and Depth of Meaning

Kautz's "ecocritical toolbox" model allows for the analysis of anthropomorphic representations around certain axes, thus enabling one to go beyond intuitive interpretations. While human qualities attributed to trees can be examined concretely through indicators such as "Physicality," "Sentience," and "Language," modes such as "Projection," "Manifestation," and "Hybridity" reveal the function of these qualities in the narrative (Kautz, p. 104). This structure has greatly facilitated the analysis of representational planes, especially in multi-layered novels (e.g., *The Overstory*).

Another strength of the model is that it can be flexibly applied to texts of different genres (children's literature, novel, fantasy, non-fiction, etc.). For example, comparisons between the representation levels in direct-speaking tree narratives such as *The Giving Tree* and scientific texts such as *The Hidden Life of Trees* have revealed the extent to which anthropomorphism has acquired an ethical function. This shows that the model can analyse environmental representation strategies regardless of the narrative type.

### 6.2 Methodological and Theoretical Limitations

However, the model also has certain limitations. First of all, the distinctions between signs and modes may not always be clear. Especially in the hybridity mode, since the representational boundaries between humans and nature are blurred, inevitable differences of interpretation arise in the analysis of representations. The question of whether characters such as Treebeard will be considered as humans or natural beings causes the representation to become complicated both on an aesthetic and ontological level.

It can also be said that the model is inadequate in explaining how anthropomorphism differs in sensory, cultural and linguistic contexts. For example, while a tree talking is represented as an astonishing event in Western culture, the talking of trees can be considered ordinary in indigenous narratives. These cultural differences limit the applicability of the model as a universal tool. Based on this, it can be argued

that the model needs variations that are sensitive to cultural context.

Another problem at the theoretical level is the ambiguity about whether anthropomorphic representation is an ethical or an aesthetic strategy. While scholars such as Feuerstein and Iovino defend these representations as a means of ethical transformation, critics such as Timothy Morton argue that such approaches represent nature in reductionist, even exploitative ways. Anthropomorphized nature is still anthropocentric; it is our own image, mirrored back at us in green (Morton, 2007). This view suggests a tension between the production of empathy and subjectivation of anthropomorphism.

### 6.3 Limits and Dangers of Ecological Empathy

Although the claim that literary anthropomorphism promotes environmental empathy has strong empirical support, this empathy may not always translate into sustainable ethical behaviour. Researchers have distinguished between affective empathy, which involves emotional concern for nature, and cognitive empathy, which reflects a deeper intellectual understanding of the nonhuman world. While affective empathy can enhance environmental attitudes, it does not consistently predict actual pro-environmental behaviour. In contrast, cognitive empathy and environmental knowledge have shown stronger correlations with behavioural change (Tam, 2013).

This situation shows that literary strategies should work not only at the emotional but also at the cognitive level. The speaking or feeling of trees should lead not only to empathy, but also to political awareness, behavioural change, and structural criticism. At this point, complex narratives such as Powers's novel *The Overstory* may be more effective because they present an environmental ethic that is not only emotional but also intellectual.

## 7. Conclusion

This article aims to examine literary narratives in which trees are endowed with human characteristics within an ecocritical framework and to reveal both the aesthetic and ethical functions of these representations. Although the representation of trees in literary texts as speaking, feeling or thinking may seem like a fairy-tale or metaphorical strategy at first glance, this study has shown that these representations are powerful narrative forms that can produce not only aesthetic but also ethical and political effects.

In the first sections of the article, the functionality of trees as narrative subjects is discussed through the basic principles of ecocritical theory and material ecocritical approaches; it is argued that anthropomorphism is a call for ethical engagement rather than reductionism (Iovino and Oppermann, p. 8). Alissa Kautz's anthropomorphic representation model consisting of a triple sign and a triple mode has provided great convenience in terms of conceptually classifying and analysing these narratives (Kautz, p. 173–188).

As seen in applied analyses, anthropomorphic representations in complex texts such as *The Overstory* position nature not only as a depicted environment but also as an agent that constructs and directs the narrative. In simpler narratives such as *The Giving Tree*, anthropomorphism is used to create environmental empathy and emotional attachment. These two different approaches show that literary anthropomorphism can operate on different levels and appeal to different reader groups.

As stated in the discussion section of the article, these forms of representation may not always be clearly

demarcated; The boundaries between humans and nature are blurred, especially in hybrid representations. It has also been emphasized that representation is not independent of cultural context and that there are serious differences between indigenous narratives and Western anthropomorphic strategies. This situation provides an important basis for future comparative and intercultural research. As a result, the human characteristics attributed to trees should be evaluated not only as a fairy-tale narrative form, but also as an ecological way of thinking. By presenting nature as a speaking, thinking, feeling subject, anthropomorphic narratives invite us to think not only “about nature” but also “with nature.” This call requires a holistic approach that includes not only scientific but also aesthetic and ethical sensitivities in order to cope with today’s environmental crises.

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