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Towards a Post-anthropocentric Pedagogy: Children's Reading of Oliver Jeffers's *This Moose Belongs to Me*

Hacia una pedagogía post-antropocéntrica: lectura infantil de Este alce es mío de Oliver Jeffers

Cap a una pedagogia post-antropocèntrica: lectura infantil de L'ant és meu d'Oliver Jeffers

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Abstract

Anthropocentrism, the idea that humans are intrinsically superior to nonhumans, pervades children's literature. While the last decade has seen an emergence of desk-based research on the intersections of children's fiction and posthumanism, empirical research on the pedagogical potential of children's books to destabilise anthropocentrism is relatively rare. In a similar vein, the field of critical pedagogy has paid relatively less attention to the oppression of the more-than-human. To address these research gaps, this paper examines the responses of two British child readers to Oliver Jeffers's picturebook *This Moose Belongs to Me* (2012) through the lenses of reader-response theory, posthumanism, cognitive psychology, and children's literature studies. This case study follows the methodological approach proposed by Evelyn Arizpe and Morag Styles (2003); while the researcher asked open-ended questions as to the visual and textual elements of the book, both readers demonstrated their readings of the human-animal interactions with a focus on the notion of pet ownership. Before reading the picturebook, the child readers demonstrated a mindset wherein the sentient quality of animals does not exist. However, children's fiction's ability to destabilise human-animal hierarchy is demonstrated through the readers' critique of the protagonist's self-proclaimed superiority over the moose, as well as their growing recognition of the animal's subjectivity. This study, therefore, serves as a test case for how children's fiction can be used in a critical pedagogy to encourage rethinking the human-pet relationship and fostering a less anthropocentric worldview.

Key words: anthropocentrism, pet ownership, critical pedagogy, reader-response theory, picturebooks.

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Resumen

El antropocentrismo, o la idea de que los humanos son intrínsecamente superiores a cualquier criatura no-humana, es una visión que predomina en la literatura infantil. Aunque en la última década se ha visto el aumento de la investigación teórica sobre la intersección de la ficción infantil y el posthumanismo, la investigación empírica sobre el potencial pedagógico que tienen los libros infantiles para desestabilizar el antropocentrismo es relativamente escasa. Asimismo, en el campo de la pedagogía crítica, relativamente, se ha prestado menos atención a la opresión ejercida sobre seres que trascienden lo humano. Para abordar estas lagunas investigativas, este artículo examinará la lectura del libro álbum *Este alce es mío* de Oliver Jeffers usando la teoría de la recepción, el posthumanismo, la psicología cognitiva y los estudios de Literatura Infantil. Este análisis comparativo de casos sigue la metodología propuesta por Evelyn Arizpe y Morag Styles (2003). En él, el investigador adulto hizo preguntas abiertas sobre los elementos visuales y textuales del libro y dos niños lectores evidenciaron lecturas sobre interacciones entre animales y humanos con un foco en la noción de tenencia de mascotas. Antes de leer el libro álbum, los niños lectores evidenciaron una mentalidad en la que la noción de animales como seres sintientes o pensantes no existe. Sin embargo, la habilidad de la ficción infantil para desestabilizar las jerarquías humano-animales se logra manifestar a través de la crítica que terminan haciendo los lectores sobre la superioridad autoproclamada del protagonista sobre el alce, así como el aumento de su reconocimiento de la subjetividad del personaje animal. Este estudio por lo tanto es de utilidad como un caso de prueba para una pedagogía crítica que abarca como la ficción infantil puede ser usada para invitar a repensar la relación mascota-humano y desarrollar una visión de mundo menos antropocéntrica.

Palabras clave: antropocentrismo, tenencia de mascotas, pedagogía crítica, Teoría de Recepción Lectora, Libros Álbum.

Resum

L'antropocentrisme, la idea que els humans són intrínsecament superiors als no-humans, impregna la literatura infantil. Encara que en l'última dècada ha sorgit una investigació teòrica sobre les interseccions entre la ficció infantil i el posthumanisme, la recerca empírica sobre el potencial pedagògic dels llibres infantils per a desestabilitzar l'antropocentrisme és relativament rara. En una línia semblant, el camp de la pedagogia crítica ha prestat relativament poca atenció a l'opressió dels éssers més-enllà-del-humà. Per a abordar aquestes llacunes en la recerca, aquest article examina les respostes de dos lectors infantils britànics al llibre il·lustrat d'Oliver Jeffers *L'ant és meu* (*This Moose Belongs to Me*, 2012) a través de les perspectives de la teoria de la recepció, el posthumanisme, la psicologia cognitiva i els estudis de literatura infantil. Aquest estudi de cas segueix l'enfocament metodològic proposat per Evelyn Arizpe i Morag Styles (2003); mentre que l'investigador va fer preguntes obertes sobre els elements visuals i textuals del llibre, ambdós lectors van demostrar les seues interpretacions de les interaccions entre humans i animals amb un èmfasi en la noció de la possessió d'animals de companyia. Abans de llegir el llibre il·lustrat, els lectors infantils manifestaven una mentalitat en què no existia la qualitat de sentir dels animals. No obstant això, la capacitat de la ficció infantil per a desestabilitzar la jerarquia entre humans i animals es manifesta a través de la crítica dels lectors a la superioritat autoproclamada del protagonista sobre l'ant, així com en el seu reconeixement creixent de la subjectivitat de l'animal. Aquest estudi, per tant, serveix com a cas de prova de com la ficció infantil pot utilitzar-se en una pedagogia crítica per a fomentar una revisió de la relació humà-animal de companyia i promoure una visió del món menys antropocèntrica.

Paraules clau: antropocentrisme, tinença d'animals de companyia, pedagogia crítica, teoria de la recepció, àlbums il·lustrats

1. Introduction

> 'Snowdrop, my pet!' she went on, looking over her shoulder at the White Kitten.

Alice's utterance and gaze at the kitty neatly encapsulate the long-standing human-animal hierarchy inherent in our culture (Carroll, 1871, p. 220). The possessive pronoun "my" brings forward humans' self-proclaimed ownership of nonhuman animals. The way that Alice looks at her little cat also subtly reveals the ontological superiority that she assumes she has over the domesticated animal. Commenting on John Tenniel's accompanying illustration of this scene, Zoe Jaques writes that "the condescending gaze of Alice… brings 'Queen Alice' across the Looking-Glass and into the real world, even without her crown" (2016, p. 162). The child protagonist might be a potent emblem of the ways in which humans narcissistically imagine their dominion over animals, as well as actualise these fantasies through quotidian violence and exploitation.

The classic children's fantasy novel is, however, just one of the many exemplars of the children's fiction that is imbued with and populated by humanist beliefs. In addition to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Jaques (2015) has helpfully instanced several more works of this sort, such as Dr. Seuss' *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* (1960) and Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1863). Robyn McCallum ascribes the ubiquity of these tales to the convention that "the cultural construction of the child" is tightly interwoven by "liberal humanism... based on Rousseau's and Locke's philosophical conceptions of childhood and of the role of education" (1999, p. 6). Children's literature, "central to the formation of subjectivity" (Coats, 2004, p. 4), is therefore crucial to one's cognitive formation of an ontological hierarchy that dignifies humans.

Karen Coats' claim simultaneously hints at the possibility of children's fiction having the potential to effectuate the opposite. I would argue that specific children's books might dismantle or at least destabilise a human-animal hierarchy in the child reader's subjectivity. The Irish children's writer Oliver Jeffers's picturebook *This Moose Belongs to Me* (2012), despite the literal meaning communicated by its title, is a case in point. It tells the story of a boy encountering a moose in the wild and seeing the animal as a pet he owns. However, the child reader will later learn that the moose has never felt 'owned' by any human beings. Victoria Flanagan argues that the book functions as "an accessible critique of speciesism… [as it] problematise[s] the concept of ownership and make[s] the boy's assertion of domination over the moose a fantasy" (2017, p. 38). Jaques is of the same mind, considering the book capable of highlighting "the potency of wild nature wherein an animal might refuse human ministrations and attempts at possession" (2022, p. 371). Flanagan and Jaques, both desk-based researchers in children's literature studies, have only briefly mentioned the book and its

posthumanist agenda. This is suggestive of the research practice in the field of children's literature criticism which tends to "negat[e] the significance of real young readers" (Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2016, p. 217). This paper sets out to answer the question "In what ways do children respond to the problem of anthropocentrism in *This Moose Belongs to Me*?". By conducting close readings of the picturebook and analysing child readers' responses, this study serves as a test case for how children's fiction can encourage children to question the anthropocentric understanding of pethood.

This line of inquiry aligns with the goals of critical pedagogy, as it explores how children can be encouraged to question various forms of power dynamics. As Henry Giroux puts it, critical pedagogy "focuses largely on how domination manifests as both a symbolic and an institutional force" through "texts, institutions, social relations, and ideologies" (2020, p. 2-3). With its roots in Marxist philosophy (Freire, 1970), critical pedagogy combats the "[erasure of] any trace of subaltern histories, class struggles, and racial and gender inequalities and injustices" (Giroux, 2020, p. 3). Kay Peggs and Barry Smart (2017) have expressed their concerns with the rare recognition of animal rights in critical pedagogy, instancing works of Helena Pedersen (2004) and Richard Kahn (2009) as the only exceptions. All these works seek to reconstruct the field in response to the ecological crisis as well as the dominant scientific paradigm that treats animals as resources for humans. The scholars mentioned do not rely on posthumanism to conceptualise human-nature or human-animal relationships; however, I find this branch of philosophy able to illuminate the issue of human-animal hierarchy and hence, the possibility of a post-anthropocentric pedagogy. This study is underpinned by the intersections of posthumanism, cognitive child psychology, reader-response theory, and children's literature studies. By examining children's responses through these lenses, this paper points towards the pedagogical value of posthumanist readings of certain picturebooks in prompting children to reflect on the human-animal hierarchy and to act more ethically towards (domesticated) animals.

This study is underpinned by the intersections of posthumanism, cognitive child psychology, reader-response theory, and children's literature studies. By examining children's responses through these lenses, this paper points towards the pedagogical value of posthumanist readings of certain picturebooks in prompting children to reflect on the human-animal hierarchy and to act more ethically towards (domesticated) animals.

2. Literature Review

All the myriad problems associated with the human-animal hierarchy arguably stem from humanism. In Kate Soper's words, humanism "appeals (positively) to the notion of a core humanity or common essential features in terms of which human beings can be defined and understood" (1986, p. 11).

Humanists presume that humans are singled out for the enjoyment of ontological privilege amongst living creatures because they are conscious and agentic beings, who make their own choices and shoulder moral obligations (p. 11). This presumption manifests itself in René Descartes' famous saying: "reason or sense… [is] the only thing that makes us men and distinguishes us from the beasts" (1988, p. 21). Because nonhuman creatures are regarded as inferior others, the unexamined supreme position of humans remains intact (Badmington, 2003), and humans can go on dwelling in the self-glorification of their "epistemic and other kinds of power over all nonhuman things, including nonhuman animals" (Murris, 2016, p. 92). Cartesian philosophy emerged more than three hundred years ago, yet it still "continues to enjoy the status of 'common sense' in contemporary Western culture" (Badmington, 2000, p. 4).

Anthropocentrism is "a necessary correlate of the critique of Humanism" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 69). It "takes the human as centre or norm" (Clark, 2011, p. 3) and the exclusive source of meaning and value (Clark, 2019). Obvious examples of this set of beliefs are human exploitation and commodification of nature and animals, but "even an aesthetics of landscape appreciation can be anthropocentric" (Clark, 2011, p. 3). The nonhuman, "as a consequence of human-centeredness, becomes displaced to the periphery" (Crist & Kopnina, 2014, p. 388). It is this imagined periphery that has spawned the human-animal hierarchy deployed by humanists to rationalise humans' rule and stewardship of animals (Braidotti, 2013). Consequently, animals have become resources or assets exploited in whatever way humans desire, in keeping with "a modern language of ownership as absolute possession" (Sampson, 2018, p. 98). It is thereby anthropocentric when one claims to own and/ or rule the natural world, including animals.

Posthumanism is a direct attack against humanism and anthropocentrism. It is utilised "as both a genealogical and navigational tool" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 5), which positions us in a process of critically "rethinking of the dominant humanist (or anthropocentric) account of who 'we' are as human beings" (Badmington, 2011, p. 374). It aims to decentre humans and revoke their special status, and it calls into question whether there exists a fundamental difference between humans and animals (p. 374). The idea of cyborgs, despite not readily relevant to the focus of my study, is another hallmark in the posthumanist discourse. Donna Haraway writes that the 'uniqueness' and dominion of humans are now undermined by the fact that "[humans] are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs" (1985, p. 66). While her contention revolves around the bodily enmeshment of humans with machines and technology, Cary Wolfe's take on posthumanism is the relationality between humans and nonhuman animals. He points to "the ethical and philosophical urgency of confronting the institution of speciesism and crafting a posthumanist theory of the subject" (2003, p. 7), intending to shatter the belief that "human freedom… has its

material condition of possibility absolute control over the lives of nonhuman others" (p. 7). Haraway later participates in the debates about the human-animal relationship, proposing the term "companion species", meaning the "joint lives of dogs and people, who are bonded in significant otherness" (2003, p. 16). The manifesto centres upon the connection between humans and canines, yet Haraway's argument is reminiscent of and is thus applicable to the overall human-animal relationship, agreed by scholars such as Amy Ratelle (2015). For Jaques, "posthumanism is best understood as 'postanthropocentrism'" (2015, p. 11). In this paper, I would define post-anthropocentrism as, by borrowing N. Katherine Hayles' articulations, "getting out of some of the old boxes" (1999, p. 285) of anthropocentrism, envisaging a non-hierarchical way of thinking in the human-animal relationship.

The practice of petkeeping reveals the power dynamics between animals and humans. Animal studies reveal "anthropocentrism that positions the animal as an oppositional and inferior other to the human" (Nayar, 2014, p. 111) and unravel "The paradigm of dominion, in which the world was a resource at the disposal of the human" (Nash, 2011, p. 255). "[P]ethood places the animal under the domination of humans, and the institutions of pethood, such as pet ownership and obedience training, typically perpetuate existing animal/ human power relations" (Feuerstein & Nolte-Odhiambo, 2017, p. 4). The idea of 'owning' an animal in the domestic sphere is problematic; when humans claim to be the owner of animals, the sentience of animals is overtly disregarded, and animals are automatically attached with "the property status" (Carlisle-Frank & Frank, 2006, p. 239). This recalls John Berger's argument: "Animals are born, are sentient and are mortal. In these things they resemble man" (2009, p. 4). Humans' attempt to claim ownership of pet animals, therefore, seems to imply an anthropocentric belief, as they endeavour to 'forget' the sentience of animals and forcefully expel them from sharing the same ontological value with humans. Philosopher Yi-fu Tuan perceives "the pet" to be a cultural product of "dominance… combined with affection" (1984, p. 2) that exhibits "man's inherent insecurity and need to display his power to subdue the unruly forces of nature" (p. 5). Erica Fudge highlights the existing ironies by naming a pet animal: "[T]hey have names like us, but cannot call us by our names" (2002, p. 28), in agreement with Derrida's (2008) critique of humans' attempt to singularise 'the animal' in human language and deny the heterogeneity of living creatures. Simply put, the domestication of animals and the practice of naming them can be considered anthropocentric and hegemonic.

Children's literature has much to offer in the debate about the reformulation of the human-animal relationship. Environmental literature for children in general is either written in a romantic form that endorses anthropocentrism or in an eco-centric and anti-humanist form (Sigler, 1994). Her generalisation agrees with Ratelle's contention that children's literature is situated in "the oscillation between upholding and undermining the divisions between the human and the animal" (2015, p. 4).

The representation of animals in a children's book could lean towards humanism or espouse a human-animal hierarchy. It could also raise doubts as to those ideas and, hence, hints of posthumanism instead. The commonality between children's literature studies and posthumanism is their consideration of ethics. Karin Murris (2015) has a tremendous faith in picturebooks' potential to dismantle the human-animal hierarchy, arguing that their aesthetics can subvert the idea of binary opposites embedded inside the reader's subjectivity. She also believes that "philosophy with picturebooks creates more epistemically just educational relationships 'between' adults, children and nonhuman others" (2016, p. 14). Picturebooks are frequently seen as simple and do not fall into adult discourse. However, these 'childish' books ironically critique the problematic and narcissist way of thinking amongst adults themselves through "offer[ing] sophisticated interventions into debates about what it means to be human or non-human" (Jaques, 2015, p. 5).

Young children's reasoning about the natural world has been also tested and discussed in child and cognitive psychology. Susan Carey (1985) posits that young children across cultures are all born to be anthropocentric. Her generalising claim is supported by the data she collected from the results of a task of inductive inference. The researcher told the participants, including 4-year-old children, that there was a property inside the body of a living creature (an omentum in her study), and they were shown where an omentum was located, as the researcher referred to a picture of a human, a bee or a dog. Later, they were asked about whether other kinds of entities (both living and nonliving) also have an omentum inside. It was found that 4-year-old participants demonstrated a marked tendency to make projections from humans to other entities than vice versa. In brief, Carey's findings attempt to prove that "prototypicality of humans is central to children's conceptions of the biological world; children's understanding of other living things is largely in reference to, or by analogy to, human beings" (Coley, 2000, p. 87).

Nonetheless, other cognitive psychologists later replicated or modified Carey's methodology and have come up to contrasting conclusions about the subject. Children from rural backgrounds did not display anthropocentrism because they did not tend to perceive humans to be "a more effective base than animals" (Medin et al., 2010, p. 205). Previously, a large majority of psychologists were convinced that anthropocentric reasoning was rooted or programmed inside human beings, yet Herrmann et al. (2010) invalidate that claim by suggesting that anthropocentrism is rather "an acquired perspective" (p. 9982). What enables the child's acquisition

I would like to bring forward the heterogeneity of children's literature in terms of genres and especially the assumption about ontology. It might be true that Berenstain Bears engenders an anthropocentric belief, but there does exist a sort of post-anthropocentric potential of many other picturebooks waiting to be unearthed.

of an anthropocentric belief system in urban environments, interestingly, is children's fiction (Waxman et al., 2014). After reading an excerpt from *Berenstain Bears* – a work of fiction that has anthropomorphised animal characters, children "show[ed] the classic human-centered pattern, favouring humans over non-human animals as an inductive base" (p. 5). On the contrary, "those reading *Animal Encyclopedia* performed differently, providing no hint of the anthropocentric stance" (p. 5). Taken together, anthropocentric reasoning might not be a universal feature or a 'built-in' faculty in children; instead, it might stem from children's books that depict the human-animal relationship from a humanist perspective. This relates back to Coats' (2004) argument that children's literature shapes the child's subjectivity. But does all children's fiction necessarily lead to their anthropocentric reasoning?

Before attempting to provide an answer, I would like to bring forward the heterogeneity of children's literature in terms of genres and especially the assumption about ontology. It might be true that *Berenstain Bears* engenders an anthropocentric belief, but there does exist a sort of post-anthropocentric potential of many other picturebooks waiting to be unearthed. If it is shown that Jeffers's picturebook acts as an invitation to children to respond to the problematic beliefs that originate in anthropocentrism, children's fiction similar to Jeffers's should be widely drawn upon to "prepare children all over the world to resist… environmentally destructive developments" (Gaard, 2009, p. 334).

3. Methodology

The present study, conducted on a qualitative and confirmatory basis, is a case study of two children's responses to the picturebook. Both of them, selected through convenience sampling, were living in Cambridgeshire, United Kingdom. The elder sister was seven, while the younger brother was five. They were given pseudonyms (Ella and Matthew) in this paper. Their parents gave permission to the use of the children's responses in a future publication, and were aware that the children could withdraw from the study whenever they felt uncomfortable. The number of participants might seem small, but a case study is able to "penetrate aspects which are not readily accessible by methods that rely on large numbers" (Nisbet & Watt, 1984, p. 73). Through "provid[ing] descriptions of individuals", it delineates "behaviour or experience which are shared by many people… in detail and depth" (Dyer, 1995, p. 48). Thus, the responses from the child readers who participated in this study, to a certain extent, might represent how other children across cultures would respond to this picturebook too.

The participants were provided with a comfortable environment that would help stimulate interactions. I first asked them "easy 'ice-breaker' questions" concerning their preferences of animals in order to "set the child[ren] at ease" and "to make [them] feel confident that [they] can contribute

successfully" (Arksey & Knight, 1999, p. 116). I also showed them a picture of a real-life moose in case anyone of them did not have knowledge of the animal. Because reading is a "transactional" process (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 18) where "the convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence" (Iser, 1988, p. 295), throughout the process of reading, I welcomed and encouraged them to offer verbal responses to the book's textual and visual elements, which are after all the kernel of this study.

Following Evelyn Arizpe's and Morag Styles's methodological approach (2003), I conducted a semi-structured interview with the participants. I interviewed them simultaneously as they could negotiate meaning in an interactive manner (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011), hoping that the dynamics between them would be reflective of their cognitive reasoning about the human-animal relationship. Open-ended questions were asked because these could bring children's thoughts and feelings into focus (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). During the process of reading, I asked questions that revolved around the participants' perception of the plot and the characters, intending to explore how they made sense of both the text and image on each spread or double spread. When participants seemed interested in expressing their opinions or when their opinions were related to the ideas of anthropocentrism or pethood, I asked follow-up questions, for example as simple as "Why?" and "Can you tell me more?", to reveal other perspectives and the underlying rationale behind their ideas. When necessary, I rephrased their words as a "confirmatory validation" to "[check] that their views have been correctly recorded" (von Kardoff, 2004, p. 141). Approaching the end of the data collection process, I asked them open-ended questions, for example "What do you like about the story?" and "If Wilfred is your friend, do you want to say something to him?". I ended the session with a creative drawing task. I share the same view as Kate Rabey, who argues that "[a] visual experience demands a visual response true to its original form" (2003, p. 118). The qualitative and visual data would thus allow me to see how the iconotext invited them to ponder on issues about anthropocentrism and develop a post-anthropocentric subjectivity.

This methodological approach may cause concerns over the intergenerational power dynamics between the adult researcher/ educator and the child participant/ reader. While the children were mostly prompted to articulate their interpretations of the picturebook, there were moments wherein the adult researcher would not follow up the child's responses. This is by no means an act of devaluing or disregarding the child's perspective; instead, by asking follow-up questions selectively and steering a particular way of decoding the picturebook, the adult researcher, in Joe Sutliff Sanders's terms, "chaperons" (2013, p. 61) the words and images for the child reader. Sanders argues that the form of picturebooks "anticipates a dual readership" (p. 63), as they "anticipate being read aloud by a proficient reader/ viewer to a preliterate listener/ viewer" (p. 74). The adult who reads the picturebook

"inevitably performs the words in a way that narrows their meaning even as the words fix the meaning of the images" (p. 62). This process of narrowing meaning is necessary or even inevitable for this research study, as it would ensure that the child readers could attentively reflect on the main concern, without roaming over the multiple possible ways of interpreting the text. For instance, the boy reader mentioned that the protagonist "did not teach [the moose]" to perform a certain act. Rather than diverting attention from pet ownership to whether an animal could learn from a human to do certain deeds, the adult reader was interested in directing the child's attention to the issue with which this present study is concerned. The adult's overseeing of the reading process somehow discloses the power the researcher holds, yet this form of power is not overused and is meant to invite the child reader to assert their agency in enacting a change of thought patterns in terms of the human-animal relationship.

4. Data analysis

The participants seemed to demonstrate a pattern of anthropocentric reasoning in their answers to the ice-breaker questions (see Appendix for the researcher's questions). Although they could not recall the names of the fish they were keeping, they quickly thought of new names for them: "fishy" and "fisy". The idea of naming animals was therefore not novel to them. When asked about the qualities of a good pet, Ella brought up the phrase "a well-trained dog". This is a rather heavily ideologically-loaded adjective that indicated her belief in the importance of obedience in the human-canine relationship, since dog training typically bespeaks "a form of instrumental domination" (Weisberg, 2009, p. 32) as a means "to ensure the [dog's] unequivocal submission" (p. 33) to humans. Matthew's wish to keep a parrot as his pet is also indicative of human-centredness. Having pointed out that "parrots like to copy", he excitedly claimed that "it will learn from me". While "to copy" suggests that he is the creator of meaning and a parrot is deprived of the capacity to make meaning, "[to] learn from [him]" clearly points to his epistemological superiority and domination over a parrot. From their utterances, the implication was that they believed they could manipulate or at the very least impose rules for animals and humanise them. The sentient quality of animals seemed to be absent from their subjectivity.

The picturebook's interplay of text and image invites the reader to adopt the moose's subjectivity. Jeffers does not explain the reason why Wilfred had a strong belief that he owned the moose in the text, only stating "he knew, just KNEW, that it was meant to be his" on the verso on page 2. The dearth of reasoning about the self-proclaimed ownership of the moose inside Wilfred plainly exemplifies humans' long-unexamined, taken-for-granted, and deep-rooted belief in our ontological superiority that automatically permits us to 'own' animals. Visually, Wilfred is shown to be standing on a chair to

knot a name tag around the moose's right antler. The recto of the double spread was the first site in the book where the readers could stretch their imagination. Without textually hinting at how the moose would feel or even whether the moose would have a feeling towards being named, the author has left a gap for the reader to fill. The text offers the reader a third person point of view, depicting Wilfred's belief in pet ownership in the narrative present, yet the visual representation of the moose invites the reader to adopt the subjective position of the moose. With that said, it is not to imply that the iconotext complies with anthropocentric ideology, as Jeffers does not explicitly inscribe the moose's feeling; instead, the author deploys the text-image interplay to propel the reader to rethink human-centredness and debunk it through recognising the voice of the animal.

The siblings had divergent initial responses to the moment of naming. Matthew quickly decoded the meaning communicated by the visual text, pointing out that "[Wilfred] gave him a name". Ella expressed her view that the moose was happy with being named Marcel, whereas Matthew answered, "No because [the moose] closed his eyes" – the very antithesis of his sister's response. The bifurcation of their interpretations here is arguably enabled by the counterpointing quality of the picturebook. Matthew managed to draw upon the visual text, which supplies additional information about the 'naming' moment, to focalise the moose to thwart Wilfred from anthropocentrically silencing the moose.

The child readers showcased a general unanimity when responding to the moose's repudiation of abiding by Wilfred's commands. Ella's diction in discussing pages 4 and 5 is noteworthy: the moose, dressed as a waiter in Wilfred's imagination, was "doing things for [Wilfred]" and "serving juice for him", which seems to denote a sense of submissiveness and imply that the moose was condescended to be a servant. Both child readers soon spotted Wilfred's failure to wrest control of the moose, as they simultaneously described that the moose was "going away" from Wilfred and did not want to listen to his rules. Interestingly, the siblings' views on the reasons for the moose's unwillingness to obey differed markedly. Ella drew upon the pictorial clue from the recto of the double spread, where Wilfred was playing his record collection and only a part of the moose was shown, saying that "the moose is turning his back". Matthew, despite still maintaining that the moose was not listening to Wilfred's rules, argued that "[the moose] did not know how to do it. [Wilfred] did not teach him". Matthew's interpretation might be related to the attention he was devoting to the protagonist, whose clothes and records are in bright colours. The child readers, after all, still decoded the moose's unwillingness to act in a subservient manner.

The siblings recognised the moose's apathy towards Wilfred and came up with ideas that align with posthumanist ideology through their responses. As they were asked to talk about the image on page

6, they identified that Wilfred was “pushing” the moose, while the moose was “eating an apple”. This spread is akin to the previous two spreads for their commonality in juxtaposing Wilfred’s desire to control the moose and the moose’s disregard for it. Because the child readers should have become familiar with this narrative pattern at this point, I decided to advance the discussion by asking them to expound on the moose’s refusal of obeying:

> Interviewer: Why isn’t the moose following where Wilfred wants to go?
> Ella: Wilfred’s too bossy.
> Matthew: Because he does not want to be his pet.

Ella’s classification of Wilfred as “too bossy” is considered an obvious sign of her critique of the boy’s dominant behaviour and/ or personality. The adjective she used might not be suggestive of her disagreement with humans’ superiority over animals at an ontological level, but it at least insinuates her contestation with any forms of hierarchy – one of the key ideas that characterise posthumanism. The girl reader vehemently denied Wilfred’s assumption that the moose was obliged to comply with his rules so long as he had established them. Matthew’s response pertains to the sentience and subjectivity of the moose himself. The text on the spread on page 6 states that “sometimes the moose wasn’t a very good pet”, which seems to presume the pet status of the moose. The boy reader did not simply take the text itself literally as the overall meaning of the iconotext, and he did not find the owner-pet relationship imagined by Wilfred valid in any sense. Instead, he managed to venture a proto-posthumanist, or proto-post-anthropocentric, opinion through decoding the image. The moose, in his view, is a sentient being who possessed agency to repudiate the pet status and/ or the ontological inferiority assigned by Wilfred. The text-image interplay here seemed to induce the child readers to ponder on the human-animal hierarchy from a critical perspective.

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Matthew’s responses to the scene where the moose does not follow Wilfred home and enters the woods instead were particularly fascinating in terms of the idea of ‘home’.

> Interviewer: What is the moose doing here?
> Matthew: Going away. Back to the wild.
> ...
> Interviewer: Where is the moose living in? Where is his home?
> Matthew: In the wild.

The adverbial phrase "back to the wild" implies the very idea that the moose was from nature, independent of humans and the dominion exercised by humans. I would contend that the young reader's response did not necessarily suggest an absolute human-animal dissociation as if the two were in essence different and separated as two binary opposites. Te point he was making seemed to be emphasising the sentient quality of the moose that allowed the animal to enact whatever he wished instead of hopelessly yielding to Wilfred's domestication.

The spreads on pages 8 and 9 exemplify ironies that expose Wilfred's delusion of his ownership of the moose. Nikolajeva and Scott (2001) argue that, in picturebooks, "the text–image interaction is full of humor and irony" (p. 229). This is particularly applicable in these two specific spreads. The text on the verso appears to display an obedient quality of the moose by saying that the moose functioned as Wilfred's shelter in the pouring rain. The text alone resonates the idea of pet ownership and how the domesticated animal meets utilitarian purposes for humans. However, the image does not suggest the same, as the moose does not seem to notice Wilfred because of the difference in their heights. The spread on the recto follows this pattern of irony. The image shows that the moose is getting apples from the trees that are too tall for Wilfred to reach, while Wilfred takes the apples that the moose knocked down. The lack of eye contact between the two in the image ironically reflects Wilfred's misinterpretation of the moose's actions which are probably done for himself.

The siblings recognised that it was Wilfred's wishful thinking that the moose was at his service. When reading the verso, they admitted that the moose here resembled "an umbrella" for Wilfred, yet they quickly refused that it was a volitional action. Matthew elaborated his view, saying that "He just walked in there" and pointing at the space below the moose's body where Wilfred is shielding himself from the rain. After decoding the image on the recto, both Ella and Matthew felt that the moose was only trying to get some apples for himself rather than for Wilfred. The interplay between text and image in these two spreads creates an irony that ultimately exposes Wilfred's anthropocentric illusion of succeeding to command the moose, inviting the reader to consider Wilfred's deluded belief.

Wilfred's encounter with the old lady initially led the siblings to believe that she was the real owner of the moose. On pages 12 and 13, the moose is situated across the gutter, facing the old lady on the verso and turning his back on Wilfred on the recto. I would argue that the act of centralising the moose alludes to how the two human characters attempt to 'own' and compete for the moose, again pointing towards how pets are traditionally condescended to "the property status" (Carlisle-Frank & Frank, 2006, p. 239). The double spread where another human character is introduced intriguingly complicated the siblings' understanding of the narrative and, more importantly, the problem of anthropocentrism. It might be the case that the objectification of the animal led the children to believe

that the moose was indeed owned by a person. Matthew, when explaining his view that the old lady owned the moose, noted that "she [knew] his proper name", while Ella believed that Marcel was not the real name of the moose "because the moose [was] looking at her (the old lady)".

Nevertheless, the next double spread (pages 14 and 15) caused a change in their opinions regarding the moose's affection towards the old lady. As communicated by the text, the moose is said to ignore Wilfred's command and be more interested in the old lady. This is visually communicated by the animal's head movement – looking briefly at Wilfred (on the verso) and biting the apple offered by the old day (on the recto). The child readers, however, both referred to the image, pointing out that the moose is "eating an apple" and is indeed more interested in the apple than the old lady, completely contrary to what the text literally conveys. Apparently, it is another manifestation of the impact of the image on the delivery of irony and humour, as discussed above. In the readers' complicated reading of these two double spreads, they held onto the belief that any humans' endeavour to claim owning the moose, such as naming, is of no use, because they saw the moose as a being with subjectivity to express preferences for anyone or anything – the apple.

In the scene where the tangled-up Wilfred is 'rescued' by the moose, both readers perceived the moose's act to be both coincidental and intentional. Provoked by the moose's disregard for him, Wilfred goes off for home, but the string he brought entangles him. He spends a night in the wild alone, worrying about his safety. Ella spotted an apple tree, and the siblings later recalled that it is the moose who liked eating apples. As they were shown the double spread (pages 22 and 23), I asked them to articulate how they made sense of the moment when the moose comes to rescue Wilfred – as the moose inclines its head to reach an apple, its antlers lift the boy, who is stuck in knots, seemingly by accident. They both indicated that the moose would like to eat the apple nearby Wilfred and save him. Ella, when explaining her view, emphasised that "[the moose] wants to eat the apple". Her explanation is surely in keeping with the previous responses from her and her brother, because they continually made connections between the animal character and his fondness of apples. Interesting is the reason why they also thought that the moose intends to save Wilfred. To gauge it, I intend to draw upon Nikolajeva's (2014) chapter about how picturebooks could develop readers' empathy. Because of the siblings' critical responses to Wilfred's anthropocentric deeds throughout the process of reading, it can be said that they did not develop "immersive identification" (p. 122) with the characters or fully adopt their subjectivity. Rather, I would say the child readers had "empathetic identification" (p. 122) with Wilfred, as they could highlight his fear and loneliness in the wild alone. While such negative emotions might have probably occurred in their lives, it is quite sensible to argue that the children would love to see someone to save Wilfred (or them in real life) from danger (or any undesired circumstances in real life). This double spread might be intended to debunk the fantasy that animals are tools to serve

various purposes for humans by the depiction of the moose accidentally saving Wilfred when lowering his body to eat the apple. The child readers both seemed to identify such an irony as shown in their response, yet I would suggest that while this double spread invites the reader to respond to anthropocentrism critically, it also asks them to develop empathy with human beings. Thus, the interpretations of the moose rescuing Wilfred, whether by accident or on purpose, are not mutually exclusive.

Through offering responses to the picturebook after finishing reading it, they made clear their antagonistic attitudes towards Wilfred's anthropocentric belief. At the closure of the story, they both made the same prediction that the moose would not go back to Wilfred again. They raised the possibility of the moose going to get more apples for himself either from the old lady, suggested by Matthew, or a tree, by Ella. It seems that the moose's disregard for Wilfred is deep-seated in their understanding of the iconotext, which might help uncover the reason why they described the relationship between the two main characters as "strangers". I shall emphasise that in literature and culture there exist "traditions that highlight a strong bond between children and animals" (Jaques, 2015, p. 127), so it is rather interesting that the siblings did not find the two main characters friendly to or even acquainted with each other. It is then safe to suggest that *This Moose Belongs to Me* not only breaks with the tradition, but also invites the child reader to reconceptualise the human-animal relationship without an ontological power hierarchy. The child readers' conception of Wilfred and the moose being strangers, arguably, paved the way for an emerging post-anthropocentric articulation of whether the moose belongs to anyone:

> Interviewer: Does the moose belong to anyone?
> Ella: No. He belongs to the wild. The old lady just wants to give him a name and give him an apple.
> …
> Matthew: He belongs to the wilderness.

Even though they previously believed the moose belonged to the old lady, they experienced a change of heart in the notion of pet ownership. Such responses, indeed, might be read as a rehearsal of the nature/ culture binary that posthumanist philosophy purports to challenge. Although the young readers demonstrated a mixed understanding of the human-animal or human-pet relationship, their concluding remarks on the picturebook indicate children's fiction's potential to destabilise the hierarchical thinking that justifies humans' belief in the right to own animals.

In light of Rabey's argument that "young artists… came to a deeper understanding [of picturebooks] through their visual explorations" (2003, p. 138), I asked the siblings to draw a picture of the most

memorable moment or message from the book. They both drew a mad Wilfred and the moose eyeing an apple/ some apples rather happily (Figure 1 for Ella's and Figure 2 for Matthew's). The child readers therefore demonstrated a mindset wherein the moose (or animals in general) has its own subjectivity and sentience, which is beyond the control of the boy protagonist (or humans in general). The drawings simultaneously suggest the agency of the animal: the ability to subdue the human's self-proclaimed ontological superiority and status as its owner through disregarding his commands.

Figure 1

Figure 2

This research study does not intend to radically suggest that any picturebooks which depict human-animal relationships would enable child readers to move from possessing an anthropocentric mindset to a post-anthropocentric one. Instead, this study sheds light on how a posthumanist reading of texts similar to *This Moose Belongs to Me*, guided by adults, could make visible to children the fallacy that lies within an anthropocentric approach to pet ownership. Aided by ice-breaker questions (which prompt children to rethink pre-existing beliefs in pethood) and questions that ask them to pay close attention to the image-text interplay, this form of reading a picturebook illuminates a sort of critical pedagogy that opens opportunities to reflect upon and question the human-animal hierarchy embedded in most children.

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5. Conclusion

My posthumanist reading of *This Moose Belongs to Me* and the children's responses to the picturebook itself stand out against the claim made by cognitive psychologists. Waxman et al. (2014) attribute children's anthropocentrism to the fiction they read, while there exists a whole host of children's literature that has the potential to destabilise and even dismantle the human-animal hierarchy within children's subjectivity. This empirical project has demonstrated the ways in which a picturebook invites

the child reader to "[get] out of some of the old boxes" (Hayles, 1999, p. 285) of anthropocentrism and to set off to be the post-anthropocentric child.

I conclude this paper with the implications for pedagogical practices that engage children in the process of questioning dominant assumptions about petkeeping and human-animal relationships. Educators may draw on Jeffers's picturebook (or similar fictional works) in a literature circle with the aim of inviting child readers to reflect on their pre-existing beliefs in pethood and animals and, later, to reformulate their attitudes towards animals. Rather than employing a didactic approach to pass on posthumanist ideas as a skill set, teachers, parents, and librarians could ask child readers to express their interpretations of the picturebook through open questions, thereby enabling them to recognise the ironic interplay between texts and images and hence the subject position of the animal. As such, children could actively re-conceive of the power dynamics between humans and (domesticated) animals in a critical manner. More research in how literature enables real readers' critical reflection on topics related to animals is still very much needed; for instance, husbandry could be explored through such picturebooks as *Gwen the Rescue Hen* (2018) and *Sprig the Rescue Pig* (2018) written by Leslie Crawford and illustrated by Sonja Stangle.

Rather than employing a didactic approach to pass on posthumanist ideas as a skill set, teachers, parents, and librarians could ask child readers to express their interpretations of the picturebook through open questions, thereby enabling them to recognise the ironic interplay between texts and images and hence the subject position of the animal.

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7. Appendix

[Ice-breaker questions]

What animals do you like?

Have you kept a pet?

(Follow-up question) Does the fish have a name?

(Follow-up question) Will you give a new name to the fish?

What makes a good pet?

(Follow-up question) What do you mean by well-trained?

(Follow-up question) Do you like a pet that likes to copy?

Do you know what a moose is?

What do you think a moose would eat: grass or meat?

Do you think it is a scary or a mild, gentle animal?

[Book cover]

Where is the moose? Is it in the city centre?

Who can you see from here?

Who said, "This Moose Belongs To Me"?

What are the things that belong to you?

Do your clothes belong to you? Can somebody else wear your clothes?

[P. 1]

What is Wilfred wearing?

Does the bowtie belong to him?

[P. 2]

Wilfred knew the moose was meant to be his. What do you think about that?

[P. 3]

Do you think the moose likes the name?

[P. 4]

What is the rule about?

What is the moose doing?

Is the moose listening to Wilfred?

[P. 5]

Does the moose want to do what Wilfred says? Why or why not?

[P. 6]

What is Wilfred doing here?

What is the moose doing here?

(Follow-up question) Why isn't the moose following where Wilfred wants to go?

[P. 7]

What is Wilfred doing here?

What is the moose doing here?

Is it Wilfred's home or the moose's home?

Where is the moose living in?

[P. 8]

What do you usually use when it's raining?

What is the moose like here?

What is the moose thinking?

[P. 9]

What are the things that the moose is knocking down?

What is the moose thinking?

[P. 10-11]

What will Wilfred discover or find out?

[P. 12-13]

Who's this?

Who does the moose belong to?

(Follow-up question) Isn't Marcel his proper name?

[P. 14-15]

What is the moose doing here?

(Follow-up question) Is the moose more interested in the old lady or the apple?

[P. 16-17]

Why does Wilfred feel silly and angry?

What is special about this place?

(Follow-up question) Who likes eating apples?

[P. 18-19]

Why is he worried?

[P. 20-21]

What is next to Wilfred?

What will the moose do?

[P. 22-23]

What is the moose doing?

(Follow-up question) What is the moose thinking here?

Why does he want to save Wilfred?

[P. 24-25]

What does ‘forgiven’ mean?

[P. 26-27]

What is this rule?

Will the moose do something like this?

If the moose has a dress and he can stand up, do you think he will do this?

[P. 28-29]

Where is the moose going?

Will he go back to Wilfred again?

[Post-reading questions]

What do you like about the story?

What do you not like about the story?

If Wilfred is your friend, do you want to say something to him?

If you can meet the moose, what do you want to say to him?

Are the moose and Wilfred strangers, friends, pet or owner or something else?

Does the moose belong to anyone?