

โลกทัศน์นิเวศเป็นศูนย์กลางและความเข้าใจผู้อื่น
ในวรรณกรรมเรื่อง *นิ้ววิเศษ* ของโรอัลด์ ดาห์ล
ECOCENTRIC WORLD VIEW AND EMPATHY
IN ROALD DAHL'S *THE MAGIC FINGER**

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ABSTRACT

Roald Dahl's *The Magic Finger* illustrates the ecocentric world view through creating the empathy for the wild ducks. The empathy is carefully crafted in a depiction of role-switching between humans and ducks in which the hunter becomes the hunted. Roald Dahl's language leads the readers, particularly the children, to empathize with "lower" creatures and respect all creatures as equal beings. The language of children's literature has an

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eminent power to sow a sustainable notion of ecocentric world view in the young readers' heart. This paper presents how the language in *The Magic Finger* is achieved in creating a sense of empathy not sympathy. The emotions are ignited and soften throughout the story; the more the readers identify themselves with the situations, the more they go beyond the level of sympathy and reach the one of empathy. The change of the name from "Gregg" to "Egg" at the end of the story also enhances the power of language in conveying the bond between humans and the other creatures. The empathy thus creates the ecocentric world view and is also created by the same world view.

Keywords : ecocentric world view, empathy, *The Magic Finger*

บทคัดย่อ

วรรณกรรมเรื่อง *นิ้ววิเศษ* ของโรอัลด์ ดาห์ล แสดงให้เห็นโลกทัศน์นิเวศเป็นศูนย์กลางผ่านการสร้างความเข้าใจที่มีต่อเปิดป่า ความเข้าใจผู้อื่นได้รับการร้อยเรียงอย่างพิถีพิถันผ่านการพรรณนาการสลับบทบาทระหว่างมนุษย์และเปิดซึ่งผู้ล่ากลับกลายมาเป็นผู้ถูกล่า ถ้อยคำของโรอัลด์ ดาห์ลทำให้ผู้อ่าน โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งเยาวชนเข้าใจสิ่งมีชีวิต "ชั้นต่ำกว่า" และเคารพทุกชีวิตในฐานะชีวิตที่เท่าเทียมกัน พลังแห่งภาษาซึ่งเห็นได้ชัดเจนในวรรณกรรมเยาวชนได้หวนพาความคิดที่ยั่งยืนว่าด้วยนิเวศเป็นศูนย์กลางในหัวใจของผู้อ่านรุ่นเยาว์ บทความฉบับนี้ชี้ให้เห็นว่าภาษาสามารถยังผลให้เกิดนัยของความเข้าใจผู้อื่น มิใช่เพียงความเห็นใจผู้อื่น ตลอดทั้งเรื่องอารมณ์ต่างๆ มีทั้งถูกทำให้ลุกโชนและผ่อนคลาย ทั้งนี้ยังผู้อ่านเชื่อมโยงตนเองกับเหตุการณ์ในเรื่อง ผู้อ่านก็ยังสามารถข้ามผ่านความเห็นใจผู้อื่น และเข้าถึงความเข้าใจผู้อื่น การเปลี่ยนชื่อจาก "Gregg" เป็น "Egg" ในตอนท้ายเรื่องขับเน้นพลังแห่งภาษาในการสื่อถึงสายสัมพันธ์ระหว่าง

มนุษย์และสรรพชีวิตอื่นๆ ความเข้าใจผู้อื่นจึงสร้างโลกทัศน์นิเวศเป็นศูนย์กลาง และใน
ขณะเดียวกันโลกทัศน์นิเวศเป็นศูนย์กลางก็สร้างความเข้าใจผู้อื่น

คำสำคัญ : โลกทัศน์นิเวศเป็นศูนย์กลาง ความเข้าใจผู้อื่น *นิเวศ*

Introduction

*“In honour of my feathered friends, I have changed it [my name]
from Gregg to Egg”.*
(Dahl, 2016: 54)

The quote shows how the language in *The Magic Finger* is thematically constructed. A removal of G can create a big impact on the development of characters such as the Gregg family. Along with the characters, the readers also develop empathy for the duck family (and also the Greggs) through the ecocentric descriptions and dialogues in the story. *The Magic Finger* can thus shape the perception of the readers, particularly, the young ones and direct them to become the empathetic ecocitizens. This paper focuses on the power of language of ecocentric world view depicted in *The Magic Finger*. It is divided into four parts which are “We allow each other: The Power of Tiny Little Men”, “We are going to allow each other: The Power of the Duck Family”, “Ecological Niche and Ecocentric World View” and “The Magic Finger of ‘I’: The Magic Finger of Dahl”. The first part depicts the role of the human characters, the Gregg family. The second part focuses on the role of the family of eggs, the duck family. The third part portrays the ecocentric world view and the concept

of ecological niche presented in *The Magic Finger* and the last part discusses “I”, the narrator and protagonist, the readers and the author Dahl.

The word “ecocitizen” in this paper represents a citizen with an ecocentric world view who positions himself/herself as a part of ecosystem, not as a top of ecosystem. This positioning makes an individual focus on the other creatures as much as himself/herself. Therefore, the need and desire of human beings are not more important than the ones of other beings. Any action of humans should respect the lives and rights of the other beings as well. The ecocentric world view is opposed to an egocentric world view which in this paper refers to a world view that positions oneself as a center of the world, that one’s need and desire are the most important things in the world. This egocentric notion leads to a construction of any legitimate action or excuse to do whatever suits one’s need and desire.

The ecocitizen and ecocentric world view closely relate to the concept of empathy. The more an individual has an ecocentric world view, the more he/she empathizes with the others or the more one empathizes with the others, the more ecocentric world view he/she has. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, empathy is “the ability to understand another person’s feelings, experience, etc.” while sympathy is “the feeling of being sorry for somebody; showing that you understand and care about somebody’s problems”. Therefore it seems that empathy and sympathy share similar ideas, but in this paper empathy is different from sympathy. The difference is on the perspective or perception. If an individual feels empathy with others, he/she takes a perspective of others and understands how the others feel because he/she looks through the lens of others. If an individual feels sympathy with others, he/she uses their

own perspective to consider what happened to others and he/she feels sorry for the others, but not totally understands them because he/she does not take the others' perspective, but look through his/her own lens. This paper then tries to show that the power of language of ecocentric world view can help the readers go beyond the level of sympathy and can reach the one of empathy.

“We allow each other”: The Power of Tiny Little Men

“We allow each other” is the reason of the Gregg family for their hunting for fun. This simple sentence has a sophisticated meaning. First of all, the word “we” signifies a sense of belonging and also constructs a sense of otherness because it does imply that there must be “them” or “the others”. The “us” are human beings while “them” are the other creatures. This binary opposition is constructed through the dialogues and descriptions of the characters in *The Magic Finger*.

The Gregg family can be considered as a portrayal of human beings. There are a father, two (male) children and a mother. The ones who go hunting are the male characters. Mr. Gregg, his two children Phillip and William always go hunting while Mrs. Gregg does not join “the activity”. It can be implied that Mrs. Gregg approves of their hunting because she does not talk them out of hunting. The silence of Mrs. Gregg and the portrayal of hunting as the usual activity represent the human-centered perception. It seems that hunting for fun is legitimized by the Greggs, the human characters.

In contrast to the Gregg family, “I” character, the young female narrator and protagonist, does not approve of hunting, particularly, hunting for fun. The story is narrated from her perception:

Now the one thing that Mr. Gregg and his two boys loved to do more than anything else was to go hunting. Every Saturday morning they would take their guns and go off into the woods to look for animals and birds to shoot. Even Phillip, who was only eight years old, had a gun of his own. (Dahl, 2016: 2)

The sentences are clear and easy to grasp. The readers, particularly, the young ones, can notice the words such as “loved to do” and “every Saturday morning” that highlight a sense of a daily routine. Although it sounds to be an ordinary daily routine, the readers can notice the disapproving voice of the narrator from the last sentence, “Even Phillip, who was only eight years old, had a gun of his own”. The words “even” and “only eight years old” can link with the implied readers who may share this age or the similar age. These words also emphasize that it is not legitimate for the adult and young humans to hunt the other species for fun.

The story is then illustrated in the hunting frame. The details of the numbers of animals that the Greggs hunt and the pleasure that they get are the leading emotion preparing the readers to sympathize and finally empathize with the wild ducks afterwards:

Mr. Gregg and Phillip and William went out hunting once again. This time they were going after wild ducks, so they headed towards the lake. In the first hour they got ten birds. In the next hour they got another six. ‘What a day!’ cried Mr. Gregg. ‘This is the best yet!’ He was beside himself with joy.” (Dahl, 2016: 10)

The more the Gregg family enjoys hunting, the more the readers will sympathize with the wild ducks.

The empathy is achieved through the role-switching between the Greggs and the ducks in the following scenes. The joy of the Greggs is replaced by their guilt and empathy. Furthermore, the role-switching between the Gregg family and the duck family does emphasize that humans are one kind of animals. The readers can feel that we share the same realm of life with other creatures. Mr. Gregg and his family become ducks and they are now “a tiny little man”:

For he [Mr. Gregg] was now a tiny little man! He was maybe as tall as the seat of a chair, but no taller. And where his arms had been, he had a pair of duck’s wings instead! (Dahl, 2016: 16)

The phrase “a tiny little man” makes the readers aware that we are “a tiny little man” in the universe. The role-switching is not only a way to create empathy, but it is also the one to create a sense of awakening that we are animals and we are not superior to other creatures. After this

scene, Mr. Gregg and his family need to follow the duck's way of life. The role-switching then makes the readers realize the other species and encourages the readers to take the ducks' perception; to feel, to live and maybe to die like them in the simulation of reading. The sharing of the perspective of the ducks helps creating a sense of empathy.

Moreover, the empathy is initiated by a female protagonist, "I". The "I" cannot stand hunting. It does not seem right to her that "men and boys should kill animals just for the fun they get out of it." (Dahl, 2016: 2) The "I" then puts the magic finger to the whole Gregg family including Mrs. Gregg who does not go hunting, but does not oppose her husband and children. This signifies the interconnectedness of actions. One action can affect all beings. The hunting of animals means the end of lives and the hunting does affect Mrs. Gregg, at least by being punished and transformed into a duck by the magic finger, what goes around comes around.

The role of the female characters is also emphasized in the fight-back speech of the duck family. The female duck, the mother-duck, or Mrs. duck is voicing her role as a mother in the same way that Mrs. Gregg claims her role as a mother in "We are going to allow each other": The Power of the Duck Family.

"We are going to allow each other": The Power of the Duck Family

The slightly adapted sentence of Mrs. duck, "we are going to allow each other to shoot you", echoes the one of Mr. Gregg. Mrs. duck and her duck family are transformed to be human-duck by the magic power. They are now voicing their own lives and how they are hunted for fun. The role-

switching makes the ducks as the one of authority. They are going to shoot the Greggs in the same way that the Greggs used to do to them and to the other animals. The human-ducks are pointing their guns to the birdlike Gregg family:

The guns were all pointing right up at the nest.
'No! No! No!' called out Mr. and Mrs. Gregg, both together.
'Don't shoot! Please don't shoot!'
'Why not?' said one of the ducks. It was the one who wasn't holding a gun.
'You are always shooting at *us*.'
'Oh, but that's not the same!' said Mr. Gregg, 'We are *allowed* to shoot ducks!'
'Who allows you?' asked the duck.
'We allow each other,' said Mr. Gregg.
'Very nice,' said the duck.
'And now we are going to allow each other to shoot you.'
'Oh, please!' cried Mrs. Gregg.
'My two little children are up here with us!
You wouldn't shoot my *children*!'
'Yesterday you shot *my* children,' said the duck.
'You shot all six of my children.' (Dahl, 2016: 38-41)

The sentence of Mr. Gregg and the one of Mrs. duck show that the power belongs to the one who has the power to define. The power to define needs the ability of language, therefore humans and the human-

ducks are authorized with the power to claim their rights. Now the human-ducks voice their rights. The words “us” and “them” underline the perceptions behind the dialogues between the birdlike Greggs and the humanlike ducks, the perceptions of “otherness”. The characters identify themselves with their species and define themselves as “us” while the others become the “not-us”. However, the irony is that both the “us” and “not-us” share the same feelings. Mrs. Gregg and Mrs. duck do love their own children. The empathy is reached through taking the perception of each other. As a mother, both the humans and ducks do love their offspring. The young readers are encouraged to feel what the Greggs and the ducks feel and realize that we are the same as the other creatures. Humans do love their lives and so do the ducks. Therefore, it is not right to take life of others just for fun. Living together as a part of nature does need a niche or the conditions that each life can live successfully which is discussed in “Ecological Niche and Ecocentric World View”.

Ecological Niche and Ecocentric World View

After the Gregg family returns to their human condition, they become a new version of the Greggs with a new vision of ecocentric world view. They change their family name from Gregg to Egg. The change of the name highlights the changing of their world view. The Eggs now focuses on the other beings, particularly, their feathered-friends. In biology, niche is “the conditions of its environment within which a particular type of living thing can live successfully” (Niche, 2018). According to this definition, it can be implied that Mr. Egg, Mrs. Egg and their two children, Phillip and William,

bring back a niche in which humans and all creatures can live together. The concept of ecological niche is also stated in Richard Kerridge's article entitled "Environmentalism and ecocentrism" that "the word niche may suggest a clever neatness of fit, and overall design in nature that furnishes a place for every species" (Waugh, 2006: 535). The niche in *The Magic Finger* is recreated with the ecocentric world view.

The ecocentric world view is portrayed in the Greggs/Eggs. Mr. Gregg and his male children used to go hunting for fun. Now he and his children will not go hunting anymore. Mrs. Gregg used to be indifferent to hunting, but now she feels sorry for the bad deeds her husband and her children used to do:

In one corner Mr. Gregg was smashing all three guns into tiny pieces with a huge hammer. In another corner Mrs. Gregg was placing beautiful flowers upon sixteen tiny mounds of soil which I learned later were the graves of the ducks that had been shot the day before. And in the middle of the yard stood Phillip and William, with a sack of their father's best barley beside them. They were surrounded by ducks, doves, pigeons, sparrows, robins, larks, and many other kinds that I did not know, and the birds were eating the barley that the boys were scattering by the handful (Dahl, 2016: 50-52).

The guns are destroyed, the respect is illustrated by the graves of the ducks and the sharing which is shown in the feeding scene. It can be noticed that the egocentric world view of the Greggs is replaced by the ecocentric one because now the Gregg or the Egg family does not position themselves at the center of everything. Instead of reechoing that humans have the right to allow themselves to hunt animals, Mr. Gregg/Egg destroys the guns. Destroying the guns is a symbol of destruction of the human-centered world view. Mrs. Gregg is also changed from the passive character to the active one. The readers do not hear any voice of Mrs. Gregg in hunting, but now she takes action showing her regret about the death caused by her husband and her children. The graves and flowers are the ways to express the respect for the lives of the other beings. The boys' sharing of barley to the feathered-friends portrays the integration of humans and other creatures.

The (Gr)egg family can be linked to the integration of human beings in the cosmos which can be dated back to the central idea of romanticism influencing the concept of deep ecology. Deep ecology, a concept coined by a Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, proposes that "we should see ourselves not as atomistic individuals, treating the world as a resource for consumption and self-assertion, but as part of a greater living community" (Westling, 2014: 64). This emphasizes that humans are part of nature. Both the (Gr)egg family and the duck family belong to the same community which is nature.

Furthermore, according to the deep ecology, "the well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent

of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes” (Hiltner, 2015: 49). It then can be inferred from this quote that there is no privilege for humans to take any life for granted because all beings do have their rights to live for their own sake, not for the sake of humans. It can be said that the “magic finger” of “I” and Dahl can successfully create and increase the awareness of the ecocentric world view. The characterization of “I” and Dahl’s intention in writing is discussed in “The Magic Finger of “I”: The Magic Finger of Dahl”.

The Magic Finger of “I”: The Magic Finger of Dahl

The “I” character, a young female girl who has a magic finger to punish the wrongdoer, is carefully constructed. The word “I” is easily identified with the implied readers. The gender of “I” is in sharp contrast to the male characters in the story. It seems that the young female “I” is a representation of the Mother Earth in disguise. The power to give life and to take life is not the one of humans as portrayed in the first part of the characterization of the Greggs, but the power of life and death belongs to nature. The “I”, the Greggs, the ducks, and all other creatures belong to nature and any action of humans can affect all lives in the nature including the humans themselves.

The effective way of “I” in switching the lives of the Greggs and the ducks leads the readers to go beyond the sympathy, but reach the state of empathy. The readers face and feel the hardship of being the ducks:

That night, while Mr. and Mrs. Gregg and Phillip and William were trying to get some sleep up in the high nest, a great wind began to blow. The tree rocked from side to side, and everyone, even Mr. Gregg, was afraid that the nest would fall down. Then came the rain. It rained and rained, and the water ran into the nest and they all got as wet as could be – and oh, it was a bad, bad night! (Dahl, 2016: 36-37)

The realization that each creature does have their “bad, bad night” reminds the young readers that we must not make the “bad, bad night” turn to be the “worse, worse night” or “the worst, worst night” by hunting for fun.

The magic power of “I” is constructed by the magic power of the author, Roald Dahl. *The Magic Finger* was *The Almost Ducks* which “was part of a project in which a group of adult writers were each asked to create a story about all the brave deer hunters and duck hunters in the country” (The Magic Finger, 2017). *The Magic Finger* is thus against the hunting in the first place. The text can be more than the against-hunting literary work. *The Magic Finger* plays a crucial role of children’s environmental text whose function is “to socialize young people into becoming the responsible and empathetic adults of tomorrow by positioning readers as ecocitizens”. (Mallan and Bradford 2011, 109) The human-centered and ecocentric world views are portrayed through the power of language of Dahl who can create an enjoyable story to sow a seed of respect of all beings and the sense of belonging to nature to the implied young readers. The progress of the

Greggs who now becomes the Eggs at the end of the story shows the triumph of the ecocentric world view over the human-centered world view. The change of the name, the change of the behaviors, and the change of the Eggs' world view can be considered as the paralleled changes of the world view of the implied young audiences of *The Magic Finger*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, language has a significant role in creating a world view of the readers. The simple language in Dahl's *The Magic Finger* can be an illustration of the power of language of children's literature to create the sense of empathy and the ecocentric world view of respect of every being's rights. The language in *The Magic Finger* can reclaim humans' position as a part of nature, not apart from nature as it seems to be.

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