

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of The Study

The relationship between humans and the environment is a crucial concern in today's society, as the harmful effects of human actions on the natural world are becoming more apparent (Putri et al., 2020). Among the most urgent problems of the twenty-first century are eco emergencies, environmental degradation, and climate change. Literature is one of the simplest methods for beginning to reconstruct society's mindset and ecosystem. Nahdhiyah et al. (2023) found that several literary works voice nature-related concerns, and many are inspired by nature.

Literature shapes us into strong and well-rounded individuals. It plays a crucial role in human awareness, emotions, and ethics, including an understanding of the environment and its relationship with nature. Especially for children, in the scope of literature, there is a segmented place for children's literature, where children's literature is synonymous with teachings and storylines that describe good morals and ethics in everyday life. Children's literature teaches about maintaining a good attitude and morals from the plot and narrative that they bring these values towards society and nature, building a good moral compass for children in the future, with media such as picture books, chapter books, graphic novels, or young adult novels. As per many studies and research, children's literature has achieved considerable results in building a positive attitude toward nature in children's minds and raising eco-consciousness (Ismail, 2024). With a variety of reading media for children, children's literature itself has a massive impact on shaping children's character in the future through the story

plots, characters, and themes. It implies that it serves not just as entertainment but also as a bridge to a better generation.

Alongside its role in shaping children's values, another key lens for understanding literature's environmental messaging is Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism, an interdisciplinary field of literary criticism, examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xix). Ecocriticism studies and children's literature can help children alike to become more sensitive to the natural environment and their surroundings through stories, characters, and themes.

One of the works of children's literature that explores life on earth and the relationship between creatures and the natural world is *The Wild Robot* by the American writer and illustrator Peter Brown, which consists of the following Trilogy of novels: *The Wild Robot* (2016), *The Wild Robot Escapes* (2018), and *The Wild Robot Protects* (2023). The first novel tells the story of a robot named ROZZUM unit 7134, which was stranded on a small island after being left behind on a deserted island following a hurricane. She then learns how to adapt to her new life with the help of a few forest friends, and even adopts an orphaned gosling named Brightbill.

The novel has received widespread critical acclaim from literary critics 2016 since its release. The novel has been nominated for the Goodreads Readers' Favorite Award in the Middle Grade & Children's category, reflecting its strong reception among young readers and the online reading community. The following year, *The Wild Robot* was selected as one of the Association for Library Service to Children's (ALSC) Notable Children's Books, earning a position as a leading work in contemporary children's literature. Peter Brown's reputation as a leading author and illustrator, whose works are widely recognized with prestigious awards such as the Caldecott

Honor, the E.B. White Award, and the New York Times Best Illustrated Book Award, is further strengthened. With many awards obtained, *The Wild Robot* got an offer to be adapted into an animated film by *DreamWorks Animation*, released in 2024 under the title *The Wild Robot*. Like the novel, it received numerous awards in both the film industry and literature.

Although marketed as a children's book, this novel contains many elements of dialogue, themes, and plots related to ecology, and the relationship between humans, in particular, technology, and nature. It has received limited scholarly attention, particularly in the field of Ecocriticism. Most discussions about this novel tend to emphasize its narrative charm and entertainment value, with few discussing *The Wild Robot* concerning ecology. This opens up opportunities to explore the novel from an academic perspective, especially regarding its potential to convey ecological awareness through literary form.

This research aims to fill the gap by examining *The Wild Robot* by Peter Brown through the lens of Ecocriticism while applying New Criticism to analyze its literary form, particularly symbolism. It focuses on how Peter Brown uses symbols to portray the interaction between living creatures and other entities in nature. I argue that *The Wild Robot* is not simply about the adaptation of a non-human creature (robot) who starts living in the natural world. Through *The Wild Robot*, I believe, Peter Brown is trying to instigate ecological awareness and promote environmental responsibility to young readers through a narrative that seamlessly blends science fiction with nature-focused storytelling.

1.2. Identification of The Problems

Ecological values in children's literature are often shown from the point of view of humankind, but *The Wild Robot* brings a new twist to the story by introducing a main character who is an artificially intelligent robot, which raises questions, ambiguity, and deeper interpretation. *The Wild Robot* highlights some of the issues related to how symbols and ecological activism are portrayed in the novel, unlike typical children's literature, which often conveys important environmental messages through human protagonists. Brown uses artificial and animal characters to raise questions about how ecological ethics are constructed, perceived, and internalized by readers. Showing that the author depicts all the characters, including Roz, as outsiders who are represented as part of the outside world of non-human agents and wild animals, serving as a model of ecologically friendly life. Through the literary elements of *The Wild Robot*, Brown presents symbols of environment, family, moral growth, and technology that portray Roz, animals, and the island as representations of life on earth. Roz's presence in the story appears to convey a message to young readers about how to lead an ecologically friendly life. This issue is interesting to study due to the non-human characters used in the story, which require further examination to fully comprehend the true ecocritical messages.

1.3. The Review of the Previous Studies

Several scholars have researched the ecological aspects of *The Wild Robot* in relation to environmental activism. Fauzan (2024), in his thesis "Ecological Apocalypse in Peter Brown's *The Wild Robot Protects*: An Ecocritical Analysis," examined how Peter Brown's novel portrays an ecological apocalypse triggered by

human actions, particularly the exploitation of underwater mineral resources. The research applies an ecocritical approach, focusing on the relationship between humans and nature as reflected in literature. The author uses Greg Garrard's theory of Ecocriticism, along with Keraf's theory of environmental ethics. This thesis reveals that children's literature, such as *The Wild Robot Protect*. Meanwhile, in my research, I examine the first novel in the trilogy, *The Wild Robot*, using a new criticism and ecocriticism approach to analyze the implied symbols that convey ecological activism in the novel. It demonstrates how a young adult novel can serve as an excellent medium for children to learn about conserving nature.

Furthermore, Batty (2016), in her thesis "Animals Are People Too: An Ecocritical Exploration of Fantasy in Environmental Children's Literature," examines how fantasy literature conveys environmental messages and encourages ecological ethics for young readers. The author employs ecocriticism to analyze the texts and underlying ethical themes related to the non-human agents. The author finds that fantasy in children's literature is a potential tool to encourage the next generation to develop environmental awareness and shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism.

Besides that, Ashraf et al. (2024), in their research "Exploring Eco-criticism in *Sweet Tooth*: Dark Ecology, Slow Violence, and Human–Nature Interconnectedness," examine the Netflix series *Sweet Tooth* (2021) through an ecocritical perspective. The study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing content analysis as its method. The analysis highlighted the themes of human-nature relationships, environmental degradation, and the impact of technology on the environment. The authors conclude that popular media, such as *Sweet Tooth*, can play a significant role in shaping public awareness and attitudes toward environmental issues.

The other study examines how children's picture books utilize narrative and illustrations to foster environmental awareness, entitled "Sustaining Life with Trees: Ecocriticism Perspective in Selected Picture Books," with a focus on the symbolic role of trees as representations of Mother Earth. The author examines children's picture books that use narrative and illustrations to promote environmental awareness, primarily through the symbolic role of trees as representations of Mother Earth. The research concludes that the tree in the picture book is portrayed as a powerful metaphor for Mother Earth, silently giving and sustaining life without demanding anything in return (Tisnawijaya & Kurniati, 2021).

A study analyzes the environmental themes and warnings presented in Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* through the lens of ecocriticism, entitled "Ecocriticism and Children's Literature: Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* as an Example," showing how the story reflects human greed, ecological destruction, and the urgent need for sustainability. The research concludes that children's literature can play a crucial role in shaping environmental attitudes from an early age. Ecocriticism applications show how the story reflects on human greed, ecological destruction, and the urgent need for sustainability. The result shows how children's literature can shape environmental attitudes early on (Ismail, 2024).

In addition, a study on children's literature examined how technology and emotional design influence children's reading experiences and literacy development in digital picture books, entitled "Technical Supports and Emotional Design in Digital Picture Books for Children: A Review," highlighting the role of multimedia features, interactivity, augmented reality, and emotional engagement through visual and auditory elements. Emotions can influence children's reading experience and literacy

when using digital picture books. Focuses on two aspects: technical support, such as multimedia features, interactivity, and augmented reality (Bai et al., 2022). The findings indicate that such supports can improve children's comprehension, vocabulary, and motivation.

Another relevant work examining children's literature is by Ninland (2023), in the research "Picture Books, Imagination and Play: Pathways to Positive Reading Identities for Young Children," which examines the role of picture books in nurturing young children's literacy development and positive reading identities with a focus on imagination and play. It emphasizes the importance of combining words and images, as this engages children's attention, stimulates their imagination, and supports their development as meaning-makers. This research also highlighted children's imagination and play as valuable tools in early literacy pedagogy.

Similarly, a study exploring Ecocriticism in the context of children's literature, Laliena and Tabernero Sala (2023), in their research "Picture books and Reader Training in the 21st Century: An Ecocritical Reading of Canonical Works of Children's Literature," study the ecocritical reading of canonical picture books in children's literature. It explores how these works can influence environmental awareness. The study focuses on a selection of 25 picture books by five influential female authors from diverse cultural and historical contexts. The theoretical framework integrates Ecocriticism, explaining the relationship between literature and the physical environment.

A study on Ecocriticism, Nahdhiyah et al. (2023), in their research "Ecocritical Study on Relationships Between Humans, Nature, and God in the Novel *The Alchemist*," examines the relationship between humans and God as depicted in the

novel *The Alchemist*. The author aims to illustrate how the novel portrays a harmonious bond among these three entities and how each character perceives nature as part of God's creation. The study applies Ecocriticism theory to analyze excerpts from the novel. Overall, the research finds that *The Alchemist* utilizes nature and its phenomena not only for the theme but also to symbolize God's guidance on how humans can appreciate their relationship with nature.

The related studies above demonstrate that various theses and papers have discussed the ecology topic using children's literature as an object, employing Ecocriticism theories and different approaches. This research, on the other hand, will examine, through a literary Ecocriticism lens supported by New Critical close reading, in order to identify symbols and elements that reflect the non-human symbols and environmental activism in the novel *The Wild Robot* by Peter Brown.

1.4. Research Questions

Regarding the research, this thesis will address several questions related to the title. Believing that the novel is not merely about Roz's new stage of life in nature, the research is conducted with the focus of answering these questions:

1. What objects, characters, or events in *The Wild Robot* seem to function beyond their literal meanings so that they can be considered as symbols?
2. How do the intrinsic symbols function in Peter Brown's *The Wild Robot* to construct ecological meaning?

1.5. The Scope of The Research

This research is an intrinsic analysis. It focuses on analyzing the symbolism, which is considered as one significant formal element, and their meanings as well as the content (central meaning) of the narrative.

1.6. The Objective of The Research

This research aims to find out whether the symbols (as the formal element) are in line with the messages (content). Additionally, it will reveal whether the novel can play the role of a worthy campaign of ecological awareness.

