

Fairy Tales in the Anthropocene: A Proposal for Advancing Sustainability Literacy through Jeanette Winterson's *Hansel and Greta*

Zita Farkas (Dalarna University)

Malin Lidström Brock (Luleå University of Technology)

Marie Wallin (Luleå University of Technology)

Abstract

Fairy tales promise teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Swedish primary school an engaging and supposedly simple way to teach both language and cultural content. By its very nature the genre is didactic; it depends on moral absolutism to address questions on how best to live and act in the world. When the content proposes how to live and act sustainably in the Anthropocene, however, a contrast emerges between the clear-cut morality of the fairy tale genre and the complexity of any proposed solutions. In this article we approach Winterson's fairy tale *Hansel and Greta* from the perspectives of the three pillars of sustainability as defined by the United Nations, namely environmental sustainability, economic sustainability and social sustainability. We identify a set of productive entry points for Swedish teacher educators to begin from when seeking to develop grades 4–6 (ages 10–12) student teachers' sustainability literacy and critical literacy, both skills that teachers arguably need to make appropriate selections among the many children's books that address sustainability. These entry points illustrate instances in the text where tensions spring up between the solutions offered by Winterson's fairy tale and the complex and often challenging problems that it addresses.

Keywords: education for sustainable development; English as a foreign language; English language teaching; critical literacy; picturebooks: Swedish teacher training grades 4–6

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Although perhaps best understood as an imperfect conceptual framework (Vermeulen 2020), the term Anthropocene can still function as a starting point from which to ask questions about the human influence on the planet, how to feel about this influence and how to reverse its negative effects (Reno 2022). English Language Teaching (ELT) is particularly suitable for introducing learners of all ages to both local and global implications of the Anthropocene, yet a challenge for English teachers of young learners is how to approach the subject so that it resonates with their learners' particular age and abilities (Yeah and Li 2022). Literature is often presented as a solution for teachers of young learners, who wish to introduce sustainability topics into their English lessons in age-appropriate and engaging ways (Lidström Brock 2024; Yeh and Li 2022; Ibrahim 2020; Hsiao and Shi 2015; Bland 2014). When selected with care, literature promises to 'provide a[n imaginary] space in which to address the Anthropocene's emotional, ethical, and practical concerns' (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 2019: 229).

The focus of this article lies on how teacher education in Sweden can prepare its students for addressing sustainability concerns in the English language classroom through literature. For English language teachers of grades 4–6 (ages 10–12) in Swedish compulsory school, their choice of literature is influenced by the national steering documents. In the reception section in the core content for the English subject in grades 4–6, the only literary genre explicitly mentioned is 'fairy tales' (Skolverket 2024: 44). Although fairy tales are often considered more suitable for preschool education (Kovačević 2024), in primary school ELT the genre promises an accessible way by which to teach both language and cultural content (Simon 2022; Davidheiser 2007). When fairy tales are implemented in ELT, they can 'provide a glimpse into the values, lifestyles, customs and historical traditions of the target language group' (Haulman 1985: 3). According to the syllabus for English in the Swedish National Curriculum for Compulsory School, ELT should 'provide new perspectives on the world, greater opportunities for interaction, and a better understanding of different ways of living' (Skolverket 2024: 43). For these reasons alone, student teachers need to familiarize themselves with the fairy tale genre, its educational potentials and possible pitfalls.

The Swedish National Curriculum for Compulsory School further states that learners should develop 'knowledge of the conditions for a good environment and sustainable development' and an awareness of how their

own lifestyles affect the environment and society (Skolverket 2024: 14). Sustainability literacy consists of the knowledge and skills to understand and act on environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainability to be able to contribute to a more sustainable future (United Nations n.d.). Literary insights into the need for and complexity of sustainable development, however, do not necessarily translate into direct actions required to build a sustainable future. Loosely in line with Julia Hoydis, Roman Bartosch and Jens Martin Gurr (2021), we nevertheless argue that ‘engaging with literature can foster [sustainability] literacy and that this can be an important form of ... action in itself’ (6).

The fostering of sustainability literacy consists of more than knowledge; it also encompasses the development of critical literacy, empathy and ethical consideration for the world and its future. According to Alice Horning (2022), ‘all citizens need instruction in critical literacy as the launch point for their participation in supporting sustainable societies’ (254). Without a solid grounding in critical literacy, teachers may unintentionally oversimplify complex topics or present them through a biased lens, leading to misunderstandings or a lack of engagement from their learners. For student teachers of young learners, we wish to propose, training in sustainability and critical literacies can improve their ability to make appropriate selections from the wide range of available children’s books in English that seek to promote sustainability.

In this article, we suggest that British author Jeanette Winterson’s children’s book *Hansel and Greta* (2023) is suitable for use by educators of pre-service teachers in ELT courses in Swedish teacher training programs for the grades 4–6, who seek to develop student teachers’ critical and sustainability literacies. In *Hansel and Greta*, Winterson provides an adaptation of the German fairy tale about Hansel and Gretel, included in the fairy tale collection *Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, first published in German in the 1800s. Winterson’s version of the fairy tale is the fourth title in the series *A Fairy Tale Revolution*, published by the Penguin imprint Vintage Classics. The titles in the series add to a tradition of rethinking fairy tales for contemporary readers.

Winterson reimagines the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel with a pronounced focus on sustainability. As such, we wish to suggest, it lends itself well as an example by which to develop student teachers’ critical and sustainability literacies. The purpose of studying Winterson’s book in the student teacher classroom is not to advance student teachers’ linguistic

competence through reading, although this is a factor that they will have to consider when they select literature for their future young learners in ELT classrooms. Nor is it to enhance ‘emotional identification or scientific understanding’ (Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr 2021: 8). Rather, it is to focus on instances in *Hansel and Greta* that add to a perception of the ambiguous nature of existing in the Anthropocene. The goal is “‘thickening” people’s understanding ... rather than disciplining it’ (Hulme 2021: 155 quoted in Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr 2021: 20). Such ‘thickening’, we wish to suggest, can be achieved by paying close attention to the tensions that arise when sustainability topics are explored in and through fairy tales.

What follows is a proposal for teacher educators on how to develop student teachers’ critical and sustainability literacies. It focuses on specific instances in Winterson’s book that we find especially suitable as entry points for discussion in the teacher training classroom. These entry points stem from the juxtaposition of fairy tale conventions and the complex realities of the contemporary topics brought up in *Hansel and Greta*. The juxtaposition prompts readers to position themselves for or against the ideological stances that the text suggests, asking them to critically engage with the literary representations of environmental crises, over-consumerism and social injustices. Navigating these layered moments, student teachers have to confront their own beliefs and values in relation to the text, while gaining insights into the boundaries of the traditional moral clarity often found in fairy tales.

Before addressing the didactic aspects of fairy tales, a short mention must be made of the format of Winterson’s book. Although *Hansel and Greta* is published in a format that traditionally corresponds with picture books, such as the vertical orientation of 9 to 12 inches and the usual 32 pages (Matulka 2008), we define it as a storybook with pictures rather than a picture book. As we define a storybook, the verbal text typically dominates its pages and the pictures play a subordinate role to the verbal text. Words and pictures complement rather than contrast each other. For this reason, our main preoccupation in the sections that follow will be with the content communicated in and through the verbal text. Visual literacy is still a foundational skill needed for the full appreciation of books with pictures (Kümmerling-Meibauer (ed.) 2018). When the pictures in Winterson’s book add to the ambiguity or the complexity of the entry points identified in the verbal text, this will therefore be addressed.

The fairy tale as instrument of instruction

In this article, fairy tales are defined as narrative prose stories set in indeterminate locations, featuring a character or characters, who face temptations and misfortunes, embark on magical adventures and ultimately achieve a happy ending (Haase 2008; Teverson 2013). The stories tend to reference reality through allegories, metaphors and symbols (Vučković 2018; Teverson 2013). Although fairy tales were originally written for adults, once they entered the realm of children's literature in the late eighteenth century, fairy tales became 'moralizing and socializing' instruments of instruction (Warner 1995: 14). Today, fairy tales are still understood as stories with strong didactic tendencies, which 'illustrate and promote the values and behavioural patterns that a given narrating community deems acceptable, ideally encouraging the reader/listener to adopt them' (Hameršak 2004: 124). By presenting clear positive or negative examples that young readers are meant to imitate or avoid, a kind of 'moral perfectionism' is promoted, albeit through the amusement and enjoyment of reading (Miller 2008, in Kujundžić 2016: 68).

The 'moral perfectionism' that Winterson's fairy tale promotes departs in its perspective from the other three fairy tales in the series *A Fairytale Revolution*. While the other titles deal with notions of power and identity, *Hansel and Greta* shifts the focus to the anthropogenic influence on the planet and a need for sustainable ways of living. Winterson (2020) identifies the major theme of the story as 'our guzzling selves', which she describes as 'a real threat to the planet' (31). In her version of the fairy tale about Hansel and Gretel, the latter's name is Greta, which, as the author makes clear in the storybook's afterword, is a direct reference to the Swedish child climate activist Greta Thunberg. The title, then, seems to foreground child activism as a response to the present state, a topic that will be returned to later in this article.

As the name suggests, storybooks tell stories. To clarify our use of the term 'story' in relation to the term 'plot', we use the former to refer to the format of Winterson's book (storybook) and to events in the narrative as they happen chronologically, while plot refers to the arrangement of events as they appear in the book. In Winterson's fairy tale, Hansel and Greta live in the woods with their woodcutter Dad. The storybook centers on a conflict between two opposing lifestyles, one personified by Dad and the children, the other by the children's aunt, GreedyGuts, and her equally insatiable friends, GuzzleGuts, Beardface, and Bogface.

The plot proceeds as follows: GreedyGuts' unsatisfiable hunger for junk food and shopping makes the family's attempts to live in harmony with nature impossible and forces Dad to leave the forest to work in an unnamed city. Hansel and Greta also end up in the city after meeting a talking tree. In a shopping mall they discover a Gingerbread House from which they are warned off by its sole inhabitant, a witch. The meeting frees the witch from a spell of her own making. The fairy tale's resolution transports the reader further into the sphere of magic; the witch returns to the forest with Dad and the children and magically rids their home of GreedyGuts. The witch then transforms into an ordinary woman, who decides to stay with the family, effectively taking the place of Hansel and Greta's missing mother. If banishing GreedyGuts from the home is the plot's climactic moment, the witch's transformation into a mother-substitute is its dénouement.

The happily-ever-after ending and the humorously-named characters suggest that Winterson's fairy tale belongs to the category of children's books, while its implicit references to Grimm's version of the story of Hansel and Gretel means that the latter can act as palimpsestic scaffolding for young readers. Winterson's definition of her fairy tale as a commentary on unsustainable human practices can also function as a starting point for an identification of the frame of values that informs her story. In this respect, we believe, it is also suitable material for the teacher training classroom. According to the UN, sustainable development is a goal that can only be achieved by harmonizing three, interconnected core elements: sustainable environmental protection, economic growth and social inclusion. These are further broken down into 17 sustainability goals (United Nations n.d.). How the three elements are addressed in *Hansel and Greta* and the role they play in the 'moral perfectionism' that the fairy tale promotes are questions which we believe teacher educators can productively ask of student teachers to improve their critical and sustainability literacies.

Critical literacy

The Swedish National Agency for Education stresses the importance of critical literacy in compulsory education (Lozic 2014). For this reason, Swedish student teachers, too, need training in critical literacy. The European Union emphasizes the importance of mitigating educational and social disadvantages to 'reduce disparities and promote inclusion,

citizenship and social cohesion’ (Council of the European Union 2016). Critical literacy can be defined as a reading practice that strives to understand the relationship between language, literacy and power (Bland 2018; Janks and Vasquez 2011). It pays attention to multiple viewpoints, missing and silenced voices and how different texts try to position their readers (Janks 2019; Lewison, Flint, and Sluys 2002; Luke and Freebody 1997).

Critical literacy focuses on sociopolitical issues and on acting and promoting social justice (Lewison et al. 2002), but it is also connected to the increasing need for all citizens, not just students and teachers, to be able to understand and act upon facts and arguments relating to climate change and sustainability. Horning (2022) argues that critical literacy ‘allows people to evaluate evidence and take reasoned positions on issues like environmental justice, responses to the pandemic, and similar problems that impact the future’ (255). In other words, while critical literacy can promote inclusion and the rights of all people to be heard, it is also a necessary skill for taking responsibility for the future of the planet. From an educational perspective, critical literacy is needed for student teachers’ ability to assess and select potential classroom material, and to attend to questions of inclusion and exclusion of different voices and perspectives (Wallin 2023). Teacher educators, then, need to consider how best to educate teacher students in such literacy.

A central idea within critical literacy is that all texts ask their readers to take certain positions, to agree to certain ideological standpoints. One way of educating student teachers in critical literacy, then, is by asking them to pay attention to how a text seeks to position its readers. Hilary Janks (2019) notes that for readers to make an ethical decision on whether to accept the positions offered by a text or to oppose them, they need to read both with and against that text. Several events in *Hansel and Greta* ask the reader to take up a certain position. Such events, which are communicated both verbally and visually in the text, can be understood as ideologically charged entry points, where teacher educators can ask their students to pause and reflect, thereby ‘thickening’ their understanding of life in the Anthropocene and the sustainability of the ideas presented in Winterson’s fairy tale. It is at points such as these that student teachers can practice their reading with and against the text, to take up or reject the position that it offers.

For teacher educators who wish to help student teachers to develop their critical and sustainability literacies, relevant entry points in *Hansel and Greta* are moments when any of the aforementioned core elements identified by the United Nations (UN) as essential to sustainable development, namely, environmental protection, supportable economic growth and social inclusion, comes up in the text. These points reveal the extent to which sustainability in the storybook is described as what the UN calls a complex and interrelated process, and the degree to which the ‘moral perfectionism’ of the fairy tale takes into account such a process. The productive tension that results from the juxtaposition of the topic of sustainability and fairy tale conventions is an opportunity for student teachers to reflect on both the problems and the solutions that appear in Winterson’s storybook. Reflecting on these points, we argue, is an activity that fills the double purpose of improving student teachers’ critical and sustainability literacies and simultaneously increasing their genre awareness. These are competencies, we believe, that teachers need to properly assess and select potential classroom material for teaching sustainability.

Entry point 1: Environmental sustainability?

A critical examination of the lifestyle promoted in *Hansel and Greta* functions as an entry point that can potentially lead to a discussion among student teachers which highlights the complexity of addressing anthropogenic problems in fairy tales. Fairy tales are typically structured as Manichean battles between good and evil, where the good ultimately triumphs. As expected, the plot of *Hansel and Greta* conforms to this norm. Winterson’s storybook creates a stark contrast between its two main settings: the forest represents a harmonious, sustainable existence closely tied to nature, while the city is portrayed as polluted, crowded and disconnected from the natural world.

The storybook’s description of the city can be understood as related to a broader criticism of modernity and its impact on the environment (e.g., Murphy Jr. et al. 2021). The family in Winterson’s book is not immune to the damaging effects of modernity. Dad works as a woodcutter and as such, he contributes directly to the deforestation described in the storybook. What sets the plot in motion and contributes to the changes towards a lifestyle ‘in harmony with Nature’, is Dad’s crisis of conscience, or inner moral conflict (Winterson 2023: 1). Early in the storybook, he

comes to the realization that the trees, the birds and a colony of wild bees in the forest are the ‘real treasure in the world’ and he consequently quits work (8). As a consequence, the family’s lifestyle shifts towards a more self-sufficient way of living, ‘trying to live in harmony with Nature—not eat too much, not make too much waste, grow our own food’ (10). Together with Hansel and Greta, Dad also sets about planting new trees, as if to reverse the effects of the Anthropocene one tree at a time.

With the change in Dad’s attitude, the storybook suggests that a more sustainable, fulfilling life can be achieved once the family consciously steps away from practices that harm the environment and embraces values rooted in ecological balance and care. The family grows its own food to avoid having to ‘to buy vegetables in plastic bags’ (Winterson 2023: 9). The vegetable garden contains ‘potatoes in trenches and carrots in rows and cabbages in squares and green beans on sticks and spinach in long lines and raspberries on wires and great big orange pumpkins’, which are supplemented by ‘catch[ing] fish in the stream’ and keeping hens for eggs (9). Furthermore, Hansel suggests that the family should bike where they need to go instead of using the car.

Winterson’s criticism of modernity is complicated by the fact that Dad’s work as a woodcutter paves the way for the construction of a high-speed railway. This is why parts of the forest need to be cleared. High-speed railways are part of modern industrial development. Arguably they also represent a more environmentally friendly alternative to cars and planes by reducing carbon emissions and fostering efficient, eco-conscious transportation (Wang, Zhang and Wang 2024). This dual perspective on Dad’s woodcutting work reflects the complex relationship between modernity and sustainability; while certain aspects of modern society can harm the environment, others can provide innovative, sustainable solutions.

Nowhere in *Hansel and Greta*, however, is this duality acknowledged. Instead, high-speed trains are contrasted with trains that run on an already existing ‘small railway’, which Hansel and Greta prefer and sometimes ‘go and wave at’ (Winterson 2023: 4). Here, the small train represents a gentler, slower-paced mode of transportation, a return to a simpler time and a landscape less dominated by the demands of rapid transit. The children’s partiality towards small trains can be interpreted as a desire to preserve rural landscapes and with that a rural lifestyle, which is what the family seeks to achieve. From an anthropogenic perspective, however,

rural landscapes are locations already highly altered by humanity. As such, they may be considered picturesque, but they are no more natural and untouched than the replanted forest in which the family lives. It is significant that in the storybook's stylized pictures, the trees in the forest that Dad cuts down are all identical. This is not old-growth forest or ancient woodland, but a forest that is grown by humans for profit.

The preference for small trains over high-speed railways in *Hansel and Greta* seems driven more by a particularly British nostalgia for an idealized rural past (cf. Stevenson 2018) than by a desire for a sustainable lifestyle. As argued by Svetlana Boym (2001), nostalgia can be a means by which to engage with the past, which enriches one's understanding of the present and opens possibilities for the future. Such 'reflective nostalgia' (49) functions as a personal, intimate connection to place and memory and does not seek to unproblematically recreate the past, in contrast to 'restorative nostalgia', which tends to mythologize the past, without acknowledging its complexities and at the expense of present realities or future possibilities (41–42).

Asking student teachers to explore *Hansel and Greta* through the dual lenses of fairy tale conventions and culturally informed nostalgia can be a productive way to 'thicken' their critical and sustainability literacies. When student teachers examine Winterson's preference for small trains in the context of an especially British nostalgic longing and the individual-centered narratives typical of fairy tales, they may also reach a nuanced understanding of how deeply personal and cultural narratives shape attitudes toward sustainability challenges. Ideally, this will enable them to critically assess how nostalgia, particularly in its restorative form, can romanticize the past and obscure more multifaceted efforts required to address so-called wicked problems (Rittel and Webber 1973; Lönngren and van Poeck 2021); high-speed railways represent a more environmentally friendly alternative to cars and planes, but they are also symbolic of a fast-paced, high-consumption lifestyle that many see as incompatible with a return to either a rural past or a greener future.

When student teachers are asked to consider how the fairy tale conventions manifest in *Hansel and Greta*, they are encouraged to reflect on the limitations of a personal, intimate framework in addressing global sustainability challenges. On the other hand, engaging with reflective aspects of nostalgia can also deepen their understanding of how connections to the past might inspire meaningful, personal contributions

to sustainability, while recognizing the importance of moving beyond romanticized visions of this past. Ideally this dual focus will help student teachers to bridge literary analysis and critical thinking about life in the Anthropocene. Encouraging them to consider Winterson's symbolic choices, such as the storybook's slow train, and their broader implications, might also sharpen student teachers' ability to critique narratives. Indirectly, we hope, it will also help them to understand how distinct worldviews can result in different definitions of sustainability and to appreciate the complex interplay between individual agency and collective responsibility, the latter a topic to which we will now turn.

Entry point 2: Economic sustainability?

The second entry point that we present encourages student teachers to explore the relation between individual agency and economic sustainability in *Hansel and Greta*. The UN's pillar of economic sustainability focuses on fostering long-term economic growth that benefits all people while safeguarding the health of the planet. It emphasizes responsible resource management, a reduction of inequality, decent work conditions and strong social protection systems (United Nations n.d.).

Winterson's storybook explores the effects of unchecked capitalism and consumerism on individuals and the environment in a fairy tale format.¹ A far cry from the UN definition of economic sustainability, the economic system described in *Hansel and Greta* is driven by corporate desire for maximum profit without regard for the environment, resource management or equitable opportunities for individuals or communities. The four villainous ogres in the storybook each represent a different element of this capitalist system: GreedyGuts, GuzzleGuts, and BeardFace personify, respectively, unsustainable, unhealthy living habits, exorbitant greed and the exploitation of people and natural resources. Meanwhile, BogFace is their willing henchman, who helps to further the system of oppression and environmental damage.

¹ The critique of capitalism in *Hansel and Greta* can also be highlighted by educators to introduce student teachers to the term Capitalocene, an alternative concept to the Anthropocene first introduced by Andreas Malm and Jason W. Moore (Haraway 2015; Moore (ed.) 2016).

One of the topics explored in *Hansel and Greta* is the lack of agency that befalls people living in a world of uncontrolled capitalism. For our purposes, agency exists in a dialectic relation to social structures (cf. De Roeck and Van Poek 2003), although this relationship is far from equal. In short, in our reading of the storybook, agency is understood as the fairytale characters' ability to act within, or in opposition to, an overwhelming economic system that limits their free choices. Hansel, Greta and Dad are largely helpless against GreedyGuts and the other ogres, as the villains take the family's money and house, and ruin their attempts to lead a sustainable lifestyle. Dad's struggle to live ethically and stop participating in what he sees as wrongful deforestation is undermined by GreedyGuts, especially, who metaphorically eats the family out of their house, and forces Dad to stack shelves in the supermarket for a living, far away from the forest and his family.

Dad is not the only character without real agency in *Hansel and Greta*. As mentioned earlier, the name Greta in Winterson's storybook is an allusion to Swedish child activist Greta Thunberg. Much like her namesake in the real world, Winterson's child protagonist speaks truth to power, yet the powerful ogres do not listen, bringing to mind the frequent failure of real-world leaders to respond to activists, especially children. Greta's failure also reflects a deeper problem: in the Anthropocene, individual agency, whether that of a child or an adult, faces overwhelming odds due to the vast and interlocking systems of environmental, economic and social power that seem impervious to individual action. In *Hansel and Greta*, these systemic barriers are further emphasized through Greta's isolation: there are no masses for her to rally in the storybook, no crowds of potential sympathizers to inspire.

The most devastating description of a character's loss of agency in the capitalist system in Winterson's storybook, however, is arguably that of the witch. Wary of exercising her magical powers, as she does not 'want bad people to know about magic', she is driven from her home in the woods by the logging company's activities (Winterson 2023: 24). As compensation, she is given a small flat in the city, where she leads a miserable existence. At this point she is approached by GuzzleGuts, who offers her a deal. Alone, displaced and vulnerable, the witch becomes an unwitting participant in GuzzleGuts' predatory scheme to make children sugar addicts. She agrees to live in the shopping mall Gingerbread House, wearing joke-shop teeth and red contact lenses to fit the stereotypical

image of a wicked witch; when the children come to see her, they are tricked into tasting the walls and furniture. GuzzleGuts then sells Evil Gingerbread on her website: ‘When you eat it you never want to eat anything else. ... She gets rich and the kids get sick’ (25). The witch’s story thus provides an account of how complex the structure of capitalist exploitation is, as individuals can unwillingly become participants in a system of oppression of which they themselves are victims.

The witch ultimately regains agency when she meets Hansel and Greta and reclaims her magical powers. Conjuring up two flying vacuum cleaners, she brings the children to the supermarket and rescues Dad. She then flies all of them back to the forest, where she leads the charge to oust the ogres from the family home. At the end of the story, she says to the children: ‘You have freed me from ... my own spell! The ones you cast on yourself are the really scary ones. I believed I had no power left. Just a life of Evil Gingerbread’ (Winterson 2023: 29). The witch’s transformation underscores her reclamation of agency, as she not only regains her magical powers but also takes control of her narrative, shifting from a passive figure defined by her ‘spell’ to an active participant in shaping a new future for herself and the two children.

While fairy tales might contain elements that reflect societal norms or collective experiences, their explicit preoccupation is usually with an individual character or small set of characters. The protagonist’s quests, challenges and transformations are central, typically serving as metaphors for personal growth and self-realization (Jones 2006). As pointed out by Warner (1995), ‘shape-shifting is one of fairy tale’s dominant and characteristic wonders ... metamorphosis defines the fairy tale’ (xix-xx). Noteworthy is that such shifts only transform the character’s physical appearance. The transformation of personal growth is up to the character’s actions. As mentioned, the witch has a chequered past in terms of complicity in the storybook’s destructive economic system. Although a victim of the corrupt system, she has also participated in GuzzleGuts’ scheme to turn children into sugar addicts. Once she transforms into a good witch and takes back her power, opportunities could arise for atonement of those acts of complicity and to challenge at least parts of the system. Instead, the witch chooses to turn away from the larger evils of the economic system and focuses her efforts and power solely on restoring the children and their father to their house in the woods.

Inspiring the family to take heart, the witch leads the charge to drive the ogres out of the family home. Her choice of actions, however, while heroic, cannot begin to dismantle the vast inequalities or address the efforts required to transform the global economic system into one that is truly sustainable. Instead, it underscores the tension between small-scale, localized solutions and the overwhelming scale of systemic change required to address the challenges of the Anthropocene. Winterson's conclusion amplifies this tension by offering the required happy ending of a fairytale, in this case focused on the salvation of a single family, while the economic system that threatened to destroy them remains firmly in place.

Although individuals may be bound by the over-arching systems in which they live, 'the structures that make up this context are also reliant on [individuals] for their continuation and reproduction' (De Roeck and Van Poek 2003: 1). By asking student teachers to consider how individual agency is presented in *Hansel and Greta*, and how the witch chooses to use—and not use—her magic, it is our hope that teacher educators can inspire student teachers to engage critically with questions of what part individual responsibility might, and might not, play in the building of economically sustainable societies. In doing so, student teachers are also invited to reflect more generally on the effects of individual actions by people in power, who could be said to have more 'magic' than ordinary people, on the vast, interwoven challenges involved in creating a sustainable future.

Entry point 3: Social sustainability?

A final entry point in *Hansel and Greta* that teacher educators can introduce to student teachers is the inclusivity and accessibility of the sustainability choices made in Winterson's fairy tale. When critical and sustainability literacies inform reading practices, they may reveal the presence of silenced or missing voices in a text. The witch saves Hansel and Greta from the evils of the capitalist system that controls life in the city by flying them back to the woods and ridding their home of the ogres. Her magical powers and subsequent transformation into a substitute mother ensure the fairy tale's happy ending, yet it is notable that this ending is not made available to any other children in the storybook.

Children in Winterson's storybook are said to populate the city, but they are nowhere in sight. Instead, the city is described as a desolate place,

devoid of human connections, and a place of danger, loneliness and displacement. No one cares that ‘two children and a cat and a little tree were wandering through the streets late at night’ (Winterson 2023: 21). When children other than Hansel and Greta are mentioned in the storybook, they are portrayed verbally as victims of the Evil Gingerbread, which the witch has lured them into consuming. Apart from being described as victims, readers are told only one more thing about these children: once they have eaten the Gingerbread, they have become unsatiable in their desire for junk food and commercial goods. In short, they have become young GreedyGuts.

GreedyGuts is the main fairy tale villain who, at the end of *Hansel and Greta*, turns out to have been a monstrous ogre all along. Although her physical appearance is not commented on in the verbal text, in the accompanying pictures her looks correspond with ogres that appear in other fairy tales (Warner 1998). The pictures portray her as both taller and larger than Dad; in addition, she has an uncontrollable appetite and a consumer-obsessed life philosophy:

The point of life is to eat as much as possible, make as much money as possible, ... buy thousands of household appliances, two new cars every year, a Jacuzzi in the garden, and a Luxury-Level Executive Home. No oats, lettuce and a bicycle. (Winterson 2023: 11)

GreedyGuts’ greed further aligns her with other fairy tale ogres (Warner 1999). As a symbolic antagonist to the sustainable values championed by Hansel and Greta, she functions as a critique of excessive consumerism and greed.

The aim of social sustainability is to ensure every person’s quality of life and the creation of a sustainable, healthy and just society for everyone, regardless of gender, sex, background or disability (United Nations n.d.). As an embodiment of unsustainability, GreedyGuts can serve as a productive entry point for educators who seek to ‘thicken’ student teachers’ understanding of some of the inequities that characterize life in the Anthropocene, albeit in a strictly Western (specifically British) context. The excessive qualities that define GreedyGuts are, the storybook indicates, shared by the largely invisible children in the storybook. These similarities mean that GreedyGuts, much like the witch, can be viewed as a contributor to an unsustainable society but also as its victim. When student teachers are asked to compare her with the children in the city,

they are prompted to question the broader social dynamics at play in the storybook, particularly those related to class and consumerism, and sustainability and equity.

GreedyGut's depiction as an ogre with an insatiable appetite could be interpreted as a critique of overconsumption, but it also risks reinforcing stereotypes about body size and class that often stigmatize individuals. Obesity, especially in urban and lower-income settings in the West, is frequently linked to structural factors such as food deserts, lack of access to nutritious options and the marketing of cheap, unhealthy food, all of which are rooted in larger social and economic inequalities (World Health Organization 2024). Although the items that GreedyGuts desires, such as an extravagant number of appliances, new cars and the 'Luxury-Level Executive Home' are associated with a growing middle class, these items are also class markers, more often associated with aspirational consumerism in lower-income or middle-income brackets than with true wealth or privilege (Aksu 2020). Indirectly, these markers of taste suggest that GreedyGuts, and the children who will grow up to become like her, exist in a socioeconomic class lower than that of Hansel and Greta, whose critique of this lifestyle carries an implicit judgment from a position of relative privilege (cf. Bourdieu 2006).

For Hansel and Greta, life in the forest is the solution to the unsustainable lifestyle that GreedyGuts and her friends represent. In the UK, however, forests represent no more than 13% of the total land area (Braby 2024).² Even if the forest in *Hansel and Greta* is understood more broadly as a stand-in for the wider countryside, this area remains inaccessible to many British readers due to inequalities in land ownership and various socio-economic barriers. In England, where 92% of land is privately owned, the countryside has often been viewed as a predominantly white, middle-class space (Ware 2015). A 2019 government review found that many Black, Asian and ethnically diverse people feel excluded from these areas, with only 2% of Black Britons living in the countryside as of 2017 (Glover 2019). While the characters in *Hansel and Greta* are not explicitly identified by ethnicity or race, the implied class differences between the human protagonists and the ogres, and the human children that resemble them, are made clear through such

² This can be compared to Sweden, where forests make up around 68% (Statistikmyndigheten 2024) of the country. Regardless, the vast majority of the population in either country resides in urban areas.

numbers. They reinforce a social hierarchy that aligns Hansel and Greta with privilege and consumption restraint, while framing GreedyGuts and city-bound children as symbols of excess and unsustainability.

When student teachers are asked to examine issues of class and privilege in *Hansel and Greta* and connect these issues to the specific socio-economic context of life in the UK, the intended outcome is an expansion of their critical and sustainability literacies. Exploring how the story reflects real-world inequalities, such as access to the countryside and other socio-economic barriers faced by marginalized communities, will ideally help student teachers to understand the wider socio-cultural context to the sustainability efforts presented in Winterson's storybook. In the process, it might also encourage them to reflect on the roles that inclusivity and equitability play in efforts toward sustainability.

Happily ever after?

We believe that Winterson's storybook *Hansel and Greta* offers a rich resource for teacher educators who seek to develop student teachers' sustainability and critical literacies alongside their genre awareness. A 'thickening' of student teachers' understanding of sustainable development and its many imperatives is dependent on the ambiguity and complexity that characterize literature, but not necessarily on the linguistic sophistication of a particular work. This is why we have proposed Winterson's fairy tale to teacher educators. When questions about how Winterson's fairy tale navigates challenges of the Anthropocene are asked, teacher educators can also empower student teachers to think critically about the texts they will use in their future classrooms through the three pillars of sustainability. We hope that the multifaceted approach to *Hansel and Greta* that we suggest will equip student teachers with some of the insights necessary to assess and select suitable classroom material for introducing sustainability topics in ELT for young learners.

Fairy tales may seem perfect tools for introducing sustainability to young readers, as they combine magical elements and compelling plots with moral absolutism, supposedly making complex environmental, economic and social concerns easily accessible to young readers. As we have attempted to show in this article, however, that is not necessarily the case. The very complexity of the sustainability topics that Winterson addresses in her storybook defies the 'moral perfectionism' that characterizes the fairy tale genre. At the same time, this contrast generates

tensions that promise rich opportunities for meaningful and productive discussions among teachers-to-be. By engaging with this juxtaposition in *Hansel and Greta* head on, we hope that student teachers will develop a deeper appreciation for the multidimensional nature of sustainable development, moving beyond a simplistic understanding to embrace a more critical perspective.

To foreground how Winterson engages with topics relating to sustainable development in *Hansel and Greta* means that concepts ‘conspicuously absent from or largely implicit in [the] text suddenly [assume] special significance’ (Hoydis, Bartosch and Gurr 2021: 32). In the context of this article, it means that teacher students, who study the storybook from a sustainability perspective, are likely to improve their genre awareness at the same time. As previously pointed out, fairy tales refer to reality allegorically, metaphorically and symbolically. The approach to Winterson’s storybook which we advocate in this article demands that student teachers pay close attention to the shape and function of these literary devices, as well as to what is missing from the story.

A ‘decoding’ of metaphors and symbols aligns with Tatar’s (2003) argument that ‘there is much in every folktale that requires awareness of social realities’ but there is also ‘much that defies historical explanation’ (50). Fairy tales reflect the cultural and societal norms of their time, but they also incorporate elements of myth and the fantastic that challenge historical accuracy and feed the imagination. As such, they might indeed have ‘transformative effects’ on its readers (Tatar 2010: 57). We remain uncertain of literature’s ability to generate direct actions required to build a sustainable future. Nevertheless, we concur with Tatar’s (2003) wish that the transformative power of fairy tales might still ‘help [readers] move from that disempowered state to a condition that may not be emancipation but that marks the beginnings of some form of agency’ (63).

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