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More-than-human voices: Animal subjectivity and ecocritical empathy as seen in Sara Pennypecker's *Pax*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of animal subjectivity and the construction of ecocritical empathy in contemporary children's literature through *Pax* (2016) novel. The study is motivated by the increasing scholarly recognition that literary narratives can shape children's ecological consciousness by challenging anthropocentric perspectives and promoting ethical engagement with nonhuman beings Drawing on Greg Garrard's ecocriticism and posthumanism frameworks, the research explores how narrative strategies—particularly the dual perspectives between human and nonhuman characters—challenge anthropocentric worldviews and foster ethical awareness toward the more-than-human world. The study focuses on how the novel presents animals not merely as supporting figures or symbols of human emotion, but as conscious beings capable of thought, emotion, memory, and agency. Using a qualitative descriptive method, this research analyses dialogues, narration, and character interactions to identify representations of animal subjectivity and ecological interconnectedness within the novel. The analysis particularly examines Pax's sensory experiences, emotional attachment, survival instincts, and relationship with Peter to reveal how the text constructs animal subjectivity. In addition, the study investigates how environmental destruction and war influence both human and nonhuman lives, emphasizing the ecological consequences of anthropocentric actions. The findings suggest that Pax destabilizes traditional boundaries between humans and animals by portraying animals as emotionally and cognitively complex beings with their own perspectives and experiences. Through Pax's perspective, readers are encouraged to develop ecocritical empathy toward nonhuman life. The study highlights children's literature as a means of fostering environmental awareness and ethical human–animal relationships.

Keywords: animal subjectivity; children's literature; ecocriticism; empathy; posthumanism.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, children's literature has increasingly focused on environmental issues, reflecting global concerns about climate change and ecological crisis. Many modern stories no longer treat nature as just a background setting. Instead, they highlight the relationship between humans and the nature, including animals. This shift is important because it helps young readers develop awareness and care for the environment. Recent scholarship argues that

environmental narratives encourage young readers to develop empathy for nonhuman beings while challenging anthropocentric perspectives, thereby fostering more sustainable ways of thinking and living (Lahtinen, T., & Löytty 2024). Moreover, literary texts that promote emotional engagement with nature can help children respond to ecological crises by nurturing ecological awareness, environmental responsibility, and climate activism (Murphy, 2025).

One important approach to understanding this change is ecocriticism. Ecocriticism provides an appropriate theoretical framework because it examines how literary texts represent the relationship between humans and the natural world. Since *Pax* presents a fox as an active subject with agency, emotions, and intrinsic value, these perspectives enable a critical examination of how the novel questions human-centered worldviews and cultivates ecocritical empathy toward animals. According to Greg Garrard, ecocriticism studies how literature represents the relationship between humans and the environment and often challenges human-centered thinking (Garrard, 2012). This means that humans are no longer seen as the most important beings, but as part of a larger ecological system. Similarly, posthumanist thinkers such as Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti argue that humans and non-humans (including animals) are interconnected and should be understood as having shared agency and existence (Braidotti 2013; Haraway 2008).

In line with these ideas, many contemporary children's books increasingly represent animals as subjects rather than objects, offering a counter-narrative to anthropocentrism, which privileges human interests and reduces nonhuman beings' voice. By granting animals voice, agency, and emotional depth, these texts encourage readers to reconsider human–animal relationships from a more ecocentrism perspective. It counters the assumption that human interests are inherently superior to those of nonhuman beings. Animals are shown as thinking and feeling beings with their own perspectives. This idea is supported by Jacques Derrida, who criticizes the strict separation between humans and animals and questions why animals are often denied voice and agency (Derrida 2008). Giving animals a voice in literature can therefore be seen as an ethical act that encourages readers to respect non-human life.

A clear example of this development can be seen in *Pax,* a novel written by Sara Pennypacker. The novel tells the story of a boy named Peter and his pet fox, Pax, who are separated because of war. Peter feels guilty and decides to go on a journey to find Pax. At the same time, Pax struggles to survive in the wild while trying to understand life without Peter. What makes *Pax* unique is its dual narrative structure. The novel's dual narrative structure positions the animal simultaneously as an object of human perception and as a subject with its own consciousness, allowing readers to move beyond an anthropocentric viewpoint and recognize the fox's agency and emotional experience. The story is told from both Peter's and Pax's perspectives. This allows readers to understand Pax not just as an animal, but

as a character with emotions, thoughts, and experiences. Pax feels fear, loyalty, confusion, and love, which makes readers emotionally connected to him.

Through this narrative technique, the novel encourages what can be called ecocritical empathy—an emotional understanding that extends beyond humans to animals and the environment. As readers follow Pax's experiences, they begin to see the world from a non-human perspective. This helps them realize that animals are also affected by human actions, such as war and environmental destruction.

Recent developments in children's literature studies show a growing interest in environmental issues and human–animal relationships. Ecocritical scholars such as Greg Garrard argue that literature plays a crucial role in shaping how readers understand the relationship between humans and the natural world, often challenging anthropocentric perspectives (Garrard, 2012). In parallel, animal studies influenced by Jacques Derrida emphasize the ethical problem of denying animals voice and subjectivity, questioning the rigid boundary between human and non-human beings (Derrida, 2008). These perspectives have encouraged scholars to re-evaluate how animals are represented in literary texts, particularly in literature for children.

Within children's literature, earlier studies tend to position animals as symbolic figures or moral tools that support human-centered narratives. As noted by Maria Nikolajeva, animal characters are often used to facilitate children's emotional and moral development rather than being recognized as independent subjects (Nikolajeva, 2010). Similarly, Susan McHugh highlights that animal narratives frequently "translate" animal experience into human terms, reinforcing anthropocentric interpretations (McHugh, 2019). While these studies acknowledge the presence of animals in literature, they still prioritize human perspectives, limiting the exploration of animal agency and consciousness.

More recent approaches, particularly posthumanism, attempt to move beyond this limitation. Thinkers such as Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti propose a relational understanding of existence in which humans and non-humans are interconnected and co-constitutive (Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 2008). In literary studies, this perspective is further developed through posthumanist ecocriticism, as discussed by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, who emphasize the agency of non-human entities and the material interconnections between life forms (Iovino and Opperman, 2014). However, despite these theoretical advancements, their application to children's literature—especially in close textual analysis—remains relatively limited.

In the case of *Pax* by Sara Pennypacker, existing discussions primarily focus on themes such as war, loss, and the emotional bond between a boy and his pet fox. Previous studies have examined children's literature as a medium for promoting ecological awareness and environmental ethics (Ismail 2024; Murphy 2025), while others have explored empathy toward nonhuman beings from an ecocritical perspective (Lahtinen, T., & Löytty 2024). However, these studies primarily

emphasize environmental themes and educational values, giving limited attention to how children's literature constructs animal subjectivity through narrative techniques and how such representations foster ecocritical empathy beyond anthropocentric perspectives. This gap highlights the need to examine *Pax* as a text that positions animals as autonomous narrative subjects rather than merely objects of human experience.

Based on this overview, it can be seen that previous studies have not fully addressed how children's literature constructs animal subjectivity as an independent narrative force, nor how such representation contributes to ecocritical empathy that extends beyond human-centered emotions. Therefore, this study fills the gap by combining ecocriticism and posthumanism to analyze how *Pax* positions the animal as a subject with agency, perspective, and voice. By focusing on the novel's dual narrative technique, this research offers a more comprehensive understanding of how children's literature can foster ethical awareness and empathy across species boundaries. By using ecocriticism and posthumanism as theoretical frameworks, the research questions proposed in this research were

1. How is animal subjectivity constructed in *Pax*?
2. How does the representation of animal subjectivity in *Pax* contribute to the development of ecocritical empathy?

METHOD

The research employed qualitative method. Sugiyono states that qualitative research is research used to examine the conditions of natural objects and the data obtained tends to be qualitative data with qualitative data analysis technique (Sugiyono 2019). In addition, according to Cresswell, a qualitative research approach is research that aims to study or understand social problems (Weyant 2022). The qualitative research employed in this study by discussing the recurring ecocritical issue depicted in the novel entitled *Pax*. The data was taken from the novel *Pax* by Sara Pennypecker as the primary data. Other supportive materials are taken from theoretical books and articles published in journals related to given topic. These sources were beneficial in terms of providing theoretical frameworks and information related to animal subjectivity and ecocritical empathy. The correlations of various sources ensured a thorough and comprehensive understanding of the issues presented in the novel.

The research begins with a close reading of the novel to gain a comprehensive understanding of its narrative structure, themes, and the construction of relationships between human and non-human characters. Next, relevant data are identified and selected in the form of narration, dialogue, and descriptive passages that reflect animal subjectivity and ecocritical empathy. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to animal subjectivity and ecocritical empathy. The researcher classified relevant passages from the novel, grouped them into themes, and interpreted the findings

using ecocriticism and posthumanism. To ensure the validity of the analysis, triangulation theory was applied by interpreting the findings through the complementary perspectives of ecocriticism, animal subjectivity, and posthumanism. Comparing these theoretical perspectives helped strengthen the consistency and credibility of the interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1.1 Ecocriticism: Challenging Anthropocentrism

Ecocriticism provides the foundation for analyzing how literature represents the relationship between humans and the environment. As a literary approach that examines the relationship between humans and the environment, ecocriticism challenges anthropocentric perspectives that position humans as superior to nonhuman beings. Ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human" (Garrard 2012, p.5). This theory emphasizes that humans are part of an interconnected ecological system rather than separate from nature. Ecocriticism therefore encourages readers to reconsider human dominance and recognize the value of nonhuman life, including animals and ecosystems.

Anthropocentrism refers to a worldview that places humans at the center of existence and treats nature primarily as a resource for human benefit. Eco critics argue that this perspective contributes to environmental exploitation and the marginalization of nonhuman beings. Garrard explains that ecocritical studies seek to expose "the cultural attitudes and ideological structures that support environmental destruction" (Garrard 2012). In literary texts, this challenge to anthropocentrism often appears through representations of nature and animals as active subjects rather than passive objects.

Recent journal articles further support the ecocritical critique of anthropocentrism. Ecocritical literature encourages readers to develop "greater empathy toward nonhuman life and ecological systems" through narratives that decenter human experience (Schneider-Mayerson 2018). Similarly, posthuman ecocriticism emphasizes "relationality, interconnectedness, and the agency of nonhuman beings" (Oppermann, 2016). These perspectives argue that humans should no longer be viewed as the sole center of meaning, but as part of a broader ecological network involving animals, landscapes, and material environments.

Meanwhile, ecological thinking requires recognition that "human bodies are inseparable from the material world they inhabit" (Alaimo, 2020). This idea reinforces the ecocritical belief that humans and nature exist in mutual dependence rather than hierarchical domination. Such theories are important in understanding literary works that represent animals as conscious beings with their own experiences and agency.

In Pax, ecocriticism can be used to analyze how the novel challenges anthropocentric assumptions through the representation of Pax as an emotionally

complex and perceptive being. The novel shifts attention away from a purely human-centered narrative by presenting the effects of war and environmental destruction from both human and animal perspectives. Pax is portrayed not merely as a pet or symbol of human emotion, but as a subject with his own instincts, perceptions, and ecological relationships. Through this representation, the novel encourages readers to recognize animals as part of the same moral and environmental system as humans.

Furthermore, the novel demonstrates that human actions, particularly war and environmental destruction, affect both humans and nonhuman life. By depicting shared vulnerability and ecological interconnectedness, *Pax* promotes an ethics of coexistence and environmental responsibility. Thus, ecocriticism provides an important framework for understanding how the novel critiques anthropocentrism and fosters ecological awareness through the representation of animal subjectivity.

In this study, ecocriticism is used to explore how *Pax* portrays the impact of human actions—particularly war—on both humans and animals. It also helps reveal how the novel shifts attention from a human-centered worldview to a more inclusive ecological perspective, where animals are part of the same moral and environmental system.

1.2 Animal Subjectivity: Animals as Thinking Subjects

To answer how animal subjectivity is constructed, this study draws on animal studies and posthumanist theory. Jacques Derrida challenges the rigid boundary between human and animal by questioning the hierarchical distinction embedded in Western thought. He argues that “the animal looks at us, and we are naked before it” (Derrida, 2008, p. 29), a statement that disrupts human superiority by positioning the animal as a subject capable of perception and response.

Donna Haraway introduces the concept of “companion species,” which highlights the relational existence of humans and animals. Haraway states, “beings do not preexist their relatings” (Haraway, 2008,p. 6), highlighting that identities are formed through interaction rather than isolation. This perspective moves beyond models of domination and control, suggesting instead a framework of coexistence grounded in relational ethics, where humans and non-human beings are co-constitutive participants in a shared ecological world. Similarly, Rosi Braidotti proposes that subjectivity is not limited to humans but extends to non-human entities (Braidotti, 2013). Together, these perspectives reinforce an ethical shift from domination toward mutual recognition, supporting the development of ecocritical empathy that acknowledges animals as beings within an interconnected ecological network.

Animal subjectivity refers to the recognition of animals as conscious beings capable of thought, emotion, perception, and agency rather than as passive objects existing solely for human purposes. In literary studies, the concept challenges

anthropocentric assumptions by emphasizing that animals possess their own experiences and perspectives. According to Donna Haraway, humans and animals exist within interconnected relationships shaped by mutual responsiveness and shared existence. In *When Species Meet*, Haraway states that "Species interdependence is the name of the worlding game on earth" (Haraway 2008). This statement highlights that animals are active participants in ecological and social relationships rather than inferior beings separated from humans.

The idea of animal subjectivity is closely related to posthumanist thought, which critiques the traditional hierarchy that privileges human consciousness above all other forms of life. Cary Wolfe argues that posthumanism requires humans to reconsider "the discourse of species difference" that has historically justified human domination over animals (Wolfe 2010). Through this perspective, animals are understood as sentient beings with their own cognitive and emotional capacities. Rather than viewing animals as symbols or extensions of human emotion, animal subjectivity recognizes them as beings with independent experiences and forms of understanding.

Recent journal articles further support this concept by emphasizing the ethical significance of representing animal consciousness in literature. In his article, Herman states that iterary representations of animal subjectivity "encourage readers to imagine nonhuman perspectives and question human-centered assumptions about intelligence and agency" (2014). Similarly, an article by Mc Hugh explains that animal narratives challenge anthropocentrism because they "foreground animals as perceiving subjects rather than narrative objects" (McHugh 2019). These studies demonstrate that portraying animals as thinking subjects allows literature to expand ethical consideration toward nonhuman life.

Animal subjectivity is also expressed through embodiment and sensory experience. Unlike humans, animals often understand the world through instinct, smell, movement, and environmental interaction. According to Weil (2020), narratives centered on animals "present forms of knowledge grounded in bodily awareness and ecological connection" (p. 58). This perspective is important because it acknowledges that animal intelligence may differ from human rationality while still remaining meaningful and complex. Therefore, animal subjectivity does not depend on animals resembling humans, but on recognizing their own distinct ways of experiencing the world.

In Pax, animal subjectivity is represented through Pax's thoughts, emotions, instincts, and sensory understanding of his surroundings. The novel presents Pax not merely as a pet belonging to Peter, but as a conscious being capable of attachment, fear, survival, and adaptation. Pax perceives the world through scents, sounds, and instinctive responses, which reflects a specifically nonhuman mode of consciousness. His experiences in the wild demonstrate that he possesses agency and the ability to make decisions independently of humans.

Furthermore, the novel portrays Pax's emotional bond with Peter while still preserving his identity as a fox rather than reducing him to a human-like character. Through this representation, the novel challenges anthropocentric assumptions that only humans possess meaningful subjectivity. By inviting readers to understand the world from Pax's perspective, *Pax* encourages empathy toward nonhuman life and promotes a more ethical and ecologically inclusive understanding of animals as thinking subjects.

1.3 Ecocritical Empathy: Feeling with the More-Than-Human

Ecocritical empathy refers to an emotional and ethical engagement with the more-than-human world, including animals, ecosystems, and nature. Unlike traditional empathy that mainly focuses on human relationships, ecocritical empathy expands empathetic understanding toward nonhuman beings and ecological systems. To address how animal subjectivity contributes to empathy, this study applies the concept of narrative empathy. According to Suzanne Keen (2006), empathy in literature involves "sharing feeling and perspective-taking" through narrative engagement. In ecocritical studies, this concept is extended to encourage readers to imaginatively experience the perspectives of animals and the environment. As Gibbons explains, ecocritical empathy is "an affective mode that connects readers emotionally to the vulnerability of the more-than-human world" (Gibbons 2022). This perspective suggests that literature can foster ecological awareness by encouraging readers to emotionally connect with nonhuman suffering and environmental destruction.

By combining Suzanne Keen's theory with ecocritical and posthumanism perspectives, ecocritical empathy can be understood as the ability of readers not only to feel for animals but also to imagine the world from their perspective. In this sense, empathy extends beyond emotional identification to include cognitive engagement with non-human subjectivity. This form of empathy challenges anthropocentric thinking and encourages ethical awareness toward non-human life by inviting readers to recognize animals as sentient beings with their own ways of experiencing the world.

Ecocritical empathy plays an important role in developing environmental ethics and responsibility. According to Schneider-Mayerson (2018) narratives centered on ecological crisis and nonhuman experience can "increase readers' concern for environmental issues and empathy toward nonhuman life". Similarly, Weik von Mossner argues that environmental narratives create "embodied experiences of affect that enable readers to feel connected to distant human and nonhuman others" (Weik von Mossner 2017). Through emotional engagement with nonhuman perspectives, readers are encouraged to move beyond anthropocentric thinking and recognize the interconnectedness between humans, animals, and nature. Therefore, ecocritical empathy becomes an important concept for

understanding how literary works such as Pax cultivate compassion, ecological awareness, and ethical responsibility toward the more-than-human world.

1.4 Human–Animal Relationship: Relational Ethics

The relationship between humans and animals is central to understanding both subjectivity and empathy. Donna Haraway emphasizes that humans and animals exist in interconnected relationships shaped by mutual dependence. Haraway states, "beings do not preexist their relatings" (Haraway 2008), highlighting that identities are formed through interaction rather than isolation. This perspective moves beyond models of domination and control, suggesting instead a framework of coexistence grounded in relational ethics, where humans and non-human beings are understood as co-constitutive participants in a shared ecological world.

The concept of human–animal relationship in ecocritical and posthumanist studies is closely connected to relational ethics, which emphasizes mutual interconnectedness, care, and ethical responsibility between humans and nonhuman beings. Rather than viewing animals as objects for human use, relational ethics recognizes animals as beings with agency, emotions, and intrinsic value. According to Donna Haraway, ethical relationships between species are built through "co-constitutive companionship" in which humans and animals shape one another through shared existence (Haraway, 2008, p.16). This perspective challenges anthropocentric hierarchies by suggesting that humans are not separate from animals but exist within networks of interdependence. Supporting this view, Probyn-Rapsey argues that relational ethics "requires attentiveness to the lives, vulnerabilities, and agencies of nonhuman others" (Probyn-Rapsey 2018). Such an approach encourages ethical engagement grounded not in domination, but in coexistence and responsibility.

Literary representations of human–animal relationships can cultivate ethical awareness toward nonhuman life. According to Lloro-Bidart, narratives involving animals encourage readers to develop "empathetic and ethical responses toward more-than-human communities" (Lloro-Bidart 2020). This perspective is reinforced by Campagnaro and Ferrari who argue that ecocritical engagement with children's literature promotes ecological awareness through the integration of empathy, reflection, and ethical responsibility toward the more-than-human world (Campagnaro, M., & Ferrari 2024). These perspectives are particularly relevant to *Pax*, where the relationship between Peter and Pax evolves from ownership into ethical recognition. Peter gradually understands that caring for Pax does not mean controlling him, but respecting his autonomy and place within the natural world. Through this relationship, the novel promotes an ethics of coexistence based on empathy, interconnectedness, and respect for nonhuman life.

1.5 Constructing Animal Subjectivity: Beyond Anthropocentric Representation

The construction of animal subjectivity in *Pax* represents a significant departure from conventional representations of animals in children's literature, where non-human figures are often reduced to symbolic or pedagogical tools. Instead, Sara Pennypacker employs a dual narrative structure that grants Pax an autonomous narrative voice, allowing the fox to emerge as a subject with perception, memory, and agency. This narrative strategy aligns with the theoretical challenge posed by Jacques Derrida, who critiques the philosophical tradition of denying animals subjectivity and relegating them to the status of the "other" (Derrida, 2008).

One of the most striking aspects of Pax's subjectivity is the novel's emphasis on sensory epistemology, particularly through olfactory perception. Unlike human-centered narratives that privilege vision and rational cognition, *Pax* constructs knowledge through smell, instinct, and embodied awareness. Early in the narrative, Pax interprets his environment through scent:

He couldn't find it—the night's winds had swept the ground clean of any trace. But among the hundreds of odors rising on the early morning breeze, hefound something that reminded him of his boy: acorns…. The familiar scent seemed a promise to him now, and he trotted toward it (Pennypacker, 2016).

This passage is crucial because it positions smell not as a secondary sense but as a primary mode of understanding. Pax does not "analyze" or "interpret" in human terms; instead, he "reads" the environment instinctively. This challenges anthropocentric assumptions about intelligence and cognition, suggesting that knowledge is species-specific rather than hierarchically ordered. In this sense, Pax's subjectivity is not a simplified imitation of human consciousness but a distinct form of being-in-the-world.

Another evidence for Pax's sensory awareness when he carefully analyses the dangerous situation in the camp surrounding. There are many workers who attempts to use weapons and explosives. It is evident in the the quote,

Pax watched the war-sick spread out along the riverbank, rolling more wires, digging more holes, and burying more dark boxes under the hot sun. The odor of their sweat was spiked with a new aggression. The danger he sensed was more immediate than that, though. It was more primitive. He ran back and paced the clearing again (Pennypacker, 2016).

This line reflects how Pax's knowledge comes through smell and instinct, aligning with Donna Haraway's idea that knowledge is always situated in the body. Pax doesn't "analyze" the world; he *reads* it through his fox senses. This aligns closely with Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledge**,** which argues that all forms of perception are embodied and relational (Haraway, 2008).

Pax's understanding of the world is also inseparable from his fox identity; his subjectivity emerges through his interaction with the environment rather than through abstract reasoning.

The field was empty. The vehicles were gone. There was no sign of the humans, but their scents were fresh and even sharper than before. They were nearby, and they were anxious. Pax climbed upstream and crossed the river at the narrows, then hurried along the treed ridge to observe the site from above (Pennypacker, 2016).

This moment is especially important. The narrative acknowledges a difference in cognition while still granting Pax meaningful awareness. It avoids reducing him to a "human-like thinker". By presenting Pax's cognition using his olfactory, the novel resists anthropomorphic reduction while still making his experience accessible to readers.

Furthermore, the narrative constructs Pax's subjectivity through temporal awareness and memory, particularly in relation to his bond with Peter. After being abandoned, Pax does not only respond to what happens around him immediately; he also experiences time through feelings of loss and hope for reunion.:

The humans had good memories, so they would come back to this spot. But they relied on sight alone—all their other senses being so weak—so if they did not see him when they returned, they might leave again. Pax would stay beside the road and ignore all temptations, including the strong urge he felt to head south, the direction his instinct told him would lead him back to his home. He would stay at this spot until his boy came for him (Pennypacker, 2016).

This statement reflects a shift from conditioned behavior to reflective experience. The distinction between learned habit (the humans had good memories) and emotional disruption (strong urge feeling to head south) indicates that Pax is capable of evaluating his own state, a key marker of subjectivity. The feeling of "strong urge" suggests not only discomfort but also a recognition that something in his world has fundamentally changed.

Another moment reinforces this sense of absence:

They stopped only for meals of grubs and berries, and whenever they did, Pax searched the air for any trace of his boy's scent, for the faintest sound of his voice. None. None.. (Pennypacker, 2016).

Here, absence becomes spatially and emotionally significant. The phrasing does not merely describe a missing figure; it constructs absence as a presence of loss within Pax's perception. This reflects a level of emotional complexity that goes beyond instinct, indicating memory, attachment, and longing. Such representation supports Rosi Braidotti's argument that subjectivity should be understood as a relational process, not an exclusively human attribute (Braidotti, 2013).

In addition to emotional depth, Pax's subjectivity is further developed through agency and decision-making. Throughout the narrative, Pax is repeatedly placed in situations that require choice rather than automatic reaction. His encounters with other foxes, for example, present opportunities for assimilation into the wild, yet Pax's responses are shaped by his prior relationship with Peter. In one instance, Pax stays alert when Runt, his fox friend, approaches him.

Pax pulled himself up sharply. He had no practice at dominance, but the situation left him no choice. *Go back to your den*. When Runt tried to nestle into his chest, Pax nipped him on the shoulder (Pennypacker, 2016).

Pax hesitates to fully integrate with other foxes, demonstrating an internal conflict between instinctual survival and emotional attachment. Moments such as "he avoids being too close" with his fellow fox (when instinct would suggest otherwise) indicate that Pax's actions are not entirely determined by biological drives. Instead, they are influenced by memory, loyalty, and learned experience. He is accustomed to be friend with human, so getting along with wild vixen makes him anxious. This capacity for deliberation challenges the assumption that animals act purely on instinct, reinforcing Derrida's critique of the human/animal binary.

Moreover, Pax's interactions with the natural environment further highlight his subjectivity. He does not passively inhabit space; he actively interprets, navigates, and adapts to it. In this quote, it can be seen that Pax

Pax didn't respond. He got to his feet to test the air. Something dangerous had entered the clearing with the dusk. An animal scent he didn't recognize but feared. It was gone as quickly as it had appeared, but Pax howled at Runt. Get inside the den. Now. (Pennypacker, 2016).

The forest is not a neutral setting but a dynamic system of signals, threats, and opportunities. Pax's awareness of danger—such as shifts in scent, unfamiliar sounds, or disrupted landscapes—demonstrates a continuous process of engagement with his surroundings. This aligns with ecocritical perspectives that emphasize the interconnectedness of all living beings, as articulated by Greg Garrard (Garrard, 2012).

The analysis demonstrates that *Pax* constructs animal subjectivity by portraying Pax as an autonomous being with emotions, agency, consciousness, and the capacity to make independent decisions. Through Pax's perspective and experiences, the novel challenges anthropocentric assumptions that position animals as objects serving human needs or existing under human control. His ability to survive in the wild, form social bonds, protect his community, and respond to his environment demonstrates that animals possess agency and lived experiences beyond human interests. Significantly, Pax's decision to remain in the wild affirms his species-specific identity and right to self-determination rather than dependence on human companionship. Thus, *Pax* destabilizes the human-centered hierarchy between humans and animals by recognizing animals as subjects with intrinsic value. Ultimately, the novel promotes a posthuman perspective that views human–animal relationships as based on coexistence, mutual recognition, and respect rather than domination.

1.6 The Role of Animal Subjectivity in Developing Ecocritical Empathy

The representation of animal subjectivity in *Pax* plays a crucial role in cultivating ecocritical empathy by reconfiguring how readers perceive and relate to

non-human life. Rather than positioning animals as passive objects within a human-centered narrative, Sara Pennypacker constructs *Pax* as an experiencing subject whose consciousness is shaped by embodiment, environment, and relationality. Through this narrative approach, the novel encourages readers—particularly young audiences—to move beyond anthropocentric frameworks and develop an ethical awareness grounded in interspecies connection.

From an ecocritical and posthumanist perspective, empathy is not simply the projection of human emotions onto animals but the recognition of difference alongside connection (Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 2008). This aligns with Donna Haraway's concept of *situated knowledge*, which emphasizes that all understanding emerges from specific, embodied positions. Pax's subjectivity is not universal or abstract; rather, it is distinctly fox-like, shaped by instinct, sensory perception, and ecological interaction. For example, the narration describes how Pax learns the situation through his smell and instinct.

He couldn't find it—the night's winds had swept the ground clean of any trace. But among the hundreds of odors rising on the early morning breeze, he found something that reminded him of his boy: acorns.(Pennypacker, 2016).

This passage demonstrates that Pax interprets his surroundings primarily through smell, revealing a fox's unique way of knowing the world. By inviting readers to experience this sensory perspective without reducing it to human cognition, the novel cultivates ecocritical empathy—the capacity to appreciate nonhuman experiences on their own terms while recognizing the interconnectedness of humans, animals, and the environment.

Through this narrative strategy, *Pax* encourages readers to respect animals for their own unique ways of experiencing the world rather than judging them by human standards. Pax understands his surroundings through smell and instinct, allowing readers to see the environment from a fox's perspective instead of a human one. By experiencing the story through Pax's senses, readers are encouraged to recognize that animals perceive, respond to, and interact with nature in ways that are equally meaningful. This shift from a human-centered perspective to a nonhuman perspective reflects ecocritical empathy, which values the interconnectedness of all living beings rather than human superiority (Garrard 2012). As a result, *Pax* fosters empathy not by making the fox more human, but by encouraging readers to appreciate and respect his distinct way of living within the natural world.

Moreover, the novel constructs empathy through its emphasis on relational subjectivity, particularly in Pax's bond with Peter. Unlike traditional anthropomorphic narratives that translate animal emotions into human-like expressions, *Pax* represents this relationship through affective and embodied memory. As the text notes, "The memory of the boy was not a picture but a feeling—warm, steady, and known" (Pennypacker, 2016). This formulation suggests that Pax's attachment is not based on abstract recollection but on a deeply

felt, bodily sense of connection. Such representation aligns with Haraway's argument that knowledge and meaning are produced through relationships rather than isolated cognition (Haraway, 2008). Pax's subjectivity, therefore, is not self-contained but emerges through his interactions with others—both human and non-human.

This relational dimension of subjectivity is particularly significant in fostering ecocritical empathy because it bridges species boundaries without erasing difference. Readers are invited to feel with Pax, not because he is rendered identical to a human, but because his experiences of attachment, loss, and survival resonate across species lines. His longing for Peter following their separation is conveyed through behavior and sensation rather than explicit reasoning, reinforcing an affective mode of empathy grounded in shared vulnerability ((Nussbaum 2001).

At the same time, the novel carefully maintains the distinction between human and animal consciousness, thereby resisting anthropomorphic reduction. This is evident in the narrative acknowledgement that

Pax hesitated. He didn't want to leave the spot his humans would return to. But dark clouds were rolling in, and just then, thunder boomed in the distance. He knew his boy would not venture out during a storm. He didn't want to think of getting drenched by the side of the road. Alone (Pennypacker 2016).

This statement affirms Pax's capacity for understanding while maintaining the uniqueness of his cognitive processes. He can calculate that the boy will not venture out during a storm through his animal instinct. By maintaining this distinction, the novel aligns with posthumanist critiques of human exceptionalism, particularly those articulated by Rosi Braidotti, who advocates for recognizing the agency and subjectivity of non-human life forms (Braidotti 2013).

In this context, ecocritical empathy emerges not from identification alone but from ethical recognition of difference. Readers are encouraged to acknowledge that Pax's experiences are not identical to their own, yet are nonetheless meaningful and worthy of consideration. This form of empathy is more ethically grounded because it respects alterity while fostering responsibility toward non-human beings (Haraway 2008).

The novel further reinforces this ethical framework through its depiction of ecological interdependence. Pax's subjectivity is inseparable from his environment, as his survival depends on his ability to navigate and respond to the natural world. Pax's awareness that there is something dangerous and deadly occurred in the forest reflects an ongoing dialogue between organism and environment,

He attended more carefully. What he sensed alarmed him. He tried to describe it: Air choked with death. Fire and smoke. Blood in a river, the river running red with it, the earth drowning in blood. Chaos. Everything is broken.The fibers of the trees, the clouds, even the air is broken.

The quotes suggests that knowledge itself is co-constructed through ecological relationships (Garrard 2012). Readers are thus encouraged to see animals as part of a broader ecological network rather than isolated entities.

Additionally, the environmental backdrop of war highlights the vulnerability of both human and non-human life. Pax's journey through disrupted landscapes underscores the impact of human conflict on ecological systems, reinforcing the need for ethical responsibility. The dual narrative structure, alternating between Pax and Peter, further strengthens this message by illustrating a parallel process of learning: while Pax adapts to the wild, Peter learns to respect Pax's autonomy. Peter acknowledges that Pax is not simply a creature; Pax is also capable of thinking and evaluating his situation, just like stated in the quote

Peter looked around. The woods looked dangerous now, full of coyotes and bears and, soon, humans at war. He looked down at his fox, still straining to follow his new family. "Go. It's okay." It wasn't, though. The pain scoured him hollow, left him without breath, like a kick to the heart. He pulled his hand away, because Pax would feel a pain that deep and he wouldn't leave. "Go!"(Pennypacker 2016).

This shift reflects a movement from ownership to ethical coexistence, aligning with ecocritical values of care and responsibility (Oppermann 2016). Peter's desire to care for Pax reflects a protective impulse; however, Pax's natural habitat lies within the wild, where his autonomy and ecological belonging are fully realized.

Pax demonstrates that children's literature can serve as a powerful medium for ecological education. The representation of animal subjectivity in *Pax* plays a significant role in developing ecocritical empathy by encouraging readers to understand the world from a nonhuman perspective. Rather than portraying Pax as merely a companion to Peter, the novel presents him as an autonomous being with emotions, perceptions, and agency, enabling readers to empathize with his experiences while respecting his otherness. This finding support argument that children's literature "nurtures empathy, and cultivates environmental consciousness"(Yanar 2024) through narratives that challenge anthropocentric assumptions and reveal the interconnectedness of human and nonhuman life. By following Pax's struggles to survive in a war-torn environment, readers are encouraged to recognize the vulnerability of nonhuman beings and the ecological consequences of human actions. This form of empathy extends beyond emotional identification, fostering ethical responsibility toward animals and the environment. Consequently, *Pax* demonstrates how the construction of animal subjectivity can cultivate ecocritical empathy by promoting coexistence, environmental awareness, and respect for the intrinsic value of more-than-human life.

CONCLUSION

The representation of animal subjectivity in *Pax* serves as a key narrative strategy for cultivating ecocritical empathy in young readers. By portraying Pax as

an embodied and perceptive being, Sara Pennypacker moves beyond anthropocentric storytelling and invites readers to engage with a nonhuman consciousness on its own terms. This approach emphasizes that subjectivity is not exclusively human but exists across the more-than-human world.

Through its dual narrative perspective, the novel enables readers to experience and reflect on Pax's viewpoint. His sensory-based understanding of the environment and emotional bond with Peter foster empathy grounded not in similarity, but in difference and interconnectedness, making animal experience both emotionally accessible and ethically meaningful. Furthermore, the novel situates animal subjectivity within a broader ecological context shaped by human impact, highlighting the vulnerability of nonhuman life and underscoring human responsibility toward the environment. Thus, *Pax* shows how literature can build environmental awareness by encouraging readers to respect, care for, and coexist with the natural world.

Despite these contributions, the present study is limited to a single literary work and relies solely on textual analysis using ecocriticism, animal subjectivity, and posthumanism. As a result, the findings cannot be generalized to all children's literature or to readers' actual responses. Future research may address these limitations by examining multiple texts, incorporating comparative or interdisciplinary approaches, or investigating how young readers interpret representations of animal subjectivity and ecocritical empathy. The findings of this study also have practical implications for literary scholarship and education, suggesting that children's literature can be an effective medium for fostering empathy toward nonhuman life, challenging anthropocentric perspectives, and promoting environmental ethics in both literary studies and classroom practice.

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Author Contribution
All three authors contributed to all aspects of the research and manuscript preparation. In the conceptualization, SS contributed to formulating the research ideas and objectives. Then, in the methodology, SS contributed to developing the research design and methodological framework. In conducting the investigation, all authors participated in collecting and examining the relevant data and sources. YP collected the theory; while SS and ETH collected data from the novel. For the formal analysis: all authors contributed to analysing and interpreting the findings. SS contributed to drafting the manuscript. ETH and YP critically reviewed, revised, and edited the manuscript. Finally, in the supervision stage, all authors contributed to overseeing and ensuring the quality and academic integrity of the study. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Disclosure and conflicts of interest

The authors declare that this research was conducted independently and that there are no undisclosed relationships or circumstances that could have influenced the research, analysis, or interpretation of the findings. All authors have no conflict of interest to declare

Declaration of generative artificial intelligence (AI) and AI-assisted technologies

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Chat GPT and Claude as an AI-assisted tool to brainstorm ideas and support the composition and refinement of the background of study, theoretical framework, and discussion sections. All AI-generated suggestions were critically evaluated, revised, and verified by the author. The author takes full responsibility for the final content, arguments, analysis, interpretation, and academic integrity of the manuscript.

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