

## ILLUMINATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS IN OLD ENGLISH AND AZERBAIJANI CHILDREN'S FAIRY TALES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS FROM AN ECOPEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines how environmental problems are portrayed in English and Azerbaijani children's fairy tales and compares their ecopedagogical potential. English fairy tales often convey ecological values indirectly through anthropomorphism and individual responsibility, while Azerbaijani fairy tales cultivate ecological awareness more directly through themes of respect for nature, collective responsibility, and prohibitions. The findings show that fairy tales are not only a source of entertainment but also an effective pedagogical resource for sustainable development and ecological education. This research contributes to the re-evaluation of national cultural heritage within the context of global environmental education.

**Keywords:** *ecopedagogy, fairy tales, environmental education, English fairy tales, Azerbaijani fairy tales, ecological awareness, comparative analysis*

### Introduction

The ecological crisis is one of the most pressing problems of our time. According to the 2023 United Nations report, forests the size of 27 football fields disappear every minute, 80% of water resources are polluted, and biodiversity loss poses a serious threat to natural balance (UNEP, 2023). This situation highlights the need for fundamental changes in education, alongside politics, technology, and other fields.

Ecopedagogy — the integration of ecological awareness, moral responsibility, and principles of sustainable development into education — plays a vital role (Gadotti, 2008). Importantly, ecopedagogy should not be limited to modern textbooks. Children's fairy tales are rich, though often overlooked, sources of ecological education.

Fairy tales are more than entertainment; they are cultural codes that preserve collective thought, ecological knowledge, and moral norms (Zipes, 2012). Through them, values related to attitudes toward nature, responsible use of resources, and ecosystem protection have been transmitted across generations.

The purpose of this article is to examine how environmental problems are depicted in English and Azerbaijani children's fairy tales, analyze their ecopedagogical significance, and explore their potential for modern education. While studies on "ecopedagogy and fairy tales" have grown since the 2010's (Chen & Lee, 2023), in Azerbaijan this field is still developing.

This topic lies at the intersection of ecopedagogy, fairy-tale analysis, and cultural ecological consciousness. Analyzing fairy tales from two nations as carriers of ecological messages represents an innovative approach. Traditional fairy-tale research usually emphasizes ethical, social, and psychological aspects, whereas the ecological perspective is relatively new.

### Ecopedagogy and Fairy Tales: A Theoretical Perspective

The concept of ecopedagogy was introduced by Paulo Freire's student Moacir Gadotti, who defined it as "the cultivation of a sense of responsibility toward the environment." He emphasized incorporating local knowledge, cultural traditions, and fairy tales into education (Gadotti, 2008).

David A. Gruenewald proposed place-based education, arguing that children can develop ecological identity through fairy tales rooted in their cultural environment: "Fairy tales teach children not only how to view the world, but also how to care for it" (David A. Gruenewald, 2003).

Sallie K. May described local fairy tales as a "hidden ecological encyclopedia" and recommended their broader use in education (Sallie K. May, 2013).

In Azerbaijan, early research by R. Aliyev and S. Mammadova highlighted the ecopedagogical importance of nature imagery in folk tales.

### **Researchers and Perspectives**

Jack Zipes, in *The Irresistible Fairy Tale*, interprets social and ecological metaphors in English fairy tales. Ruth B. Bottigheimer, in *Fairy Tales: A New History*, discusses issues such as resource distribution and early ecological awareness.

Among Azerbaijani scholars, Könül İsgandarova emphasized teaching ecological topics in English classes through fairy tales, while Jala Mammadova analyzed ecological terms in English and Azerbaijani, noting their importance in environmental education.

### **Methodology**

This research used qualitative content analysis.

**English sources:** Joseph Jacobs' *English Fairy Tales* (1890) and Andrew Lang's *The Blue Fairy Book* (1889).

**Azerbaijani sources:** *Azerbaijani Fairy Tales* (five volumes, 2005) and the *Azerbaijan Folklore Corpus* (seven volumes, 2006).

Criteria for analysis:

1. Presence of nature imagery (tree, water, animals, soil, etc.).
2. Evaluation of ecological behavior (positive or negative).
3. The ecological lesson conveyed (direct or indirect).

### **Representation of Environmental Issues in English Fairy Tales**

English fairy tales often rely on **anthropomorphism** (animals behaving like humans) and moralistic principles.

For example, in "**The Three Little Pigs**" the materials used to build the houses (straw, sticks, and bricks) highlight not only safety but also the issue of responsible and proper use of resources. Straw and sticks symbolize quick but unsustainable solutions, whereas bricks reflect the principle of sustainable development. Two pigs misuse resources, while only one makes the correct choice by building a brick house (Zipes, 2012).

In "**Jack and the Beanstalk**" the magical beanstalk that grows into the sky symbolizes the power of nature and the need to treat it with caution. Although Jack initially acts out of greed and succeeds, he later witnesses the consequences of excessive exploitation of nature—an idea relevant to ecological balance.

"**The Elves and the Shoemaker**" promotes minimalism and the principle of repairing rather than replacing—echoing today's low-consumption movement and encouraging people to fight wastefulness. Repairing old shoes instead of buying new ones introduces the idea of reducing waste. The tale therefore indirectly reinforces the "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle (3R)" principle.

In "**The Rose-Tree**" a girl turns into a bird after her death and takes revenge. The tale displays the typical chain-motif structure of fairy tales. However, no environmental problem is presented; nature elements such as the rose tree and soil appear only as background. The ground metaphorically becomes the witness of a crime. The presence of death scenes in the narrative is noticeable, though such scenes in fairy tales usually exclude harm to main heroes.

In "**Little Thumb**" the main character is a small but clever boy who manages to save his siblings from poverty and danger. The forest, trees, and ogre appear as secondary images. The ogre

acts like other fairy-tale antagonists. The forest is described as dense and thick, but this imagery is not linked to ecological issues such as deforestation. No explicit ecological problem is addressed.

### **Representation of Environmental Issues in Azerbaijani Fairy Tales**

Our analysis of Azerbaijani fairy tales shows a strong emphasis on animals as symbolic messengers used to convey moral lessons and guide human behavior. However, this does not mean that other elements of nature are absent. Below is the analysis of several tales:

**“Gold and the Snake”** The main character is a snake. It helps a human and is the first to offer assistance. The human accepts but later breaks his promise and is punished by the snake. Symbolically, the snake represents nature, which constantly supports humans and provides for them (one gold coin instead of a bowl of milk hints at nature’s generosity). When humans betray nature, they face consequences. Although the tale does not explicitly present an ecological problem, it teaches gratitude and respect for nature—values relevant to ecopedagogy.

**“Jirtan”** The central character is Jirtan, a small boy known for his cleverness. The river appears as a helper, guiding the children home. Again, nature helps humans. However, no specific ecological issue is addressed in the story.

**“The Black Horse”**. Although the main hero is the king’s son Ibrahim, his true helper is the Black Horse, which speaks and repeatedly saves him. Ibrahim is portrayed as a protector of nature and animals: he saves the young of the Simurgh bird, cares for his horse, and heals a tiger’s wounded paw. His good actions are reciprocated. The forest appears only as a background element. The tale lacks explicit environmental problems but strongly promotes positive attitudes toward nature and animals—an important ecopedagogical value.

**“The Wooden Sword”**. The main hero is actually a snake disguised as a human. A snake that was once spared by a father after attempting to bite his son returns in human form and helps the king’s son. This suggests that animals do not forget kindness. The river appears again as a background element. No ecological issue is addressed.

**“A Wheat Grain the Size of an Egg”**. Here, soil functions as a central symbol. The land produces a massive wheat grain, one of which reaches the king’s palace. The core theme is purity and righteousness: only honest labor yields such blessings from the earth. The unity between humans and nature is strongly emphasized. However, no explicit ecological problem is portrayed.

**Comparative Table: Highlighting Environmental Issues in Fairy Tales**

<b>№</b>	<b>Fairy Tale</b>	<b>Nation</b>	<b>Nature Image</b>	<b>Ecological Problem</b>	<b>Message/Aspect</b>
1	The Three Little Pigs	English	Building materials	Resource use	Sustainability, safety, responsibility
2	Jack and the Beanstalk	English	Magic bean/sky castle	Exploitation	Balance, consequences of greed
3	The Elves and the Shoemaker	English	Shoe workshop	Wastefulness	Minimalism, 3R principle
4	The Rose-Tree	English	Rose tree/soil	—	Nature as background
5	Little Thumb	English	Forest, ogre	—	Cleverness, forest as setting
6	Gold and the Snake	Azerbaijani	Snake, milk, gold	—	Respect for nature
7	Jirtan	Azerbaijani	River	—	Nature as helper
8	The Black Horse	Azerbaijani	Forest, animals	—	Care for animals
9	The Wooden Sword	Azerbaijani	Snake, river	—	Kindness repaid
10	A Wheat Grain the Size of an Egg	Azerbaijani	Soil, wheat	Fertility	Honesty, unity with nature

## **Conclusion**

Neither English nor Azerbaijani fairy tales directly address modern ecological problems such as pollution, global warming, or climate change. This is understandable, as these issues did not exist when the tales were created.

However, both traditions carry ecopedagogical value. They instill love, care, and responsibility toward nature. Fairy tales are not merely cultural heritage; they are tools for educating environmentally conscious citizens. Their systematic use in education can help preserve national traditions while fostering global ecological awareness.

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