Humanising the Nonhuman: An Ecocritical Toolbox for Anthropomorphic Agency

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Abstract

Ecocriticism tends to acknowledge anthropomorphisms as a possible tool to create empathy for nonhumans, but in doing so mostly labels said tool as too sentimental for serious environmental literature. This paper aims to establish a categorisation of anthropomorphisms in media that allows a more diverse and detailed analysis of humanised nonhumans. It seeks to overcome the prevailing idea that anthropomorphic descriptions are limited to nonhuman animals and therefore extends the term to the humanisation of anything that is not human. Following the school of thought suggested by new materialism and material ecocriticism, nonhumans are regarded as having agency and anthropomorphising them allows humans to empathise with nonhumans. The categorisation of anthropomorphism proposed here is divided into each three markers and modes. The markers signify which part of the human can be observed in the anthropomorphised subject, while the modes define how this is realised. This article exemplifies the concept of markers and modes through anthropomorphic trees in literature, but as it is not a static concept, it allows for overlaps between categories and dynamic adaptations for other cases of anthropomorphised subjects. The three markers are Physicality, Sentience, and Language and may appear also in combinations. The modes are Projection, Manifestation, and Hybridity. As anthropomorphisms strongly intersect with theories of nonhuman agency, this, too, will be discussed in the final section of this article.

Keywords: Anthropomorphism, material ecocriticism, nonhuman agency, trees

Resumen

La ecocrítica tiende a reconocer los antropomorfismos como una posible herramienta para crear empatía hacia los no humanos, pero al hacerlo, en la mayoría de los casos, cataloga dicha herramienta como demasiado sentimental para la literatura medioambiental seria. Este artículo pretende establecer una categorización de los antropomorfismos en los medios de comunicación que permita un análisis más diverso y detallado de los sujetos no humanos que han sido humanizados. Pretende superar la idea predominante de que las descripciones antropomórficas se limitan a los animales no humanos y, por tanto, amplía el término al proceso de humanización de cualquier cosa que no sea humana. Siguiendo la corriente de pensamiento sugerida por el nuevo materialismo y la ecocrítica material, se considera que los no humanos poseen agencia y que el hecho de darle forma antropomórfica permite a los humanos empatizar con ellos. La categorización del antropomorfismo que se propone se divide en tres marcadores y modos. Los marcadores representan qué parte de lo humano puede observarse en el sujeto antropomorfizado, mientras que los modos definen cómo se realiza el proceso. Este artículo ejemplifica los conceptos de marcadores y modos a través de los árboles antropomórficos en la literatura, pero como no son conceptos estáticos, permite los solapamientos entre categorías y adaptaciones dinámicas para otros casos de sujetos antropomorfizados. Los tres marcadores son el carácter físico, la sensibilidad y el lenguaje, y pueden aparecer también en combinaciones. Los modos son proyección, manifestación e hibridación. Dado que los

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antropomorfismos se cruzan en numerosas ocasiones con las teorías de la agencia no humana, se discutirá esto también en la sección final del artículo.

Palabras clave: Antropomorfismo, ecocrítica material, agencia no humana, árboles.

Introduction

From everyday projections of human emotions onto our pets, to abstract concepts about the inner thoughts of matter, anthropomorphism is a feature used on various different levels. It is not only a tool in literary analysis but can be found in everyday language as well as in academic papers across disciplines. In seeing the human in the nonhuman, the seemingly strict division of the nature/culture spheres—divisions that are (hu)man-made concepts, primarily originating from Western ontologies—come loose and may even change the way we humans view other beings and other matter. When speaking of the nonhuman, this essay refers to any form of being or matter that is seen as nonhuman from a human perspective. That which is not seen as human has the potential to become more like humans through, for example, anthropomorphism. This does not imply that becoming more human is desirable for the nonhuman, as all matter has value in its own right. But to present the nonhuman as more human-like can have positive effects on human-nonhuman relations. The examination of anthropomorphic techniques should be of particular value in ecocriticism since the relation between humans and their environments is a central topic in texts of ecocritical interest.

Ecocriticism, as a field within literary studies, analyses a variety of texts that bear some relation to environmental themes including agency beyond the human. However, some significant gaps in the study of anthropomorphisms so far remain within this discipline, which this paper aims to explore. The main issues are that previous research has primarily considered anthropomorphism in denigrating terms, and that discussions have almost exclusively been limited to the humanisation of nonhuman animals. There also seems to have been a lack of categorising different forms of anthropomorphic usage which this essay aims to solve by providing a toolkit for the analysis of anthropomorphisms. For the purpose of elaborating this toolkit, the essay will focus on literary examples. Most cases are taken from fictional works in the genre of speculative fiction. However, that the toolkit is not limited to this genre is seen in the case of Peter Wohlleben's popular science book *Das geheime Leben der Bäume* (2015). This essay will first contextualise the topic and elaborate on the shortcomings of previous approaches. The sections on the markers and modes of anthropomorphism will then explain the new approach that I propose. The three markers of anthropomorphism are Physicality, Sentience, and Language, providing categories through which the nonhuman in a narrative can be changed to become more human. These markers are then realised through (usually) one of the three modes: Projection, Manifestation, and Hybridity. As the present paper mainly aims at suggesting a new theory, rather than the detailed application thereof, the examples

for each marker and mode are given directly in the respective section. This essay will only discuss cases of arboreal anthropomorphism as the concept has been initially created with humanised trees in mind, yet it may be applied and adapted to other nonhuman matter, too. The selection of examples is highly Eurocentric which neither means that other cultures do not have unique connections to trees, too, and may even express this also through anthropomorphisms, nor that European or Western culture is one homogenous culture. While the examples here are all taken from literary texts, examples from audiovisual material such as the Peter Jackson adaptation of Tolkien's *The Two Towers* and the Ents therein indicate that the application of this toolkit is not necessarily limited to the page.

Once the toolbox for analysis is set up and explained with examples, the final part will discuss the topic of agency. It is important to look at agency since anthropomorphic depictions of nonhumans have the potential to influence how we humans perceive the agency of those that are not human. There is a tendency to demonise anthropomorphism for being inherently anthropocentric—both among ecocritics and natural scientists—; however, I argue that anthropocentrism is not inherently negative, but rather can allow humans to understand and empathise with the nonhuman.

Ecocriticism and Anthropomorphisms

The approach to anthropomorphic agency proposed in this essay situates itself in the wider academic field of ecocriticism, which concerns itself with the analysis of literary works in regard to environmental issues (Morgan 384; Buell 138). It is no longer expedient to limit oneself to literary material as the subject of study. Hence "the focus of the field has broadened recently to consider other cultural artefacts such as film and media" (Morgan 384), which this essay does not do itself, but it strongly encourages the application of the proposed concept to other mediums.

Ecocritics have long acknowledged the topic of anthropomorphism as a literary technique. However, previous research, or the lack thereof, has left the concept wildly understudied as well as giving it a bad reputation. Lawrence Buell and Greg Garrard, for example, are very tentative in their handling of anthropomorphism as they see in it the risk of being too anthropocentric even if it is "done in the interest of dramatizing the claims of plight of the natural world" (Buell 134). Garrard rightfully notes that anthropomorphism "has until recently been used exclusively as a pejorative term implying sentimental projection of human emotions onto animals" (154). The criticism of sentimentalism suggests that emotional involvement hinders the "proper" use of anthropomorphic writing, and yet avoiding our own emotions is not possible as they inform how we think about and act with other matter (Weik von Mossner 183). Thus, if emotionality is inevitable, it does not serve to generalise sentimentalism as inherently negative.

Nevertheless, the cautious voices should not be entirely ignored because, as with many tools, it depends on how they are used. Material ecocriticism's insistence

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on the agency of all matter to tell their stories, helps to counteract these rather suspicious attitudes towards anthropomorphism. Material ecocriticism and its concept of storied matter is a useful way to reconcile material agency and anthropomorphism (Iovino 74; Oppermann 10). This essay agrees with the approaches that see anthropomorphism as having a great potential to be a tool that, when applied consciously, can make nonhuman agency tangible for humans.

When ecocritics like Buell and Garrard mention anthropomorphism, they only consider it in relation to animals and animal studies. To counter this tendency, this paper will focus on the humanised depictions of trees. Interdisciplinary approaches to plant studies like *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature* (Gagliano et al.) certainly help solve the problem of zoocentricism in ecocritical tradition. Studies that centre plants as the nonhuman are certainly needed, yet scholarship must not stop at plants. Instead, it is important to value "the capacity of nonhuman matter to participate in the construction of stories" (Raipola 264).

The toolkit proposed here also aims to tackle the problem of differentiating "between kinds of anthropomorphism" (Garrard 155). Garrard himself distinguishes between 'crude' and 'sophisticated' anthropomorphisms which is a valid distinction if one only wants to compare the 'productive' with the 'unproductive.' Neither crude nor sophisticated anthropomorphisms are clearly defined or elaborated on by Garrard and therefore do not pose a suitable basis to identify more subtle differences in their use. The phenomenon is much more complex than the above-mentioned, and rather biased, binary suggests. Upon closer comparison of humanised trees in different literary texts, the three markers of anthropomorphism I identified relate to what shape the anthropomorphised being takes in a text. In addition to the markers, the different modes of anthropomorphism shed light on *how* the technique is used in a text. In combination, these categories work as tools not only to identify anthropomorphic descriptions, but also to determine their inherent potential agency as offered to the humanised subject.

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Anthropomorphic Markers

The primary category of anthropomorphisms consists of three markers which each describe a way of representing the nonhuman in a humanised way. The first, and most superficial, marker is Physicality, which applies to all instances in which an anthropomorphised subject is described to have physical similarities to humans. This marker is strictly limited to the physical description. It is, however, not limited to outward appearances but applies to internal organs or features of human corporeality, too. Whether the human features are the product of human imagination projected onto something nonhuman or if the text is describing a tree or animal that really has some physical resemblance to humans is determined not by the marker but by the mode of representation, which will be elaborated on in the next section.

An example of the first marker would be trees whose boughs are called arms, or which have legs that enable them to mirror human mobility. In concrete terms this

can be realised as in *Silver in the Wood* by Emily Tesh where "Bramble lifted her head sharply" (Tesh 30) with Bramble being a tree-like figure who possesses human physical traits such as a head and eyes. Naturally, humans are not the only beings whose bodies have heads and eyes; however, these features are considered as anthropomorphic, too, even if they are not exclusively human. When assigning eyes to a tree, most humans would by default imagine human eyes rather than those of another animal.

The second marker of anthropomorphism is Sentience. Here, the focus is on the subject's depiction of a Sentience that parallels that of humans. Although many animals possess sentience, the signs of sentience in nonanimals are still often considered to be mere anthropomorphisms; thus I will necessarily address this attribute as an assumed anthropomorphism since these characteristics are perceived through a human lens. Sentience includes both human ways of thinking and the capability to experience certain emotions and the sensory world in a "human" manner. Sentience is, in fact, the broadest marker as it extends to essentially anything that originates in the human mind, including the measurement of time in artificial constructs such as minutes and weeks, as well as social constructs like politics and value systems, to name a few. Aspects of social life are considered here also as part of the Sentience marker, since social interaction is informed by psychological concepts and thus by Sentience. When applying the markers and modes to anthropomorphic animals, how far the species' social behaviour is inherent and where the anthropomorphism sets in should, however, be considered. This contrast is one example of the special role of animals in this field.

To determine the amount of agency the Sentience marker provides to the nonhuman subject, it is necessary to consider the mode with which it is realised, considering, for example, whether the subjects are able to act upon their feelings and thoughts or not. Is it a woodworker imagining that the trees are listening to their every move, or is the wood also portrayed as being able to act upon the intruder by, for instance, actively dropping boughs as a warning to not harm the trees? A literary example of humanlike arboreal sentience is Ursula K. LeGuin's 1971 short science-fiction story "Vaster Than Empires and More Slow" in which the protagonists encounter a sentient forest on a foreign planet. It is established that the human group's empath "could pick up emotions or sentience from anything that felt" (LeGuin 9) which not only applies to the empath's colleagues, but he is also able to connect with the foreign planet's forest, or, plant-brain entity. The forest is assigned a "forest-mind" or "plant-mind" which emits "human"-like emotions (LeGuin 26) and can thus be classified as an anthropomorphism of Sentience. There are many such examples in science fiction, a genre that tends to be much more open towards expanded ideas of sentience and agency.

The markers of anthropomorphism can, but do not have to, appear in isolation. The presence of one or more markers proves that a case of anthropomorphism is at hand and therefore qualifies a text for the analysis of anthropomorphic modes. An example of a combination of the first two markers would be to describe a tree as

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"weeping," which, according to Tzachi Zamir, is a frequent anthropomorphic tendency in relation to trees (442). It both signifies the presence of human emotions like sadness or grief that would cause the weeping, and simultaneously implies the presence of human-like eyes or other physical characteristics that make it physically possible to (appear to) weep. Additionally, the final marker, Language, can naturally be combined with the previous ones, too, as the interconnected usage of markers is not uncommon.

For a nonhuman subject's description to qualify for the final marker, it needs to give the subject the power of Language and Communication. Humans have discovered and attempted to decode many nonhuman animals' interspecies forms of communicate, but to imagine nonanimal beings and matter to possess language still seems to be a mental leap that meets consistent resistance. Communication between trees or other plants is disputed among researchers, although plant scientists are increasingly gathering evidence that plants do communicate. Naturally, even the argument for chemical transmission of information between trees is a very different form of communication than human language systems. Monica Gagliano, a plant scientist herself, points out that

> [t]he concept of the language of plants is neither a flight of fancy nor a figure of speech, symbol, metaphor, or allegory. Its precursors are theories that decouple language from a linguistic or verbal root and instead conceptualize it as an inherent attribute of all living and non-living phenomena. (xviii)

Her statement aligns with ideas in material ecocriticism, yet the language of trees can be difficult for the human mind to grasp. Nevertheless, anthropomorphisms may broaden our imaginative ability to perceive and recognize their plant language(s). Not being able to understand or notice a being's language does not mean it does not have one. Rather, one may consider the possibility of "language [as] a fundamentally natural and inevitable consequence of being" (Gagliano 95). This marker can be realised, for example, by a human character imagining that the nonhuman other is talking to them, but it can also appear in the shape of a tree that speaks the language of humans, or vice versa. At the core of this marker is the fact that a form of language is established that effectively transcends communication barriers between the human and nonhuman world. The tree's language does not have to be understood by the humans, but it must be possible to identify the arboreal language as having a similar complexity and quality to human language. This does not mean that language is limited to voice and vocalisation (Marder 112–13). Rather, vegetal beings should be considered to "talk without articulating and naming […] they say through shaping their own matter" (Irigaray 129).

An example of the language of trees in literature can be seen in Maggie Stiefvater's young adult fantasy novel *The Raven Boys* (2012) where the magical and sentient forest Cabeswater is a key location—and arguably a character in its own right—where "[t]he trees speak Latin" (Stiefvater 272). Most characters are not able to understand the trees for a lack of fluency in Latin on the one hand and the trees speaking in a modified pseudo-Latin on the other. In the later novels, the protagonists

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acquire new tools and methods to understand Cabeswater, but initially, they are unable to clearly communicate with the forest despite their awareness of the trees having a complex language system.

Another concrete example of this marker would be in Terry Pratchett's fantasy Discworld novel *The Light Fantastic* (1986) in which wizard Rincewind has an entire conversation with a tree which concludes with the magician telling himself that "[i]f I was talking to a tree I'd be mad, and I'm not mad, so trees can't talk" (Pratchett 25). Through Rincewind, who is convinced that language is a trait that is not found in the arboreal realm, Pratchett plays with the concept of language as a purely human characteristic. Despite Rincewind's determination that trees cannot talk, the author proves the opposite as later other characters acknowledge that talking trees are nothing out of the ordinary within the fantastic realm of the Discworld. Furthermore, the author signifies the tree's words in parentheses just as every other character's spoken word and thus describes these trees as being anthropomorphic in terms of them speaking in the same language as the (mostly) human characters.[1]

Sentience and Language are closely connected since some form of sentience must be present in order for the nonhuman being to be able to use language in a way that is understandable by humans. However, just because the nonhuman subject speaks the same language as the human one, it does not mean that the nonhuman understands how humans feel or think. In terms of temporality, for example, a tree may be able to talk to humans, but through its long life span it does not grasp how humans experience time or vice versa.

Of course, one may argue that every attempt at capturing thoughts of the nonhuman world in human words will be anthropocentric and anthropomorphic in practice as we project our humanness on everything that does not possess it, by using our own language and imagination to write about it (Raipola 263; Buell 134). This observation is true, and yet it is not the most productive approach to group every attempt at writing about the nonhuman under the umbrella term of anthropomorphism. Just as there will always be a trace of the human in all human writing, there will most likely be a trace of Sentience in texts which use the marker of Language in their depiction of the anthropomorphic.

Anthropomorphic Modes

As I have established the three markers that identify anthropomorphisms, I will now address the three main modes in which anthropomorphic depictions might be realised. These modes work hand in hand with the previously mentioned markers; a marker tells us *what* the text makes us see and what level of anthropomorphism is applied. A mode characterises *how* this marker is realised. While it is possible and not uncommon to combine markers, modes can, too, appear in combination. However, in

[1] In dealing with science fiction and fantasy literature, some characters may be humanoid but not entirely human. In many cases they nevertheless stand in for the human audience and can be considered human in their function within the narrative.

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most cases one mode will dominate how anthropomorphism is executed.

The first mode can be referred to as the mode of Projection in which the marker or markers are not manifested in the anthropomorphised subject but are humanising ideas that are projected onto the subject. It mirrors broader definitions of anthropomorphism which refer to projection as its key feature (Garrard 154; Chesher 2047; Joney 2063). Projection, here, is used without attaching evaluative connotations such as "sentimental" or "crude" to it as those tend to function only to comment on this phenomenon, not to explain it. If a text claims that a tree looks sad, it projects the human emotion of sadness onto the tree which ascribes a capability of Sentience to the nonhuman other and thus realises the second marker through the mode of Projection. There is a tendency for this mode to be more about the individual human since the projection mainly happens in the mind. Projection can also be shared among humans, but the anthropomorphised subject remains equally passive in those cases.

Central to this mode is that the audience is not informed about the subject's perspective and thus disables an active role of the anthropomorphised other. Despite its passivity, the subject is not reduced to object status as the anthropomorphism assigns it humanity. The nonhuman subject can also have agency over the human in the mode of Projection as even the imagination of being watched by the surrounding trees has an effect on the human. This mode poses a unilateral narration of human/nonhuman encounters from the human anthropomorphising author, narrator, or character's point of view. It tends to appear on the level of metaphors and similes rather than on the larger scale of the text such as plot or characters. This is mainly caused by the human tendency to see the human in everything, even the nonhuman, and thus Projection can happen more easily as a by-product of simply describing the nonhuman world through the human lens. Most owners of pets will project their human emotions or concepts onto their animals, for example by referring to cats who meow a lot as "talkative." In this case, the pet owner interprets the meows as a form of human-like language and sees the human trait of being talkative in the frequency of its meowing.

Instances of anthropomorphic Projection, among other markers and modes, can be found all throughout Robert Holdstock's 1984 novel *Mythago Wood*. The selected passage illustrates how the character ascribes the surrounding forest qualities to underline how he feels in the wood: "I felt a chill, an odd tingle, a sense of being watched. Christian noticed my discomfort and admitted that he felt it too, the presence of the wood, the gentle breathing of the trees" (Holdstock 112). Initially, one may think that the character feels watched by someone human, but in the second sentence, it is made clear that he does not see a human entity as the cause of this sensation, but rather projects this feeling onto the forest itself. The wood is furthermore described as breathing, yet there is no description of a tree with the physical capability for breathing. Here, breathing is used simply as the anthropomorphisation of the sound of the leaves rustling in the wind. Naturally, breathing is not an activity exclusive to human animals, however, the focaliser does not provide any hint whether it is the human or nonhuman breath that he projects

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onto the surrounding trees. It can be assumed that the human's anthropocentrism makes it extremely likely that if they were to project an animal's feature onto a tree, they would specify this.

While the previous mode can also be found in realistic texts, the following two modes require more than the Projection of the human and call for active participation of the nonhuman in the narrative. Thus, the second and third modes will often require magical, supernatural, mythic, or speculative elements to realise them. The Manifestation and Hybridity modes can therefore be found primarily in sources that fall into the genre of speculative fiction as it offers a better equipped toolkit for the realisation of anthropomorphised subjects. This categorisation is, however, not restricted to certain genres. Despite speculative fiction being a good basis for some modes, they may equally be found in popular science books, as *Das geheime Leben der Bäume* (2015) by Peter Wohlleben shows. In his book, Wohlleben walks the thin line between making scientific discoveries accessible to a broad public and using anthropomorphisms to explain things that science cannot (yet) confirm. This can be observed in the case of memory where he claims that "and something else would also be proven by this: Trees must have a memory. How else would they make internal comparisons of the lengths of days; how else should they count warm days? [my translation]" (Wohlleben 135). Therefore, the case of Wohlleben illustrates that nonfiction is not limited to the Projection mode, but rather that conventional genre boundaries can be bent by using anthropomorphisms. In general, the usage of such stylistic techniques in scientific writing is frowned upon, as this is also the main point of criticism on Wohlleben's work (Kingsland 2). Some scholars, however, go as far as arguing actively for such trends in writing that actively bend genre conventions. As the environmental crises are now so urgent, some argue that environmental writing can and should no longer limit itself to one genre, that interdisciplinarity is not an asset but a necessity (Ghosh 32–33; Braun and Rosenthal 194–95; Martin 225).

In contrast to the mode of Projection, the mode of Manifestation is centred around the subject being an active part of the text and shows a Manifestation of the anthropomorphic marker(s). Human Physicality, Sentience, or Language might be identified by the human; however, they are not only a projection of their humanness onto the nonhuman, but the nonhuman is, in fact, depicting these features—at least within the narrative. Just because the subject has a more active part in this mode, it is not necessarily represented as a character. The Language marker would manifest in the first mode as a hiker who imagines hearing the forest talking while the second mode would mean that the voice was not a product of the person's mind, but of the surrounding wood's actual ability to communicate with them. There may be instances in which the lines between the first two modes blur when the text describes an anthropomorphic instance but does not specify whether it is caused by the human or nonhuman subject and thus disables a clear-cut categorisation into one of those modes. It is important to examine every case individually to determine the specific mode, or the combination of modes used by the author.

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Finally, the third mode is centred around the idea of Hybridity, which may initially evoke similarities to the first marker but provides a far broader application than simply a physical or genetic hybrid being. Hybridity functions as a mode rather than a marker as it is more concerned with creating a unique bond between the human and nonhuman. This can be applied, as with the previous modes, to one or multiple markers and is thus not limited to a physical hybrid being. A human character who shares both their own human sentience and those of the nonhuman other can be a hybrid of the mind. The Hybridity mode is even imaginable in terms of, say, a human-stone hybrid if this mental connection means that the hybridised mind fundamentally understands both what it means to be human as well as a stone. Raipola's theory of material ecocriticism comes in handy here as he argues that all matter is "*storied matter* [original emphasis]" (Raipola 264) and has their own story to tell. An anthropomorphic hybrid can allow the nonhuman's story to be made comprehensible to the human reader.

This ties in with one central aspect of the Hybrid as this mode is necessarily centred around a humanoid being in one way or another and therefore this hybrid can take the role of an ambassador, or translator when it comes to the Language marker. In a purely physical hybrid this mediating function is achieved in a more passive and rather symbolic way. Hybridity offers a strong potential for the human to engage with the nonhuman and can attempt to answer questions such as "Who speaks for the trees?" or "Who are their stewards?" The best example to illustrate arboreal hybridity can be identified in the fantasy classic *The Two Towers*, the second instalment in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series. In the novel, the character Treebeard represents the hybrid race of the Ents who are beings that are hybrids in each of the three markers. They have "large feet" (Tolkien 463) that allow them mobility and not roots, they have faces, and their skin is made of bark. In addition to a merged physicality, Treebeard does not understand all concepts of other species, but he is very aware of that fact. He knows that species like the hobbits have very different perceptions of time, yet he fails to properly comprehend the reasons for it (Kautz 70) so that he frequently repeats that they "must not be hasty" (Tolkien 474). Finally, the Language marker is also visible in the simple fact that Treebeard, among other Ents, is able to speak with the Hobbits. Aside from his native language Old Entish, he conveniently speaks the language of the Hobbits in with that a language the readers can understand.

While the Manifestation mode is centred around the tree, or other nonhuman entity, to which individual human traits are added, the third mode positions the human subject at its core and is therefore an embodied anthropomorphic mode that manifests the nonhuman in the human body and/or mind. One could claim that, if starting with the human as the base which is then merged with the arboreal this is not a case of anthropomorphism of the tree but rather an arbomorphism of the human. In this context it does well to remember that even if the text appears to project the nonhuman onto the human, it is still written by a human and not a tree. Therefore, human-tree hybrids will be considered here exclusively from the anthropomorphic perspective.

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Humanised Agency

The concept outlined above provides a new toolkit for the analysis and categorisation of anthropomorphisms. However, for these to be more effective in their ecocritical application, nonhuman agency must be included in the equation. Anthropomorphisms are a valuable phenomenon for (material) ecocritics to study as they bring the potential to heighten understanding of agency beyond the human. While the overall environment would benefit from decentring the human, we cannot escape perceiving the world through our human lens. Therefore, anthropomorphisms offer the possibility to establish better relations with the nonhuman world by imagining and writing them to some extent more like ourselves. It gives us a chance to understand nonhuman "storied matter" (Iovino and Oppermann 1), that is, the stories that are inherent to all matter, but that we for the most part are unable to access. Raipola insists to clarify that "things are not telling their 'own stories' to anyone but are simply behaving in a way that can be interpreted as a story or several stories" (277). While matter does not act for humans, "narrative agencies contain us as integral parts of their unfolding stories, which have the power to challenge our human-centred interpretation of the world" (Oppermann 13).

The connection between anthropomorphisms and material agency is crucial as the former "is recognized as a narrative technique employed to stress the *agentic power* of matter and horizontality of its elements [emphasis added]" (Raipola 264). Therefore, humanising the nonhuman has the inherent potential to show that "[a]gency, therefore, is not to be necessarily and exclusively associated with human beings and with human intentionality, but it is a pervasive and inbuilt property of matter, as part and parcel of its generative dynamism" (Iovino and Oppermann 3). Iovino and Oppermann actively counter the criticism of anthropomorphism by concluding that it "can even act against dualistic ontologies and be a 'dis-anthropocentric' stratagem meant to reveal the similarities and symmetries existing between humans and nonhumans" (8).

Since the material turn in the humanities and the rise of theories such as Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) and Alfred Gell's theory of Co-Actants, the possible definitions of agency are ever increasing. Most of the earlier concepts all remain within a Western ontology which is deeply founded in human exceptionalism, meaning that material agency is never seen as inherent, but always as something relational to humans (Oyen 3–4). The two definitions of agency that I work with in this essay relate to the typical definitions that assume intentionality and the subject's ability to act upon its intentions. This definition works well for human subjects, but if applied to other matter, it inhibits the analysis of nonhuman agency. Pearson notes that "[w]hile intentionality-based agency is evidently extremely important, there exists more than one kind of agency" (Pearson 711). The second type of agency is, rather, associated with the universal agency of matter, i.e., its influence on the world. All matter has the ability to influence other matter. Despite this paper's attempt to transcend overly rigid categories of nature and culture, a distinction between

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(mainly) human and (mainly) nonhuman forms of agency is nevertheless necessary. As Owain Jones and Paul Cloke rightfully warn, "ascribing intentionality to non-human agents can lead to dangerous forms of reductionist essentialism" (81). To prevent such issues, the main distinction between forms of agency made here is between intentionality-based and influence-based agency. It is important to note, however, that this does not signify that one form of agency is more valid than the other. Raipola as well as Iovino and Oppermann highlight that agency is not hierarchical, so that even if some matter has agency based on intention and some based on influence, the former is not a superior version of the latter (Iovino and Oppermann 3; Raipola 264). Therefore, the presence of human-like agency is not regarded as an inherently better indicator for a more appropriate representation of material agency in a text.

Yet, the distinction between human and nonhuman agency is necessary even if this may seem contradictory to the anti-hierarchical approach to agency established in the previous paragraph. As stated earlier, the distinction between intentional and influential agency is still needed since new materialism and material ecocriticism seek to transcend the prevalent ideology of human exceptionalism. Most non-ecocritics who believe 'their', that is human, agency to be unique, may be more susceptible to human-like depictions of agency in the nonhuman. Therefore, even if there is no inherent hierarchy of agencies from the material ecocritic perspective, intentional agency as the conventionally 'human' agency still tends to be identified more easily as it is closer to what we humans are used to.

Furthermore, the intersection of anthropomorphism and agency must be clarified. What some scholars have called crude or unproductive anthropomorphisms reveals that anthropomorphic writing always has the risk of allowing the nonhuman only a form of pseudo-agency and tokenism. Garrard points out that "while it might seem that anthropomorphism engenders kindness toward animals and acceptance of their agency, in its crude form it is really a way of *not seeing* animals in their own right at all [original emphasis]" (Garrard 165). Despite the fact that I am rather critical of ecocriticism's treatment of anthropomorphism, Garrard's point must not be ignored when analysing humanising literature. This paper argues for the great potential of anthropomorphisms, but they are ultimately a tool whose misuse may also have the opposite effect, as Garrard highlights.

As Thomas Nagel points out, imagining the experience of nonhuman others is difficult as we are "restricted to the resources of [our] own mind[s], and those resources are inadequate to the task" (439). But just because we cannot know for certain how it feels to be nonhuman, it still matters how we represent our attempts at imagining it. Hardly any literary text exploring nonhuman agency does so with the explicit purpose of material ecocriticism in mind but may nevertheless function to execute the main idea that all matter has its story to tell. Raipola asks us "to respect the creativity of matter in its own terms, [and] we have to acknowledge that its numerous agencies are not performing stories for the human audience, but exist and act of their own accord" (276). However, this is only thinkable in theory. In practice, the stories that are being told by, and to, humans about the life of materiality, will

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naturally always be tainted by how we, as humans, imagine the Other. This bears the risk of depicting nonhuman subjects overwhelmingly in one way or another. Pearson points out that there is, for instance, a tendency to depict nonhuman agency only through its role of resistance (713). A textual example can be easily observed in Tolkien's writing where both Old Man Willow and the Ents mainly appear as actors when they are taking revenge on humans or rage against the destruction of the environment. "[T]he nonhuman-as-resister model of nonhuman agency defines and values the nonhuman world solely through its ability to impede human intentions" (Pearson 713), which is problematic insofar as the only active quality that matter is attributed is fundamentally related to humans. This starkly contradicts Raipola's point on material agency in its own right as it robs nonhuman agents of their power to act. One approach to reconcile the model of resistance with unrelational material agency is to be found in Amitav Ghosh's essay collection *The Great Derangement*:

> Can the timing of this renewed recognition [i.e. of nonhuman agencies and theories] be a mere coincidence, or is the synchronicity an indication that there are entities in the world, like forests, that are fully capable of inserting themselves into our processes of thought? And if that were so, could it not *also* be said that the earth has itself intervened to revise those habits of thought that are based on the Cartesian dualism that arrogates all intelligence and agency to the human while denying them to every other kind of being? [emphasis in original] (31)

If we follow Ghosh's suggestion, the aspect of resistance becomes nature's active reaction to the immense destruction that we humans impose on it. One may even go as far as implying that the very reason why more people begin to regard agency as no longer exclusively human is directly influenced by nature itself, which then would only further support the thesis that all matter has the inherent agency to influence other matter. Wherever one may situate the agency of the natural world, be it in the position of the resister to human intervention or as an independent force influencing humans, human and nonhuman agencies are deeply entangled. Elements of nature seen as agents are being integrated into the stories we tell, but simultaneously

> narrative agencies contain us as integral parts of their unfolding stories, which have the power to challenge our human-centred interpretations of the world. Narrative agencies, in short, represent a new ecology for understanding the ultimate ontology of a meaningfully articulate planet. (Oppermann 13)

Therefore, the moment one accepts the agency of nonhuman beings and matter, our reciprocal entanglement with these agencies is revealed. In literature, this realisation can be supported by the use of thoughtful anthropomorphisms that signify to the audience that humans are not the only ones who possess agency. Whether the humanised subject exhibits influence, or intentionality-based agency, can have an impact on how well the text (or other medium) manages to engage the human audience. If the agency depicted is too human, too intentionality based, the risk of overriding the nonhuman perspective exists, while the use of influential agency may go unnoticed to some readers. Ultimately, anthropomorphism and agency are inherently interlinked, and it is paramount to investigate their entanglements.

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Conclusion

Ecocritics have long critiqued the phenomenon of anthropomorphism although the literary technique is anything but a recent invention. This paper provides a new approach to not only categorise anthropomorphisms, but to destigmatise its use. It is a toolkit that equips scholars who want to conduct research in the field of ecocriticism and beyond. While material ecocriticism provides a good basis for an academic change in approaching the nonhuman world and its inherent agencies, this categorisation shall not be limited to this specific field. It is rather an invitation to reconsider agencies beyond the human in interdisciplinary fields, too.

The textual examples given here were largely taken from fantasy and science fiction literature, however, anthropomorphism need not be limited to the application in these fields. Future research may, for example, specifically target genres such as children's literature, or even nonfictional as well as academic writing. As a rough rule, the method suggested here can be adapted and applied to any case of anthropomorphism regardless of the genre or medium. It may do well to further investigate the specific potentials that non-literary media have in terms of humanising nonhumans and making their agency accessible.

Identifying when and how we humanise nonhumans is the first step to rethinking agencies and the relationships we as humans have to other matter. It must not be ignored that there are also risks in imagining how nonhumans think and feel, but ultimately, anthropomorphisms provide a tool with significant potential for reconsiderations of the human, nonhuman, or more-than-human that should not be rejected just because it also can be misused or misunderstood. If applied well, it may make us challenge our own perceptions of the world around us and eventually open our eyes to see that it is not only the human species that is worth protecting.

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