

## INCREASING PUPILS' INTEREST IN NATURE PROTECTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH A PHILOSOPHICAL LITERARY STORY

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**Abstract:** The aim of the article is to analyse the possibilities of stimulating interest in sustainable development, climate and environment improvement through work with philosophical literary stories. In this article, we focus on a specific philosophical story called *The World According to Anna*, written by the Norwegian philosopher and writer Jostein Gaarder. The book is stated for readers of older school age. The main method of the research part is the interpretation of the above artistic text with an emphasis on the depiction of elements appearing as a motivation to think about the complex issues of the environment and its protection. Subsequently, we discuss the possibilities of working with similar books in the process of education.

**Keywords:** sustainable development, environmental improvement, education, philosophical literary stories

### 1 Introduction

There are many ways to form a positive attitude towards the environment and its sustainable development in working with students. Which methods will be used to achieve this goal depends primarily on the teacher, his relationship to nature, his commitment to this issue, the nature of the school subject and other factors. We consider the use of a philosophical literary story with the theme of nature as an alternative to the traditional methods of forming the values of nature protection. One of the authors writing philosophical stories is Jostein Gaarder. In his books (mainly philosophical literary stories) he deals with issues of human existence, the essence of things and being, as well as the search for the meaning of the origin of the world. Books of this author are intended especially for children in the older school age, but these stories can be read on several levels, so they can also attract an adult reader. The book *The World According to Anna* is popular among many readers of the world with its parallel story, deep philosophical thoughts and simple language. The main character, Anna, is a sixteen-year-old curious girl, in some ways different from her peers and in some ways she solves the same problems as current teenagers. We recommend including the story according to the maturity of the reader. The story (or its parts) can be included in several school subjects. Except for literature, it can be biology, geography, civics, history, ethics, religion, or some other subjects depending on the topic of the curriculum. The teacher is able to work with this artistic text in various ways, at least he can recommend the text to pupils as an optional reading. Parts of the text can be used as a stimulus for discussion in which values such as love, honesty, nature protection, health, wisdom or education could be solved.

### 2 Literary stories focused on nature protection and sustainability

Several authors describe economic development as a burdensome state for the functioning of nature (eg Špirko, 1999; Huba, 2004; Lipovetsky, 2007; Pelikán, 2011; Pechočiaková Svitačová, 2020). There are many approaches to raising awareness of the need for sustainable development. Pechočiaková Svitačová (2020) pays attention to eco-literacy as one of the components of education for sustainable development. The author presents environmental literacy as useful in transforming the economy into a sustainable one. She argues over the continuation of negative global changes, the conflict between man and nature and argues that the role of educational institutions is to contribute to ensuring sustainable development through education for sustainability. Although we do not underestimate the influence of the media, politics, the economy and other sectors in ensuring sustainable development, this paper

focus mainly on education as a necessary instrument of creating a sustainable future. The connection between philosophy and literature in relation to nature protection and sustainable development is also represented by so-called eco-narratives, for example Pintes (2020) deals with the issue of eco-narratives in more detail.

In relation to this paper, we include the attitude of the authors Kollárová, Karasová, Nagyová (2019), which clarify the specifics of teaching the subjects of elementary realia at the first stage of primary school in connection to literary texts. They focus mainly on the curriculum about the forest environment, which is associated with literary text and the subsequent implementation of activating methods. Effective work with a literary text about the forest environment is a subject to an appropriate selection of the text, as well as functionally selected tasks and questions that stimulate pupils' activity of thinking. We consider the implementation of a philosophical literary story to be one of the ways to increase interest in nature protection and sustainable development. The philosophical literary stories are part of the artistic (fiction) literature, it contains philosophical categories, but it is characterized by simplicity in the thematic, content and linguistic aspect. The philosophical problems in this specific text are not limited for adults and these stories don't have to be formulated in such a way they are too distant for primary and secondary school pupils. One of the positive areas of philosophizing is that people of almost all ages can participate in it with pleasure and enjoyment. Working with a philosophical literary story (for example asking philosophical questions, discussion, role-playing) could provide the application of specific cognitive, behavioural and socio-emotional skills enriching pupils with challenges in nature protection.

### 3 Materials and Methods

The introduction of this paper shows that the primary material for working with data is the literary story *The World According to Anna*, written for pupils from about twelve years of age. We consider this book as appropriate in raising awareness of sustainable development and at the same time sufficiently stimulating it to develop an interest in nature protection and sustainable development by including a number of conflicting philosophical concepts. The main method of this paper is the interpretation of an artistic text and through it we deal with concepts such as climate change, ecological disasters, plant and animal extinction, cultural diversity, climate change and so on. These elements potentially observable in a philosophical literary story are subject to the interpretation of an artistic text, through which we can reveal the deeper meanings and functions of the text when focusing on the topic of nature protection and sustainable development.

Interpretation simply represents the reduction of the original text (in this case in written form) to key statements and at the same time creating explanations of meanings. Chrz (2013) describes the interpretation as extended understanding, 'answering the unanswered'. Interpretation of a literary text is a method that depends on the perception of the interpreting researcher, so it is necessary to take care to avoid possible underinterpretation (not displaying key elements of the literary text with respect to the topic) or overinterpretation (displaying text elements that don't result from the text). In the following chapter, through the interpretation of the literary text, we will reflect several elements that may be useful in supporting the formation of a positive relationship with nature.

#### 3.1 Interpretation of the philosophical artistic text *The World According to Anna* with a connection to the elements and values of the environment

The title of the book suggests that the core of the story is the inquiry of environmental issues. The reader encounters warnings

about the effects of climate change at the beginning of the story: *But on New Year's Eve the year Anna turned ten, no snow had fallen either on the mountain plateau or on the lowlands. Jack Frost had long held the countryside in his icy grip but, apart from the odd small drift, the mountains were untouched by snow. Even the high mountain terrain lay bare beneath the open sky, stripped of its winter cloak* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 7). In addition, the author initially outlines the topic of animal migration to human dwellings: *The absence of snow had not been the only talking point that Christmas. Over the holidays, reindeer had been spotted down by the farms, and people joked that Father Christmas might have left behind a couple on his rooftop travels. Anna had sensed that there was something scary, something alarming about this. Reindeer had never strayed down to the villages before. Anna had seen pictures in the newspaper of farmers trying to feed a poor, frightened creature: Wild Reindeer in Mountain Villages the caption had read* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 7-8). The main character – Anna – perceived the beauty of nature by the lake: *Under a thin membrane of ice she saw moss and lichen, crowberries and black bearberries with crimson leaves. It was as though she had moved into a more precious, a more refined, world* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 8). But then, there is a sharp contrast. When Anna sees dead mice on the ground, she is shocked: *Soon, though, she spotted a dead mouse ... and another. Under a dwarf birch she found a dead lemming. By now Anna understood, and she no longer felt as though she was on an adventure* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 8-9).

Despite the fact that the story is taking place in Norway, the problem of warm winters is not uncommon in other European countries. The teacher can also draw attention to this phenomenon of global warming through some parts of the text. In the following pages, the story is postponed by six years, two days before Anna's sixteenth birthday, when she received a new smartphone, but she also received an ancient ring with a ruby inherited from her aunt Sunnive. The reader finds out that the main protagonist is in the first year of high school, and about her lush imagination from an early age: *Ever since she was small, Anna had been told she had a lively imagination. If she was asked what she was thinking, she would reel off endless stories, and no one had thought this was anything other than a good thing. But that spring, Anna had begun to believe some of the stories. She had a feeling that they were being sent to her, perhaps from another time, or even another reality* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 12-13). Anna had several sessions with a psychologist, who recommended that she should be examined by a psychiatrist in Oslo, who then played a key role in the story. In a session with Anna a psychiatrist Benjamin noticed her unusual behaviour, extraordinary talent and tendency to invent stories. Anna didn't hide her curiosity and asked him a few questions: *What about the doctor? Did he ever come up with strange stories? Did he also have dreams where he was a different person? Had his dreams ever come true?* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 14-15).

Although Anna is an extraordinary girl, Benjamin considers her healthy – her curiosity and the number of curious questions about everything that surrounds her make her special. The reader may notice the young girl's courage in asking questions, conversations can lead him to think more deeply about some topics. In the form of a dialogue, Anna talks to a psychiatrist: *'I think I got that,' he said. 'You may have such an active imagination that it seems to overflow. You can't believe that you made it all up yourself. But imagination is a quality everyone possesses, to a greater or lesser extent. Everyone has their own dream world. Not everyone, however, can remember what they dreamed the night before. This is where you appear to have a rare gift* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 15). Anna replied: *'But I still get a feeling that the dreams come to me from another world. Or from another time'* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 15). This part gradually outlines the solution of the themes of time, reality or fiction. The story contains some real information about the year 2012: *To Anna's surprise, the psychiatrist didn't miss a beat. 'I think today there's about forty per cent more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere than there was before we seriously started burning oil, coal and gas, cutting down forests and farming intensively. It's more than*

*600,000 years since the CO2 level was so high, and the problem is man-made'* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 18).

The author raises several concerns about climate change in the dialogues: *'I mean, I'm afraid of climate change. I'm afraid that we're risking our climate and environment without a second thought for future generations'* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 17). The philosophical context is the conversation of doctor Benjamin and Anna about the basic problems of human being: *'Sometimes I ask myself whether we live in a culture that intentionally represses fundamental truths. Do you understand what I mean by that?' 'I think so. We try to forget unpleasant things'* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 18). *I agree with you, Anna. It wouldn't surprise me if less than one per cent of the population can explain what the carbon balance is'* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 20). Finally, Benjamin indirectly supported Anna for the activity: *Perhaps you and Jonas should set up a pressure group in your village. That would be the best course of action. As a psychiatrist I know it's not healthy to become consumed by your worries. So, if I may give you a piece of advice it would be: go for it. Make something happen'* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 22).

Another storyline stretches through the story, in which time moves to the date of December 12, 2082 and a character named Nova appears here. She lives in the same house as Anna, but the environment has changed. In the room where Anna used to sleep, there is an apparatus in which the currently extinct species appear. Nova is angry and furious, she is thinking: *The most significant cause of this mass extinction is global warming. It got out of hand decades ago. Only a hundred years earlier, this planet was outstandingly beautiful. In the course of this century it has lost its charm. The world will never be as it was* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 27).

Elements of sci-fi are complemented by the way *Nova looks at the camera at the Siberian tundra, bubbling and boiling* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 28) or *Nana comes into the garden carrying a big tray. She has made a casserole. Nova knows the food is synthetic. She is sick of all this synthetic food even though she is told it contains all the nutrients she needs* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 82) or *She walks to the crossroads where there was a petrol station in the olden days. Now it is a kind of staging post* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 51). The author captures the consequences of reckless human action: *Oil had run out. Almost all the fossil fuels had been used up. The rainforests had been burned down and the peat marshes had rotted. There was so much CO2 in the air and in the sea. Our planet's resources had been destroyed and people were starving* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 108). Sometimes it may seem to the reader that the predictions are exaggerated, but it is possible to assume that this is the author's intention to underline the situation: *This was sick. What right did mankind have to destroy other forms of life?* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 68). Many warnings are extreme: *Nature had been destroyed. Civilisation had almost broken down and the world's population was so much smaller than it is today* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 109), however, some scenarios may give the reader the impression of reality, for example in 2082 Nova flies in space with a friend: *Both of them have seen photos from the Apollo mission more than hundred years ago. The globe is unrecognisable now. It is much more obscured by clouds and storms. This tallies with their experience on the ground* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 154).

Nova, as representative of future generations, is dissatisfied with the state of the environment in which she lives: *Some of nature remains, but only the crumbs from the rich man's table. What she sees is wonderful, but she will not be fobbed off by it. She has the right to live in nature which is intact. Not holey, like a Swiss cheese* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 28-29). She looks at old articles written in 2012 (first published in 2013), which highlight the possible loss of natural resources, such as gas and oil, the extinction of animal species and the loss of biodiversity. She notes that there were several warnings. As she browses on the Internet, text written in the form of a letter appears on the monitor. She finds out that the letter is addressed to her, Nova, and it was written by her grandmother Anna fifty years ago. Nova wonders how her grandmother could have known she

would have a great-granddaughter. The letter takes over the behaviour of the human species, whose desire will never be fulfilled. Although we are alerted to the possible effects of our actions, we are not very interested in protecting the world: *When we use words like 'consumption' I suppose it is because we don't want to see that there is an upper limit. The cup is never full. A word which is hardly ever used now is 'enough'. Instead we overuse another word, which is shorter: 'more'... „A word we rarely use is 'save'. But words like 'eco-conscious' and 'carbon-neutral' appear more and more in newspapers* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 157-158).

The plot again focuses on the character of Anna, who had a dream about her granddaughter Nova and a devastated environment. Anna wonders if there was anything real about the dream and if it was just a fragment of her imagination. The story continues and she dreams of Nova again. In a dream, Nova criticizes her grandmother: *I want monkeys, lions and tigers, too. I want them all back. Why can't you understand? I want bears and wolves in Norway. And that funny sea parrot – what's it called? The puffin! And the curlew – don't forget about the curlew! I want bearberries and alpine speedwell and glacier buttercups and dwarf willow. Did you know that the dwarf willow was a bush even though it didn't grow more than five centimetres high? Or was it you who told me that?'; 'Do you know what I want? Shall I tell you? I want a million plants and animals to come back from extinction. No more, no less, Nana. I want to drink clean water straight from the tap. I want to go fishing in the river. And I want this clammy winter weather to end'* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 36-37). The old woman's ring, which she received on her sixteenth birthday, then plays an important role. She believes that the ruby ring has miraculous power. In part, the author also shows understanding between generations: *Anna and grandmother are friends now. Nana was sixteen once, too. Who hasn't been?* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 38). The granddaughter and her grandmother talk about how they could turn back time, make contact with their ancestors and warn them against plundering nature. In addition, Nova wants to return rock owls, otters and bluegills and their environment: *'And their habitats too? There's no use saving the animals two by two. Plants and animals must have something to live off, they have to thrive, so the rainforest must be restored, the acidification of the sea must be reversed, the mountain temperature must be brought down a few degrees, and the African savannah must be watered'* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 40). Anna considers the awakening from a dream as a miracle that gave the world and nature a new chance.

The story is made special by newspaper articles, encouraging readers of the story to think about the issues of the past and especially the future: *An important basis of all ethics has been the golden rule, or the principle of mutual respect: do to others as you would have them do to you. But the golden rule can no longer only have a horizontal dimension – in other words a 'we' and 'the others' We are beginning to realise that the principle of mutual respect also has a vertical dimension: do to the next generation as you would have had the previous one do to you. It is that simple. You should love your neighbour as yourself. Which, naturally enough, should include the next generation. It must include absolutely everyone who will live on this earth after us. All of mankind does not live at the same time. People have lived here before us, some are still living here now and some will come after us. Those who come after us are our fellow humans too. We have to treat them as we would want them to have treated us – if they had been the ones who had inhabited this planet first* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 46).

Elements of philosophical topics are also contained in the school work written by Jonas (Anna's boyfriend), for example in the sections: *But man as a species has been so successful that we are threatening our own existence. We have achieved so much that we are threatening the existence of all species* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 117) and *To restore the planet's biodiversity, we would need a Copernican shift in our thinking. Living as though everything revolves around our time is as naïve as thinking that everything in the sky orbits the earth. But our time is no more significant than any time to come. Of course our time is most significant to*

*us. But we can't live as if our era is the only one that matters.* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 118). The topic of the future is solved in many questions of the main characters: *'Weren't we wasting resources that coming generations could use? Weren't we letting batteries go flat when they should last much longer?* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 55).

The plot represents a reflection on the relationship between reality and fiction *'In the past Anna had been introduced to people she had never met in real life but had seen in her dreams. She had learned it was wise not to bring that up early on'* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 62) and *'But what if her dreams are real?.. What was consciousness? And what were dreams?'*, even in the speech of Jonas, for example: *Wow. Even I'm beginning to believe your dream* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 112).

The story also has a value dimension in another area, e. g.: *She wasn't really following watching a TV* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 11). It can also be inspiring for the reader that the main characters like lectures, in one of them the reader can meet with philosophical thinking about time: *What is time? Time can be seen from many perspectives: firstly, the perspective of the individual, then that of the family, then that of culture and written culture, and then what we call geological time* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 75). Questions of a philosophical nature also concern animals in the story: *How would it feel to be inside the head of a deer? Would it feel different from being in the head of a camel?* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 94) or: *The animals swing nervously behind the netting and stare at her through yellow-brown eyes. She wonders how much they understand. She is sure they understand more than they can express* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 115). Other ecological problems are mentioned in the book, such as the felling of rainforests, illegal hunting, but in connection with the protection of animal species, the author uses a broader context: *To save the tiger you have to save a long list of plants and other animals. The tiger is a symbol of something much larger, and if the tiger disappears it is a very bad sign indeed... Everything in nature is interconnected. Biodiversity is as much about the tapestry of nature as the survival of individual species. Species which have lost their natural habitats and only survive in zoos are just one step away from extinction* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 124-125).

Another character, Jonas, had ideas, which he formulated through a paper in which there were some interesting ideas: *Are people really that bothered about nature? Haven't we turned the earth into a big theme park? Too many things are competing for our attention. We share a planet, but not everyone can think in terms of our planet* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 127-128). Anna deals with other philosophical issues: *'What is a human being? And who am I? If I was only myself – the body sitting here and writing – I would be a creature without hope. In the long run, that is. But I have a deeper identity than my own body and my short sojourn on Earth. I am a part of – and I take part in – something greater and mightier than me* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 152).

The dimension of the community's strength is also emphasized: *The problems are so big that people feel powerless. What can I do to save the Amazon rainforest? What responsibility do I have for the African savannah or Atlantic fish stocks? People do not think like this. It's not how our brains work. We are arrogant, selfish animals. In any attempt to save our planet we must use this as the starting point* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 123). Although the story depicts possible catastrophes and is negativist in some parts, it ends with a hope for a better future:

- *'Are you an optimist? Or are you a pessimist?'*
- *'I don't know. Perhaps a bit of both. What about you?'*
- *'I'm an optimist, Jonas. And do you know why? I think it's immoral to be a pessimist.'*
- *'Immoral?'*
- *'Pessimism is just another word for laziness. Of course I worry. But that's different. A pessimist has given up. We can't give up hope. And in practice that might mean we've got to fight. Do you want to be part of that, Jonas? Do you want to start a fight?'* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 168-169).

Anna's attempt to change the world for the better may inspire more people and that was probably Jostein Gaarder's intention.

#### 4 Conclusion

Gaarder's book acts as a warning from the future for the current generation, and although it was first published in 2013, it can still be an inspiration to improve the environment at various levels. The motivation for writing this article were some moments of the book, which already concern the life of the present, for example when the numbers of bees decrease every year: *'In the garden her mom and dad are both on step-ladders hand-pollinating the fruit trees. Bees are a thing of the past. Their numbers started to fall a hundred years ago for a variety of reasons. Then, all of a sudden, they died out completely. Now people have to do by hand the painstaking work performed by billions of bees'* (Gaarder, 2016, p. 82).

The purpose of Anna's dream was to give the world a new chance, and that was probably the point of the book. Gaarder does not underestimate reader of this book, in addition to philosophical elements, he also inserts love and mystery into the story, he encourages to think more deeply, but at the same time it is written in an understandable and clear language. Although we focused on environmental issues in the interpretation, the book also contains a storyline about love, common school and family problems, so we think the story is suitable not only for readers who are primarily interested in nature. We cogitate the opinion of Pelikán (2011) who considers maintaining sustainable development as a serious problem in today's society. The mentioned author deals with the difficulty of finding a balance between economic development and at the same the protection of natural resources. He considers the fight for sustainable development to be one of the global trends in social changes, influencing new reflections about the character of education.

Literary stories of similar nature are not probably aiming to change the whole world, but they can change the whole world, but they can change the view and behaviour of individuals in relation to our planet, in an education environment all the more if the teacher cares about this issue. The book *The World According to Anna* provides a space for philosophical inquiry on environmental issues and also fulfils the aesthetic function of an artistic text, so the teacher may have several options for working with this specific text. One opportunity may be to spark a discussion about a defined issue. The discussion could be conducted according to the methodology of the Philosophy for Children program. In this program, participants read a philosophical literary text with philosophical topics, ask philosophical questions and then discuss according to established rules. A significant element of the story is a letter written by the main character Anna, so the teacher could include the activity 'Letter for my grandson or granddaughter' in which pupils could address the following points: 1. Write what you like on our Earth and what you want your grandchildren should see or experience. 2. Write down what you are doing for nature protection and sustainability now (even the minimum) and what could you improve.

Zapf (2016) in connection with sustainable development expresses the idea that literature and art can comprehensively support the concept of sustainable development. This author argues that artistic literary texts in relation to sustainability are rarely published, but represent the potential for improving the future of ecological thinking. We hope that similar contributions to raising awareness of sustainable development will attract the attention of scientists and teachers and inspire them to educate pupils to understand the problems of our planet, lead them to become critical thinkers and people who experience social, emotional and economic well-being, but also they are aware of how ecology can affect their lives and the lives of their descendants.

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