

## ECOLOGICAL CATASTROPHE IN THE DYSTOPIA NOVELS OF TANYA MALYARCHUK AND SERHIY OKSENYK

## ЕКОЛОГІЧНА КАТАСТРОФА В РОМАНАХ-АНТИУТОПІЯХ ТАНІ МАЛЯРЧУК І СЕРГІЯ ОКСЕНИКА

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**Abstract.** The article examines the theme of ecological disaster as a central motif in Ukrainian prose for children and youth using the example of dystopian works by Tanya Malyarchuk (*MOX NOX*) and Serhiy Oksenyk (trilogy *Through the Forest. By the Sky, by the Water*). It analyzes how the scenarios of ecological apocalypse are artistically represented in these works, and shows the models of the heroes' behavior.

The ecological disaster in these novels appears not as the background, but as the artistic and semantic center, revealing cultural, social and ethical crises of modern times. In the novel *MOX NOX*, through the images of an ideal (dreamy) and destroyed natural world, the author demonstrates the contrast between harmony and the consequences of anthropocentric invasion. The heroine Teresa dreams of ecological restoration and constructive interaction between people and nature, focusing on biodiversity and the power of nature to self-regenerate.

In Serhiy Oksenyk's trilogy, the destroyed world after the ecological disaster is a territory of struggle between a consumerist approach to nature and efforts to save the remnants of life. The child heroes, in particular Lysy, act as carriers of ecological awareness, which forms a model of "ecological uprising" – a protest against destructive systems and a desire to restore the natural balance.

As the analysis shows, the dystopian genre allows authors to vividly depict the consequences of ecological disasters and social crises. At the same time, due to their emotional resonance, such works form ecological thinking, a responsible attitude towards the nature, environmentally conscious and proactive behavior in young readers, and strengthen the understanding of the connection between a person's moral choice and a state of the environment.

The article uses methods of literary analysis and typological comparison, tools of the ecocritical approach, which allowed us to identify key markers of ecological disaster in dystopian novels. This is a destroyed civilization, loss of biodiversity, resource scarcity, climate change, technological ruins, and lost ecological memory.

**Key words:** ecological disaster, children's literature, dystopia novels, eco-critical approach, post-apocalyptic plot.

## INTRODUCTION

In the context of today's global challenges – including climate change, ecosystem destruction, technological disasters, and wars – environmental issues are increasingly becoming the subject of literary reflection. While writers use different genres to explore these concerns, many national literatures reveal a common trend. As Kaisu Rättyä notes in her study of Finnish literature, “Contemporary YA literature has dealt with questions of utopia and postapocalyptic themes, and the agency of young adults has often been placed in the near future” (Rättyä, 2025). The motif of ecological disaster acquires particular significance within the dystopian genre, which, through fictional foresight, warns of the potential consequences of humanity's destructive actions. This is precisely the function that environmental themes serve in the dystopia novels of contemporary Ukrainian authors – Tanya Malyarchuk (*MOX NOX*) and Serhiy Oksenyk (trilogy *Through the Forest. By the Sky, by the Water*).

The dystopian narratives of these writers not only depict possible scenarios of ecological apocalypse but also raise the issue of human moral responsibility for the state of the environment. Ecological disaster in their works is not merely a narrative backdrop but a deeply symbolic construct that allows for the exploration of existential, cultural, and social dimensions of contemporary life. Through imagery, metaphor, and speculative models of the future, these authors contribute to shaping a new kind of ecological thinking – critical, empathetic, and oriented toward the preservation of life in its broadest sense.

The depiction of ecological disaster in children's literature broadens the understanding of contemporary Ukrainian culture. In addition, it is integrated into the global dialogue about the planet's future, intergenerational responsibility, and moral choices within post-apocalyptic narratives. As noted by A. Ulanowicz: “the presence of Ukrainian voices in global children's literature is of great importance, especially now that most Westerners have begun reevaluating the perception of Ukraine as a young post-Soviet state” (2025, p. 239). Świetlicki emphasizes this fact as well (Świetlicki, Mateusz & Ulanowicz, 2025, p. 4).

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Research on children's literature that addresses ecological themes and issues is typically conducted by scholars using an ecocritical approach. It is based on the analysis of the relationship between the literature and the physical environment. In this context, it is natural to refer to works on the problems of ecocriticism by Glotfelti (1996), Buell (1995; 2005), Garrard (2012), Gladwin (2017), Shinde (2016) etc., in which the foundations of the theory and three waves of ecocriticism are described, the trends that determine its evolution from romanticism, ecocriticism, discursive feminism to ecocosmopolitanism, ecocultural studies, ecofeminism, “green” gender theories are highlighted

Researchers take into account the key tasks of ecocriticism: rereading works from an ecocentric perspective; paying particular attention to authors whose creativity places nature at the forefront; advocating for ecocentric values; and determining the significance of ecologically oriented texts. Ecocriticism is used both as an ethical criticism and as pedagogy that explores and establishes the connection between the individual, society, nature, and the text (Cocinos, 1994)). Increasingly, the ecocritical approach is being linked with the examination of children's literature through the lens of its ecopedagogical potential by G.Gaard (2009), G. Massey and C. Bradford (2011), N. Goga, L. Guanio-Uluru and al. (2018; 2023), S. van der Beek and Ch. Lehmann (2022), T. Doughty, J. Deszcz-Tryhubczak and J. Grafton (2025).

The growing body of ecocritical research emphasizes the importance of children's literature in shaping young readers' environmental awareness and values. As Ismail notes, "Ecocriticism makes kids' books more interesting by looking at their nature themes, how they show the world, and what we can learn from them. It makes writers and readers think about how people affect the environment and helps teach kids to care for nature so they become responsible and influential eco-minded persons" (Ismail, 2024, p. 143). This perspective is particularly relevant when analyzing dystopian narratives by T. Malyarchuk and S. Oksenyk, where ecological catastrophe functions not only as a plot element but also as a trigger for ethical reflection and eco-activism among young protagonists.

Researchers C. Hints and E.Ostry (2003) emphasize the special impact on readers of utopian and dystopian works, which are considered political in nature. Such works, on the one hand, describe and problematize the ecological crisis, and on the other hand, popularize the images of "eco-rebels". Through the lens of ecocriticism, these novels reveal how imagined environmental collapses serve to mobilize resistance, foster empathy for non-human life, and promote the search for sustainable alternatives – turning child characters into agents of ecological hope in a damaged world.

A valuable theoretical framework for understanding such representations is offered in *New World Orders in Contemporary Children's Literature: Utopian Transformations* (Bradford et al., 2008). This monograph explores how children's literature constructs alternative worlds and engages with issues of power, ideology, and transformation. It provides useful conceptual tools for interpreting dystopian texts that respond to global ecological crises. In the context of analyzing Malyarchuk's and Oksenyk's novels, this approach helps reveal how environmental disaster shapes narrative structure and ethical engagement, and how it functions as a catalyst for young protagonists to imagine and enact ecological resistance.

The issue of representing ecological disasters in children's literature is actively explored within the framework of contemporary ecocriticism. In particular, S. Dobrin and K. B. Kidd, in their collection *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism* (2004), emphasize the capacity of children's literature to shape ecological awareness,

highlighting that children in literary texts often act as natural eco-activists who respond to environmental destruction and resist ecological harm.

The ecological theme in Ukrainian literature for young readers has been the subject of scholarly analysis by T. Kachak, T. Blyznyuk, V. Kyzylova, J. Kumanska, M. Vardanian, I. Dyrda, M. Kirieieva, and others. Using ecocritical tools, J. Kumanska conducted a comprehensive study of the texts addressed to young readers by Z. Menzatyuk, O. Ilchenko, and I. Andrusyak (2021). M. Vardanian, I. Dyrda, and M. Kirieieva analyzed the artistic features of the representation of the Chernobyl theme in Ukrainian literature for children and youth (2022; 2023), while V. Kyzylova outlined the typological characteristics, dynamics, and functions of the contemporary Ukrainian fairy tale (2024).

T. Kachak and T. Blyznyuk performed ecocritical readings of the novellas by H. Pahutiak, A. Bachynsky, and V. Polianko (2025c) and analyzed the eco-pedagogical potential of contemporary Ukrainian children's literature through the prism of young eco-rebels (2025b). They found that "the key components of ecological representation in these texts are problematic eco-situations, behavioral models of young eco-heroes, eco-initiatives, and eco-perspectives, which together contribute to shaping readers' environmental awareness and ethical stance. In line with the global trend of studying children's literature within the framework of eco-criticism and the postcolonial turn, this research amplifies the Ukrainian voice, often marginalized in international discourse" (T. Kachak & T. Blyznyuk, 2025b).

Literary interpretations of the works by T. Malyarchuk and S. Oksenyk were offered by T. Kachak (2018; 2025), L. Ovdijchuk (2020), N. Marchenko (2024), and S. Oliinyk (2014). However, these studies have not analyzed the artistic features of depicting ecological disaster from an ecocritical perspective, taking into account the genre characteristics of dystopia, nor have they evaluated these works as tools for shaping ecological consciousness in young readers. This highlights the relevance of this research.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVE, METHODOLOGY AND DATA**

The aim of the article is to analyze the depiction of ecological disaster in the dystopia novels by Tanya Malyarchuk and Serhiy Oksenyk, explore its artistic and ideological significance, and examine how these works reflect contemporary environmental challenges and contribute to shaping ecological awareness among readers.

Ecological disaster in literature is a subject of study placed at the intersection of ecocriticism, literary theory, and the philosophy of culture. Its representation in literary texts makes it possible to uncover the deep-seated anxieties of modern humanity, trace transformations in the perception of nature, and articulate ethical guidelines in the face of global environmental threats.

The most remarkable works on the environmental theme of the adventure and dystopian genre of contemporary Ukrainian writers were chosen as the object of the study: *MOX NOX* by Malyarchuk, and the trilogy *Through the Forest. By the Sky, by the Water* by Oksenyk. The tools of the eco-critical approach are used to understand their content and analysis of artistic depictions of ecological disaster, the methods of literary analysis and typological comparison. Narrative and receptive-aesthetic approaches are updated to evaluate the works and images of heroes as a tool for forming readers' eco-activity.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **Eco-Apocalypse and the Search for Truth in the Dystopian World of Tanya Malyarchuk's *MOX NOX***

A dystopian narrative, a post-apocalyptic plot is the basis of the story *MOX NOX* by Tanya Malyarchuk, recognized in the Ukrainian and international literary space. It tells about the fact that the ruins of human civilization are inhabited by fantastic creatures – pteropus, who believe in life after death in mangrove gardens, keep the legend of their ancestor Vulpes and the dried mango as the highest relic. Everyone is satisfied with such a life, because the pteropus consider themselves the all-powerful masters of the world. Only young Teresa, whose people live in the ruins and look after their own gardens, wants to learn the truth and find out what caused the destruction. She wants to see the world beyond the ruined city, beyond the mountain range, to taste the mummified mango and see the mangrove gardens. She is helped by Leo, a mouse who is despised by everyone.

Teresa is characterized by human feelings and emotions, the desire to protect the offended, to love, to know. She is a rebel who seeks truth and spiritual depth, often questioning the values imposed by society. Because of this, she has to confront everyone – friends, teachers, even mother. Her rebellion is not directly related to the eco-rebellion, but her desire to learn the truth about the destroyed civilization proves the active search for the causes of the disaster, part of which is the destruction of the ecosystem.

She searched for the truth about buildings, mangrove gardens, mangoes that someone brought to their city: “I felt that we were being lied to again, but not on purpose, however, only to protect and somehow explain the unexplained” (Malyarchuk 2018, 22). Teresa confesses to Apollonius, who had long dreamed of flying over the ridge to find out the truth: “I also knew that such a trip could end in death for both of us, and even more: the probability of our death was much higher than the probability of success. But even more was the temptation of risk, shared with pteropus, which you love. Together we are stronger than alone. Earth-shattering adventures and great discoveries awaited us.” Even the punishment (forbidden to fly



with friends to the night gardens and the duty to take care of the old teacher Herodotus) did not stop her.

Teresa differed from her peers by her inquisitiveness, which is also a sign of rebellion: “Sometimes I asked myself what I believed in, but my list was not very long. The ruins that became our home seemed to hint: no matter how much you hope, no matter how strong your belief is, the time of decline will come.” “Every decline gives way to a new flourishing,” Herodotus liked to repeat, but it seemed to me that it was impossible to flourish without knowing what happened to your predecessors? Why did they leave their homes? Where did they go? and Do they live now? These questions did not escape my peers. The only thing they did in their free time from studying was playing or arranging competitions among themselves. Who will fly faster from the top of a tree to the ground? Who will fly around the big tower in the central square with the fewest flaps of wings? Who will name more shades of the darkness that gave birth to us and in which we will disappear sooner or later? (Malyarchuk 2018, 23).

Teresa rebels against the rules and dares to fly outside the middle of the city-ruins, during the day, because “she felt deep regret, because she did not want to return from the light to the darkness. Here, under the sun, was my place, and if I was destined to die, then let it be better of a gentle ray than in the impenetrable darkness of hunger or old age” (Malyarchuk 2018, 61). She was called a “brave rebel” (Malyarchuk 2018, 67). She was like that in her efforts to find answers to the questions about the causes of the destruction of civilization, the existence of mangrove gardens, and in the search for justice and activism: “For me, it was a search with its ups and downs, and the search is never equally good. Happiness is being able to rise again” (Malyarchuk 2018, 105).

The author admits that she invented this book when she was lying sick and delirious: “... and then, actually, a picture flashed in her mind: a gray and black urban landscape and a fiery fox that lives here, in an unnatural environment for itself, lonely, confused, at the end of all time. After that, I carried on with that fox for a long time, several times I started to write an adult book about her, until finally I realized that in order to realize my plan. I myself had to step into an unnatural element for me, for example, in children’s prose. The fox eventually changed its appearance, gained wings and became a fructorian” (Malyarchuk... 2018). Tanya Malyarchuk, experiencing a spiritual and ecological catastrophe, chooses the genre of dystopia.

This work is marked by the universality of the theme, the innovation and common human values, the confrontation of one man against the crowd, and at the same time it is an excellent example of a fantastic children’s apocalypse. And although there are no human characters, they are mentioned by pteropus living on the ruins of a civilization that was once created and then destroyed by humans. In an interview, the author admits that at one point she regretted “that she had written about the time without people, because what I like most in the work of Katya (the artist) is the skeletonized contours of human bodies. However, she did a great job with animals,

and she managed to squeeze in the “human theme” by depicting human hands reaching up and asking for help (Figure 1). This is one of the most emotional illustrations in the book. And the saddest one” (Tanya Malyarchuk... 2018).

In this work, two concepts of the image of nature are implemented - idyllic and problematic N. Goga (2023), referring to the works of Garrard and Gifford, writes about these two concepts of the image of nature and the need to identify them in the analysis: “Nature can be considered a pure and harmonious place, as in the pastoral tradition, or it can be considered problematic, a place where ecological balance, climate change and the loss of species and plants reveal crises”(Goga 2023).



*Figure 1. Illustrations for the book MOX NOX*

The first concept is associated with a clean, harmonious and fertile place. These are mangrove gardens that pteropuses dream of: “Mangrove forests are our biggest dream. If we dreamed of something, it was only them, endless evergreens overgrown on the distant sea coast, full of heat, moisture, juicy fruits and fragrant flowers” (Malyarchuk 2018, 7); “In the mangrove forests,” aunt Marianna was trying to convince, “there are an infinite number of different fruits of the most amazing shape and taste. You can live there for years on one tree, and there will still be enough food. Mangroves bloom and give fruit at the same time” (Malyarchuk 2018, 8). It’s like an imaginary world.

The work describes mangrove forests as a special ecosystem. The pages of the journal “National Geographic. Cambodia” were full of images of “mangrove forests, exactly as I imagined, dying of fever, as Aunt Marianna told me. They were full of green and moist, lush, shiny roots stuck out above the water, like the bones of some

giant creatures, and luxurious fruits loomed seductively in the flowering tops. The mangroves bloomed and gave fruit. And here they were, the real ones, now stretched out in front of me, so real that it seemed that touching the pages of the journal, one could feel the rustling of small leaves and the warmth of the tropical sea” (Malyarchuk 2018, 93 - 96).

The second concept is based on the description of nature on the ruins of civilization, which corresponds to the realities of the characters. Teresa states: “There is no other living creature anywhere, except for insects, but no one took them into account. Therefore, it was customary to consider us all-powerful, and the night visionaries, our teachers, always emphasized that we conquered the planet and became the masters of the world” (Malyarchuk 2018, 8). From Teresa’s story, we learn that some trees have disappeared in the ruins, and, for example, apricots and peaches do not give fruit. However, nature has the ability to self-restore: “The trees tried to make their way wherever they could, but they seemed somehow lifeless against the background of destruction” (Malyarchuk 2018, 28); “at first little by little, here and there small fragile cherry blossoms timidly peeked out, as if they were asking for permission, reluctantly. Then plums blossomed profusely, followed by a slender pear, and finally a luxurious apple tree. The slopes of our two rivers, covered with vineyards, also turned white, and the smell that hung in the middle of the river made my head dizzy” (Malyarchuk 2018, 34). Instead, pteropus explained the disappearance of other living creatures with the legend of the ancestor Vulpes, who ate everything. “From the books we read, found on the shelves of our homes, we vaguely imagined that there were other living creatures before - cats, dogs, people, elephants. But all of them were devoured by the insatiable Vulpes” (Malyarchuk 2018, 16).

The description of the ruins of civilization is explaining of potential consequences of the activities of people who destroy each other and the surrounding world. “I slowly opened my eyes and for the first time in my life I saw the city in its daytime beauty. Although the word “beauty” was the least suitable here. The city was ugly. A whimsical ruin, a continuous unhealed wound. Mutilated houses stood in rows, and elderberry and nettle brazenly pushed through the half-collapsed walls. Their number was terrifying; at night it was not so noticeable. It was a city of elderberry and nettle, not pteropus” (Malyarchuk 2018, 60-61).

Teresa does find out the truth when, after the death of Herodotus. She takes his place among the night visionaries (teachers). First of all, the truth is that “People destroyed people. They invented deadly weapons that killed their own kind and destroyed their cities. Those who survived, the murders soon died of hunger. Those who killed also died” (Malyarchuk 2018, 112-113). The author does not use the word “war”, but from this fragment it is clear that it is the cause of the death of civilization, apocalypse, eco-catastrophe.

On the pages of the journal “National Geographic. Cambodia” the heroine finds the images of mangrove forests. She challenges everyone, breaks the usual rules and



dares to go on an expedition - to fly over the ridge to see them. Even the fear of meeting people does not scare her. Her courage is also a manifestation of rebellion, and her behavior and the values she professes are eco-oriented. She admires nature: “And the farther I flew, the harder my heart beat. The field was replaced by a forest, then again by a field, again by a forest. Trees grew everywhere. Trees were the real masters of this world” (Malyarchuk 2018, 116). And although the ending of the work is open, from the last lines it is easy for the reader to believe that Teresa will succeed in fulfilling her plan, see the mangrove gardens and live in a harmonious world with nature.

The depiction of ecological disasters in children’s literature is often closely tied to the emergence of eco-activist protagonists. In many contemporary works, young heroes are not passive witnesses of environmental degradation but active participants in resisting it. These characters are frequently portrayed as having a high ecological awareness and a strong moral focus that drives them to challenge destructive systems, restore balance in nature, and protect their communities. Their journeys typically involve not only survival but also a transformation into guardians of the environment, suggesting to young readers that even in the face of overwhelming devastation, personal responsibility and collective action can lead to hope and renewal. Similar eco-rebellious behavior can be observed in the protagonists of the novels *Ghosts of Black Oak Wood* (2022) by Andrii Bachynskyi and *Taming of Kychera* (2022) by Viktor Polyanko, where young characters confront environmental destruction and corruption, choosing instead to defend and restore natural spaces, often at personal risk.

In *MOX NOX* by Tanya Malyarchuk, the character Teresa envisions a future grounded in ecological restoration and biodiversity: The youth in the near future planned, if not to finally find the sea (and with it the mangrove forests), then at least to cross the mountain range, bring the sprouts of exotic plants and accustom them to our climate. Then all the local pteropus could feast on amazing fruits to the heart’s content: rambutan, guava, coconuts, bananas - we heard of such delicacies from the stories of adults who themselves had never tasted them, but had learned from other adults” (Malyarchuk 2018, 25). This dream of reviving the lost ecosystems and sharing resources with other species reflects the ecological imagination and hopeful activism at the heart of post-apocalyptic children’s fiction.

### **Eco-Rebels and the Post-Apocalyptic Mission: Environmental Consciousness in Serhiy Oksenyk’s Dystopian Trilogy**

A journey to save oneself, friends (fellow villagers) and nature is one of the key motives for the actions of the protagonist Lysyi (Lesyk) in Serhiy Oksenyk’s fantastic dystopia novels of the trilogy *Through the Forest. By the Sky, by the Water*. The events that take place against the background of a destroyed civilization and that are experienced by the main characters Lysyi, Lelya, and the children often find

themselves in dangerous and life-threatening situations. However, the heroes impress with lightning-fast intelligence, courage and bravery.

The first novel of the trilogy “Lysyi” is about boy’s journey to the Ruin; the path becomes a central story-creating element. A teenage boy named Lysyi is gifted with a supernatural ability to sense danger, and his journey is shrouded in mystery. Gradually, its goal is revealed – to find something that will purify the water in the village. He is saved from the first danger by Lelya, who becomes a companion and faithful friend. Werewolves destroyed her village and kidnapped her children. Lysyi helps Lelya free the children, together they overcome all obstacles (Eagle Forest, Witch and others) and get to the Ruin. After meeting the Engineer, who survived the epidemic and is a descendant of the previous society, they learn a lot of useful things and return to their village. Here they dig up a deep well with clean and non-poisonous water, saving the inhabitants from death. Lelya, Ivasyk, Marichka and other children stay to live in this village.

There are several textual layers in the novels: dystopian descriptions of the desert, ruins, poisonous rivers, destroyed forests as a result of a long-term and destructive human activity; threatening personified spores of diseases, mutant-rats that settled in the Ruin after the epidemic; pictures of ecological disaster and the problems of generations who have to live on the land whose resources have been exhausted; werewolves as an echo of Ukrainian demonology, as an image of a “degenerate person” who lives by the laws guided by one’s own needs and instincts. The author “creates artistic time” that depicts the events after the ecological disaster (Ovdijchuk, 2020).

The underground headquarters, brutality, aggressive treatment of people and inhumanity of the military in the forest are revealingly described. The children, killing the captain and his brother in the form of an eagle, overcome this danger as well, freeing the neighboring village from obligation.

Fairy-tale motifs, realized in episodes with the Witch, magical objects (stupa, cauldron, horn, broom), supplemented with formulas of pre-Christian beliefs and folk wisdom. To defeat the werewolves, the children use aspen poles and crossbows loaded with silver arrows. The image of a large worm in the desert resembles a snake from folk tales, which the hero must overcome in order to continue the journey. Some problems are solved by the heroes with the help of magical objects and living water.

“Lelya”, the second part of the trilogy, is about the adventures that happen to Lysyi (Lelya calls him Lesyk), Lelya and the children after settling in the village. They find out that someone is hunting them again. In search of answers to her questions, Lelya goes to the mermaids. Together with Vasylo and Lysyi, they fall into another trap. Lysyi, and later Lelya, are captured by people from another settlement who served werewolves. The story of the Engineer helps readers understand the causal mechanism of the development of the plot.

The stories about the subsequent lives of the heroes, Ivas and Marichka’s dangerous journey, Lysyi and his friends’ struggle with a dark underground force in the third novel “The Engineer” are intertwined with the story of the engineer-inventor Gubchenko. Different temporal and spatial layers of the novel, descriptions of heroes’ dangerous fantastic adventures representing two different worlds, ensure the dynamic

development of the “double” plot, “double” composition and maintain the plot tension.

The researchers of the trilogy note that, in addition to “the context of Slavic mythology, it is worth pointing out another layer of meaning, vividly realized in the genre model of the trilogy – post-apocalyptic - a genre type of rational fiction in which the action develops in the future after a global catastrophe” (Oliynyk 2014). This disaster is caused by an epidemic, as a result of which people began to get sick, die, kill each other, seeing a threat to themselves. The engineer talked about it, about the virus, and considered it something like a universal flood... “that is, a punishment for humanity for the sins” (Oksenyk 2014a, 173).

In these novels, nature is a living character. It can provide shelter, food, serve a person as well as create traps, such as, for example, a motherwort bush, from the leaves of which frogs appear - monsters that are dangerous for humans with their poison. The author describes the forest in which most of the events unfold and the adventures of the main characters take place. He describes trees that sometimes “turn into a solid dark wall” (Oksenyk 2014a, 22) and block the road, then become saviors from werewolves, like “a mighty oak, winged and thick” (Oksenyk 2014a, 23).

The description of the Ruin helps to imagine the scale of the ecological disaster: “Lysyi’s heart was speechless with delight: the Ruin stretched to the very horizon and the opposite bank of the river as well. Scatters of what once was huge buildings, covered high mountains and valleys between them. According to the Engineer’s stories, Lysyi imagined all this somewhat differently. More precisely, he simply could not imagine how huge the settlement was. Lysyi did not know the number of people who could live here. How could they feed themselves? If only half of the adult men went hunting, there wouldn’t be a live fly left in the surrounding forests. And water! How did not they drink this entire river? It is not surprising that in the end the earth refused to feed them” (Oksenyk 2014a, 150). In the novels, the Ruin is described as “solid dumps of stones, rusty metal and rotten wood”, “The whole world is covered, like a carpet, with gray powder” (Oksenyk 2014a, 150).

The key environmental problem is not only mutated nature in the post-apocalyptic world, but also the lack of drinking water. Lysyi repeatedly reflects on the fact that people themselves destroyed nature and condemned themselves to death. So, in their village, people make the mistakes of ancient people again: “They had good water, and no one got sick as badly as now. They spoiled the water themselves. They poisoned themselves” (Oksenyk 2014a, 147), “they destroyed the stream themselves - poisoned it with their garbage” (Oksenyk 2014a, 187). With support Lelya recalled the words of her father, who said that people took advantage of everything, “they couldn’t help but understand that someday these debts would have to be returned” (Oksenyk 2014a, 181), “Didn’t they understand that they borrowed too much land and too little was given back” (Oksenyk 2014a, 181).

In these considerations and dialogues, the ecological consciousness and position of the young heroes, who also belong to the eco-rebels, are revealed. Lysyi has a mission - to save people, his village. He rebels against the consumer attitude towards the nature and looks for opportunities to restore the ecosystem. He believes that “he will also have children when he grows up. They will not live like that. They will live

like the old Engineer” (p. 181), the one they met in the Ruins. That is, understanding that natural resources are exhaustible and nature must not be used only, but also protected.

Lysyi is brave and courageous, he has a supernatural ability to sense danger. His image is built up according to the laws of fantastic prose: “Children-heroes are idealized, often endowed with supernatural abilities, because they perform an important mission. The field of activity of children-heroes is different worlds, time-space planes. The depth of the psychological portrayal of characters depends on taking into account the reading capabilities and requests of the target audience. As a rule, writers depict peers of potential readers” (Kachak 2018).

Lysyi and Lelya have the characteristics of the heroes of fantastic texts and eco-rebels who oppose the consumer attitude to nature and the mindless use of its resources. They have a task not only to save others, but also to change the world. The Engineer thinks of who can save people as a biological species in this post-apocalyptic world, who should be the person who can start a revival: “intelligent, experienced, decent, brave, devoted to others, independent in judgment”, “humanity in general can survive and be reborn only under one condition. This is if people develop new qualities” (Oksenyk 2014a, 189). And these very children are endowed with such qualities.

### **Markers of Ecological Catastrophe in the Dystopia Novels of Tanya Malyarchuk and Serhiy Oksenyk**

Dystopian fiction in children’s literature often functions as a narrative space where environmental anxieties are projected and explored. In the novels *MOX NOX* by Tanya Malyarchuk and *Through the Forest. By the Sky, by the Water* by Serhiy Oksenyuk, the ecological disaster is not merely the background setting but a core thematic axis. These narratives use a set of symbolic and narrative markers that signify environmental collapse and the consequences of anthropocentric exploitation of nature.

Both authors construct their fictional worlds as post-catastrophic environments, where traces of previous human error are embedded in the landscape, social systems, and the protagonists’ memories. These worlds are shaped by ecological trauma - ruined cities, contaminated nature, extinct species, and displaced communities - reflecting a deep-seated fear of irreversible damage caused by technological arrogance and disregard for ecological balance.

Below is a schematic representation of the major markers of the ecological disaster identified in these novels (see Table 1).



Table 1. Markers of Ecological Disaster

Marker	Description / Example
Ruined Civilization	Depictions of cities buried under toxic fog, dead zones, or radioactive wastelands caused by human activities.
Loss of Biodiversity	References to extinct animals, mutated species, and collapsed ecosystems.
Scarcity of Natural Resources	Water, fertile soil, scarcity of clean air, valuable commodities.
Climate Extremes and Uninhabitable Zones	Drastic weather changes, flooded territories, desertification, or poisoned landscapes.
Displacement and Survival Migration	People forced to leave homelands in search of habitable areas, echoing environmental refugee crises.
Technological Ruins and Abandoned Infrastructure	Crumbling remnants of industrial civilization as warnings of failed progress.
Generational Amnesia / Lost Ecological Memory	Children growing up unaware of the world “before now” relying on myth-like stories told by the elderly (e.g., the sea).
Children as Eco-Conscious Agents	Young protagonists resisting further degradation and forming eco-utopian plans (e.g., Teresa’s plant restoration).

In *MOX NOX*, for example, Teresa is longing to revive exotic vegetation and create an ecosystem for local pteropuses. She illustrates the hopeful resistance that children embody in the face of irreversible loss. As she dreams of crossing mountains and acclimating tropical fruit trees the novel intertwines disaster with regeneration, and grief with action.

Similarly, Oksenyk’s protagonists navigate through the forests that are no longer safe havens but coded spaces of past and future danger. The Forest becomes a double symbol: a remnant of pre-catastrophic nature and a zone of resistance, where new ethical relationships between humans and the more-than-human world are forged.

Thus, ecological disaster in both novels is expressed through a rich and layered system of narrative markers that offer young readers both a warning and a call to ecological imagination and responsibility.

## CONCLUSION

Analysis of the novels *MOX NOX* by Tanya Malyarchuk and the trilogy *Through the Forest. By the Sky, by the Water* by Serhiy Oksenyk testifies that

dystopia as a genre gives writers the opportunity to fully reveal the consequences of ecocatastrophes and crises, show the post-apocalypse, and at the same time, due to the emotional impact on readers, motivate them to eco-active behavior. Often, the protagonists of such works are eco-rebels (people or mythical creatures, such as the pteropus Teresa), who fight to restore the balance in nature, try to correct the mistakes of humanity, search for the truth and discover the reasons for the destruction of civilizations in order to warn modern society against such a life-threatening scenario. The laws of the fantasy genre allow you to use idealization to create vivid images of eco-rebel heroes who have strong moral convictions and are capable of extraordinary deeds. Idealization allows the authors to emphasize their dedication to the cause, courage and steadfastness in confronting the crowd. They become symbols of the struggle for justice and a better future, inspiring readers to think about their own attitude to the planet and the impact of humanity on its ecological balance.

In the works, ecological disaster is depicted through key markers illustrating a post-apocalyptic world shaped by the human impact. These markers include ruined civilizations with toxic fog and radioactive wastelands, loss of biodiversity, scarcity of natural resources, climate extremes, displacement, technological ruins, and generational amnesia. Additionally, children are portrayed as eco-conscious protagonists who resist further environmental damage and promote restoration.

Future research should focus on comparing the representation of ecological disasters in dystopia novels in realistic literature to better understand how different narrative approaches can shape readers' perceptions of environmental issues.

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**Качак, Т., & Близнюк, Т.** (2025). Екологічна катастрофа в романах-антиутопіях Тані Малярчук і Сергія Оксеніка. *Дитяча література: інтердисциплінарний дискурс*, 2 (1), 58 – 74.

У статті розглянуто тему екологічної катастрофи як центрального мотиву в українській прозі для дітей та юнацтва на прикладі творів-антиутопій Тані Малярчук (“MOX NOX”) та Сергія Оксеніка (трилогія “Лісом. Небом. Водою”). Проаналізовано, як у цих творах художньо репрезентовано можливі сценарії екологічного апокаліпсису, показано моделі поведінки героїв.

Екологічна катастрофа в цих романах постає не як тло, а як художній і смисловий центр, що розкриває культурні, соціальні та етичні кризи сучасності. У романі MOX NOX через образи ідеального (мрійливого) й зруйнованого природного світу авторка демонструє контраст між гармонією та наслідками антропоцентричного вторгнення. Героїня Тереза мріє



про екологічне відновлення і конструктивну взаємодію людей і природи, акцентуючи увагу на біорізноманітті та силі природи до саморегенерації.

У трилогії Сергія Оксеніка зруйнований світ після екологічної катастрофи – це територія боротьби між споживацьким підходом до природи та намаганнями врятувати залишки життя. Герої-діти, зокрема Лисий, виступають носіями екологічної свідомості, що формує модель “екологічного повстання” – протесту проти руйнівних систем та прагнення до відновлення природного балансу.

Як засвідчує аналіз, жанр антиутопії дозволяє авторам яскраво зобразити наслідки екологічних катастроф та суспільних криз. Водночас, завдяки своєму емоційному резонансу такі твори формують у юних читачів екологічне мислення, відповідальне ставлення до природи, екологічно свідому та проактивну поведінку, підсилюють розуміння зв'язку між моральним вибором людини та станом довкілля.

У статті застосовано методи літературного аналізу та типологічного порівняння, інструменти екокритичного підходу, які дозволили визначити ключові маркери екологічної катастрофи в романах-антиутопіях. Це зруйнована цивілізація, втрата біорізноманіття, нестача ресурсів, зміна клімату, технологічні руїни та втрачена екологічну пам'ять.

**Ключові слова:** екологічна катастрофа, дитяча література, антиутопічні романи, екокритичний підхід, постапокаліптичний сюжет.

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