

TENDENCIES IN ENGLISH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Abstract: *This thesis seeks to identify the main trends and themes in children's literature, and determine how narrative devices and strategies are used in the modern literary works for children.*

Keywords: *children's literature, genre, narratology, narrative strategy, fantasy, fiction, literary culture, phenomenon, syncretism, modern tendencies.*

There are a number of narrative techniques seeking to entertain children and educate them about the fundamentals of life. Authors of children's books are usually individuals whose names carry a high degree of ethos. Someone writing a book intended for children is entrusted with providing a sound and positive moral and ethical impact on children. Children are extremely impressionable and they tend to be heavily impacted by the stories they read. All children's literature is inescapably didactic. Since children's literature is didactic it must by definition be a repository, almost the quintessential source, of the values that parents and others hope to teach to the next generation [1].

Although considerable number of papers has been devoted to various issues of the literature for children, further research is needed to verify the key themes in the recent writings for youngsters.

The findings of this study, reliable sources and data suggest that abandonment, alienation and homelessness as well as violence are increasingly the themes covered in modern literature for children. As it has been already mentioned, new themes in children's literature, such as death, war, disasters, violence, are the themes which have been taboo, and thus silenced for a long time. *They can now be traced in current children's literature as a means of accompanying children throughout their gloomy moments in life, those hard situations that they must face in the surrounding world and the conflicts that affect many generations. These themes have not been deeply analysed yet, but fiction must approach them to discover the world and the dangers that life poses. It is obvious that children's literature can deal with any topic if readers' feelings are duly considered. Let us consider the theme of bullying, as an example.*

While *bullying* may not be the major theme, many books contain some minor episodes of bullying since the subject of bullying is casually mentioned or embedded in the storyline.

The fact is that nearly every child will face or witness the effects of *bullying* at some point in their lives. Children's authors recognize this as a major concern for kids and they have become more adept at weaving bullying themes into storylines.

The use of *fear and violence* in folk and fairy tales is a controversial issue which illuminates disparities between those firmly entrenched in beliefs of virtue and others who believe there is no harm in frightening children with stories. Others believe that children need to be shielded from all displays of violence, especially violence found in video games, television, and folk tales, because children might imitate or copy it and bring harm to themselves or others. But it is worth mentioning, that studies, trying to prove that displays of violence in print and visual culture lead to fear and violence in our youth, are quite frequently inconclusive at all.

In our opinion, the truth is that it is hard to keep children safe these days. Our world is consumed by images of war and disaster which is impossible to hide from young inquisitive minds. Bringing these adult themes into children's literature may provide a gateway for parents to talk to their kids about such difficult topics. Such themes as orphanage, or dealing with tragedy, family relationships,

and the importance of friendship can help strengthen the knowledge of the world around and allow readers to develop their own ideas and opinions.

Though violence has played a part in children's literature throughout the ages, Maureen Nimon points out in her essay about violence in children's literature, that "it is only in recent decades that the place of violence in children's books has been so vigorously questioned" [2]. M. Nimon explains that violence has appeared for centuries in didactic stories in which the wicked are punished, often with physical violence, and the virtuous are rewarded [3]. Dianne Koehnecke, reviewing two recent children's books, Eve Bunting's "Smoky Night" and "The House That Crack Built" by Clark Taylor, discusses the books' controversial themes of violence and drugs respectively, as well as their didactic format. She states, that "the didactic nature of these two books is clearly not a revolutionary concept in children's literature", then goes on to give a brief history of didactic literature which often includes violent content or undertones [4].

Another way of looking at this problem is to focus on how books influence readers through narrative technique. It has been claimed, for example, that some books over-explain and so patronise the child-reader, whilst others offer complex narrative techniques (unreliable, "self-conscious" or multiple narrators, flashbacks and flashforwards, deliberate gaps in narrative, inconclusive endings and so on). Jennifer Mary Armstrong, an American children's writer known for both fiction and nonfiction, has utilized multiple types of narrative structures. J. M. Armstrong believes that a short story is only one of many narrative structures. "We create narrative with jokes, ballads, tales, novels, poems, anecdotes, etc... While there are many satisfactions to be found in the conventional beginning-middle-end narrative that is common in short fiction for kids, I believe young readers can respond to many other forms of short narrative" [5].

Humorous revisions of fables and tales to facilitate children's interest to reading have become a popular and valuable genre of books for children. Authors and illustrators provide new takes on traditional fables laying emphasis on the role of reversal and changes in point of view the characterization and setting. These "remakes" have been labeled as "fractured fairy tales".

What is a fractured fairy tale? It is a fairy or other folk tale that has been modified in such a way as to make us laugh at an unexpected characterization, plot development or contrary point of view. The most successful among them, in our opinion, are those based on traditional wolf tales, such as "The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig" by Eugene Trivizas and Helen Oxenbury and Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith's "The True Story of the Three Little Pigs by A. Wolf". The authors conjure and undo not only the tales but also the protagonists through the mishmash of humour, intertextuality and even hypertextuality. "Whereas some revisions retain the wolf as a villain, others mirror the relatively recent rehabilitation of the wolf in ecology and society, transforming the wolf from a metaphor of human predation and gluttony to one of benign and even admirable behaviour" [6].

Fractured tales assume that their readers know the traditional version. It's quite natural as the young reader must read the tale on which the story is based to understand and enjoy the fractured one.

There are lots of ways to change a fairy tale: 1) change or swap the roles of the main characters; 2) have the story take place somewhere else; 3) have the story take place in another time period; 4) tell the story from a different character's point of view; 5) make the problem of the story different; 6) change an important item in the story; 7) you can even change the end of the story (maybe they don't live "happily ever after").

Among the writers for children's literature, Roald Dahl is one that is famous for this special style of narrative strategies. What makes Roald Dahl different from many other children's authors is really his extraordinary style. His cynical and ironic approach to the subject matter and characters can be seen in almost all his works for children. He has a unique way of describing characters and this adds unusual twists to his stories.

According to Birketviet, Dahl's "tone of texts is confiding, conversational and funny" [7]. Although some of his works create controversies, these controversies bring him fame and attract many readers especially adolescents.

In the collection "Revolting Rhymes" he retells six well-known fairy tales. What is special about this collection is that all the six fairy tales are twisted so that the contents of the verses are different from the original fairy tales [8]. The author uses a very simple, basic and colloquial language throughout the book. His simple descriptive style with colloquial lexis is modern and unpretentious. Roald Dahl strives to create semantic fields with images of death, cannibalism, war and murder in his tale for children. He describes the giants using terms of brutality and death, using their names to describe their eating habits and techniques when eating humans. "Fleshlumpeater", for example is highly evocative as a compound word for he tears lumps of flesh from his victims. The semantic field and use of imagery in terms of butchery, murder and violence is consistently maintained throughout the novel but it does not have a troubling effect on the child readership [9].

The narrative voice is a very important element in Dahl's children's books, be it either a first person or a third-person omniscient narrator. They all share in various degrees the following features: they are intrusive, all-knowing and overtly in control of the narrative. The implied reader is frequently addressed with questions, pieces of advice and instructions, thus demanding the reader's attention and participation in the story. These children's literature narrators are not neutral, but take sides and often make comments about the events retold and the characters depicted, expressing freely their opinions.

All these stylistic devices and narrative strategies make his books an interesting and enjoyable experience for young readers. Roald Dahl knows how to make use of the fact that young readers like to read fresh stories which are different from average ones.

The above mentioned facts can be considered as an indicator for increasing value given to the role of children's literature in education and upbringing. The works, that add coloring to a child's perception of the world, not only enrich his imagination, but also can help him to use the language understandably and effectively. The authors writing for children must be able to introduce to them the life from a realistic standpoint. They should respond to questions that child can not find the answer in life, and should help to complete the missing information.

The future of children's literature seems to be filled with endless possibilities. It is a medium that will constantly be growing, changing, and evolving, and so it seems, as long as there are children, there will always be a need for a story, cultivating the healthy development of next generation's spiritual life.

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