



LITERATURE AS AN INDISPENSABLE TOOL FOR THE REFORMATION OF THE CHILD: THE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE EXAMPLE

Dr. Uche Nnyagu¹ and Dominion Joanna Ngozi²

¹Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.

²Early Childhood Care and Education, Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe

ABSTRACT: *Literature has as its major aim, to educate and help the audience to understand the society as to be able to live and appreciate the society. One reading any literature reads to grasp the message of the literature. Children's literature is an indispensable means upbringing. Therefore, the belief of many that this aspect of literature is easy to write is a mere illusion. If we believe that children in their formative stage are docile, then we will realize that children's literature is not as easy to write as many assume. Many people have written and published trash and pushed such material to the market for the consumption of the child. When a child reads, instead of the literature reforming, it rather corrupts. It is based on this fact that the researcher has analyzed some texts and has given an illustration of the paradigm of children's literature so that one understands why a child must not be allowed to read any book he or she lays his hand in.*

ABSTRACT: Literature, Reformation, Children's Literature, Education, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Literature has its origin in the classical period and the concept *literature* is taken from the word *literate* which simply means being able to read with understanding and write meaningfully in a particular language. This entails that one is literate in a particular language only when the person is able to read, understand and interpret any written material in such language. Obviously, one can be literate in a particular language without being literate in another. A professor of English for instance in Nigeria, when he goes to China or any other country where the English language is not spoken, he becomes illiterate. The fact that literature is that written for the literate to read and understand however, does not include calculations as literature: calculations unlike literature that letters of the alphabets, make use of figures, and signs.

Books on history, Biology, Geography, English, Creative writings such as novels, plays and poems written in English or any other language are literature as long as the reader understands the language. According to Nnyagu in *Literature and Literate*, the texts as listed above, are examples of literature on the broad sense. According to him, literature on the broad sense includes such texts on all fields of endeavour with the exception of imaginative works which he describes as literature on the narrower sense. Baldick in his *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, says that since the 19th century, the broader sense of literature as a totality of written or printed works has given way to more exclusive definition based on criteria of imaginative, creative, or artistic value, usually related to a work's absence of factual or practical reference.



In the view of Abram, literature comes from the Latin word *litteraturae*, which means “Writings”. As he puts it, literature has been commonly used since the eighteenth century, equivalently with the French *belle letters* (fine letters), to designate fictional and imaginative writings – poetry, prose fiction and drama. To consolidate the fact that literature is not confined only to works of fiction. Abram (2005) goes further to state that in an expanded use, it designates also any other writings (including philosophy, history and even scientific works addressed to a general audience) that are especially distinguished in form, expression, and emotional power. In a similar reaction, Baldick has stated that until the mid-20th Century, many kinds of non-fictional writing – in philosophy, science, and politics – were counted as literature; implicit in this broader usage is a definition of literature as that body of works which – for whatever reason – deserves given culture (unlike yesterday’s newspaper), which belongs in the disposable category of ephemera.

Baldick’s (Ibid) submission simply denotes that literature is not restricted to only works of imagination. However, in this research, emphasis is on the imaginative literature. This is the literature type that involves works of fiction: drama, poetry and especially prose fiction. Edgar and Jacobs see imaginative literature as compositions that tell stories, dramatize situations, express emotions, analyze and advocate ideas. Although literature is a work of fiction rather than being a documentation of any historical fact, a good work of art is that which is realistic. What makes the reader to continue reading a work until it comes to an end is the fact that the work is realistic and perhaps, shares the reader’s experience. This is why Perrines says that imaginative literature, despite the fact that it is a work of fiction, must be realistic and must in addition to the entertainment that literature offers, also offers enlightenment. As he puts it, one of the major duties of literature, in addition to the entertainment that it offers, is to educate the reader about the author’s society.

The Children’s Literature

This is the type of literature meticulously written for the consumption of the child. It is pertinent to state at this point that although children should be encouraged to read extensively, what they read ought to be censored or as Plato observed, the literature would profusely corrupt the mind of the child. According to Nnyagu, children’s literature denotes the totality of literatures including the three genres: drama, prose and poetry specifically prepared, not only for the enjoyment of the children but also for their positive upbringing. A child is like the yam tendril, anywhere it is led to, there it would go. It is based on this fact that the Bible enjoined parents and guardians to bring up the child in the way that it should go so that when he or she grows up, he or she can never depart from that. Contrary to views of people, children’s literature is not easy to write. A writer of this literary type must come down to the level of the child in order to be able to communicate effectively. We must understand that literature is like a closed door, if one who wants to pass through the door pushes the door and it is difficult to open, the person goes back. In literature, the child is a neophyte reader and if the literature he or she reads is difficult for him or her to decode, he develops aversion for literature. Nwahunanya makes this fact vivid when he says that “one of the problems with children’s literature in Nigeria is the fact that every literate adult assumes that he can write stuff which children should read – ranging from the meaningless nursery rhymes that are being fed children in nursery and kindergarten schools, to the stories published as novelettes for more advanced teenagers” The belief that children’s literature is very simple to write is a mere illusion. Children’s literature is one of the most difficult aspects of writing not only because the writer will bring down himself to the level of the child, he or she has to in



addition, do a lot of bowdlerization and expurgation or otherwise, he or she will feed the children with trash.

To make it more vivid, Nwahunanya says that:

One consequence of this erroneous assumption is that these writers set out with their notions of what children's books should be, with the result that they choose as their models' stories which are popular in the social circles in which such writers operate. They often fail to establish and work with the ideal objectives of children's literature behind their minds (370).

Children's literature should be shaped in such a way that its aim is not defeated. When Plato, a Greek classical thinker described literature as a worthless venture that is capable of corrupting the minds of the youths, he was concerned about the effect of literature on the child. He was of the view that literature ought to be devoid of any corrupting influence. Based on the imaginative work of Homer, Plato concludes that literature corrupts the society and therefore, that literature must be properly censored to carry only morally enriching pictures and ideas. However, Plato (Ibid) believes that literature is a source of knowledge, and so its content was important. His main interest was the moral effect of such knowledge acquired from literature on its consumers.

Obviously, parents feel so delighted when they see their children read any novel. They do not probe to find out the type of stuff their children read. Children are so inquisitive that they long to read anything they lay their hands on. Some of these materials contain erotic materials. These are the type that children delight so much in reading and soon after they had finished reading, they begin to practice what they understood from the material. It is good that children are encouraged to read but what they read must be censored so that what they read fails to corrupt them rather than aid in reformation. What a reasonable elder must always put in mind is *whether the novel can help the child to grow or is it the type that will spoil the child forever?* Obviously, any smart child can read any novel and understand it. Though the parents and guardians should encourage the children to read, they must as well, know that the children should not read every novel that they see around. Some novels could be poisonous to the child though they are apt for the adult. The adult may read any novel but not the child. This is because, the way an adult reason is different from the way a child reason. When an adult reads any novel that contains some erotic and corrupt influence, he or she will tend to take only the good aspect of the novel and jettison the bad influence. It is a fact that no matter how bad a novel is, there is something good about it. When the child reads any bad novel, unlike the adult counterpart, he takes everything and goes ahead to put them into practice. This is the reason why we say that it is not easy to write, especially children's literature. It must be stated categorically at this point that bad things are so easily learnt and copied than the good ones and any bad thing a child learns at a tender age, it is always very difficult for corrections to be made later. This is why parents, guardians and especially, teachers must be wary of the fact that children's literature is different from adult literature and for a child not to go astray, we must monitor the type of literature they read.



Qualities of Children's Literature

Children's literature is distinguished from adult literature basically because children's literature is written with every meticulousness or else, it would simply aid in the corruption of the young mind. In order to identify works apt for the child, this section is dedicated to the illustration of the qualities of children's literature. In this work, features or characteristics of children's literature are considered as synonym to qualities of children's literature. According to Nwahunanya, many critics are of the opinion that children's literature in Africa has been relegated to the background for too long. The assertion about the neglect of children's literature was made by concerned critics when they noticed that the plethora of published works in Africa for the young adults failed to follow the convention of a paradigm of children's literature. William Wordsworth, a romantic scholar, has as far back as in 1802, observed that children aid in keeping any society alive and therefore, serious attention is to be given to them. He wrote in "My Heart Leaps Up" that "the child is the father to the man." The statement seems self-contradictory but it contains an underlying truth about the immense importance of children in any society and that it is the children who would succeed the parents in the near future. In order to ensure that these children become beneficial to the society and their parents, there is the need to monitor the quality of literature that they read. You don't allow a child to read anything he or she sees around simply because he or she can read. While a child should be encouraged to read, the child should be encouraged to read only the literature designed for them.

Major Characters in Children's Literature are Children

Characters are the imaginary people in a work of art used by the author to represent real persons in real life. It is a fact generally acknowledged that children are interested about what happens to other fellow children. This is why they are always inquisitive about the other's affairs. A good writer of children's literature bears this in mind and tries to mirror this fact in his or her works. The essence of literature, of course, is to communicate facts about the author's society mirrored in the imaginary setting to the reader. This is why it is believed that literature is a mirror of life. To ensure that a novel, play or even poetry meant for the child effectively communicates the child so that the aim of the work is achieved, the work must centre on children: the major characters should be children who embark on adventures. This is not to say however, that adults should not feature as part of characters in children's literature. Adults constitute part of the minor characters. According to Abrams, minor characters play minor roles in a work of art and they help the reader to understand and appreciate the major characters. Adults in children's literature help to influence the child; they function as instructors and moral-givers to the children.

In a typical children's literature, the major characters are children and we see the adults who constantly advise, admonish and blame them as in real life with the intent to make them better persons in the society. Ginikanwa, Ugochukwu's *My Dream Comes True*, Uche Nnyagu's *The Disobedient Child*, *Deserved Wage*, Okonkwo Nkala's *Mezie the Ogbanje Boy*, Chinua Achebe's *The Flute* among others are some good examples of children's literature. In the above, one discovers that the major characters are all children with the elders helping in a way or the other to shape their lives for better. Any child reading any of the novels will definitely enjoy it because it shares his or her experiences. In Nnyagu's *Adamma Goes to Jail*, we discover that one of the chief characters, Adamma is an adult. Though Adamma, an adult is a main character in the novel, emphasis is on the child entrusted in her care. In the play, the



author aims to discourage manhandling of young people by their guardians as well as discourage street hawking by young ones which he (the author) sees as a very dangerous thing that contributes immensely to the corruption of the children.

Although the author of children's literature is an adult, a good writer of children's literature must write from the experiences of the child. That is one of the reasons why we say that to write juvenile literature is not as easy as one thinks. Nwahunanya observes that if a writer of children's literature writes from his or her own experiences as an adult, the work certainly will not be apt for the target audience. He argues that we find for instance that simply because some of the writers are from backgrounds where horror stories, love and sex stories and stories of crime and violence are common, they go ahead to write children's stories that reflect and incorporate an unpardonable degree of horror, crime, violence, and sex, without considering the possible impact of such stories on their intended audiences. Supporting that major characters in children's literature should be children, Nwahunanya says that books in which the protagonist is shown to be a drunkard or a criminal of sorts or to be engaged in violence, or any other acts or misdemeanor should not feature on children's bookstand except such a character really suffers or is punished in the end because of his behaviour. Sopuru in *A Journey to Maturity*, when he succumbsto the unbridled persuasions of Ikpeama, becomes a truant. In the end, virtue is encouraged. Likewise, in *The Strong Desire*, Emeka conspires with other gangsters to kidnap an innocent boy, Ekene but in the end, Emeka is made to suffer for the wicked acts. A child reading the novels will try to avoid the actions of the antagonists as not to end up the way they ended. Though the novels centre on crime, the author subtly designed the works so that the characters who are involved in the crimes are made to suffer at the end.

Children's Novel Must be Didactic

According to Catherine Acholonu, the quality of the output of works produced as children's literature in our society is low and frightening. Although the major aim of literature is not to pass morals across, children's literature on the other hand is geared towards passing moral. Matthew Arnold, a Victorian critic with romantic impulse, observed that literature is not only thing that can help one live by interpreting life for him. Any good literature for children, has to, as observed by Arnold, helps the children to live a morally pure life. Perrine similarly, believes that must, in addition to the pleasure that it offers the reader, also educates. According to him, "But, unless fiction (Literature) gives something more than pleasure, it hardly justifies itself as a subject of (College) study." To ensure that children's literature educates as well as passes moral lessons to the audience, only such subjects that would spur the reader to live positive life should be contained in the work. In Chinua Achebe's *The Flute* for instance, vice is discouraged whilst virtue is encouraged. Any child reading the work will see clearly, the ills associated with envy, hatred and malice as x-rayed by Achebe, using the envious second wife and her son. In Nnyagu's *Lizard and Chameleon*, the author vivifies the consequences of disobedience. Though the short children's novel is based on popular folktale, the animal characters are highly symbolical. A child reading the work sees how lizard disobeys its mother who advises it against its friendship with chameleon whom the mother lizard has described as a foe. Against the advice of the mother, lizard follows chameleon to steal and chameleon eventually hands lizard over to the enemy. As lizard is being given capital punishment, chameleon laughs at it. The book, like *The Disobedient Child*, is full of moral lessons apt for the child.



In Ginikanwa, Gloria Ugochukwu's *My Dream Comes True*, Afamefuna, the chief character has an ambition to be great in life, he does not relent in working towards the actualization of his dreams. Despite all odds, Afamefuna struggles to the zenith and as the saying goes that God helps those who help themselves, at the climax of the plot, Afam is transported. The moral lessons in the short novel that "hard work does not kill, rather, it pays" helps the audience to live positively. In *A Journey to Maturity*, Nwachukwu O Nwachukwu vividly chronicles the story of a boy, Sopuru who is an obedient and intelligent boy. Sopuru is optimistic about getting his treasure through education. However, as the saying goes that bad company corrupts good thoughts, Sopuru in his JSS2, becomes closer to Ikpeama, his childhood friend who almost spoilt him but for the divine timely intervention. The novel shares the same subject and message with Uche Nnyagu's *Price of Disobedience*. The major characters in the two novels learn their lessons the hard way as they see themselves in the police cell so that they realize at the eleventh hour that they have been doing bad to themselves. The two characters, having learnt their lessons, decide to advise themselves and go back to school. The moral lesson the novels carry – "bad company corrupts good mind" is the popular motif in Mike Ejeagha's. Mike Ejeagha is a popular *Akuko n'Egwu* musician whose music is based on popular Igbo folktales. Mike Ejeagha in an interview, discloses that every folktale, like children's novel must be didactic as it would teach the reader some fundamental lessons of life. Ejeagha (2005) believes that with the moral lesson of his song, the life of the child is positively affected. Emphasizing on the indispensability of moral lesson for the upbringing of the child, Ejeagha says that he can never conclude his music without vivifying the moral lesson of the song. Catherine Acholonu (1990), in consolidation, says that children's literature and its relevance to moral health and growth of the society, should be the writer's focus.

Direct Characterization and Number of Characters

In a good work of art, fictional characters, as earlier said, are used to symbolize real people in real life. The characters that feature so prominently in a work of art are major characters. A major character, if he is optimistic but rebelled or humiliated by another major character, he is the protagonist, hero or heroine (*if the major character is a female*). The antagonist is also a major character who fights against the protagonist. Ekene in *The Strong Desire* is the protagonist. He is optimistic and does not fight for the downfall of anybody. Emeka who conspires against him is the antagonist. For the fact that the two characters feature prominently in the work, they are major characters.

An experienced author develops his or her characters well so that they look like real persons in real life. Characters that are fully developed are referred to as round characters. Round characters are credible and they look like real persons in real life. However, in most cases in children's literature, especially in folktales, the major characters are usually flat. This is so because the writer aims to pass some moral lessons across. In the story of Tortoise and Elephant for instance, the raconteur presents characters that think irrationally – they think one sided. The characters are not portrayed to look real. Besides, the characters are static rather than dynamic. Static characters are the characters that remain unchanged in a work of art. From the beginning of the work till the end, they do not change with circumstances. Dynamic characters on the other hand, change with situations. In F.C. Ogbalu's *Mbediogu*, because the animal characters in the series of short stories in the work are used to teach the children morals, each of the characters remains what it is from the beginning till the story ends. If



Tortoise is presented as a cunning character, till the end, it remains so no matter the circumstances and Elephant remains a big fool from the beginning till the end.

The term, *characterization*, on the other hand, according to Baldick (2004), is the representation of persons in narrative and dramatic works. This may include direct method like the attribution of qualities in description or commentary and indirect method (or dramatic) methods inviting the readers to infer qualities from character's actions, speech, or appearance. While direct method tells the reader directly who and what the character is, the indirect method demands that the reader reads and decodes the qualities himself. In children's literature, it is recommended that while both direct and indirect methods are used, the writer should make use of the direct method more often than the indirect method. Ginikanwa (2005) in her *My Dream Comes True*, in describing the characters, writes, "Arinze and his wife were very successful in life. He was a practicing lawyer while his wife was a banker. Arinze's integrity and sincerity spoke for him and placed him ahead of his equals in the field. His wife also was truthful and pious in her job as a banker. They were happy.... All that we know about Arinze and his wife in the short novel comes from the author's direct method of characterization often makes the work boring and monotonous, but to make sure that the work is understood by the target audience, it has to be used more often than the indirect.

Children's Literature and the Simplicity of Diction

For children's literature to be understood and appreciated by the target audience, the writer must consider the diction. It has been said in the introductory part of this work that literature is like a door closed, if the reader finds it difficult to appreciate it, he or she develops aversion for it. To understand a work of art depends on how difficult or simple the diction is. Diction means the choice and use of words in a literary work. If the writer of children's literature is aware that the essence of literature is to communicate, then he or she has to consider his language and ask himself or herself if his or her language in a particular work of art is adequate for the target audience. To get a child to begin to appreciate literature, the child should be encouraged to read novels whose language is simple. If the language is simple, the child will understand and appreciate the work. If on the other hand, the language is too difficult, it will, like the closed door difficult to open, keep the child away. The simplicity of the language of a literary work will make the child to appreciate the work. Nevertheless, the diction of the children's literature should be moderate; it should neither be too simple nor too difficult. If it becomes too simple, then the aim of literature – to help the reader develop his or her vocabulary is defeated. If it becomes too difficult, the literature possess threat to the understanding of the work. Good children's literature should have its language moderate as such coheres with the level of the target audience.

Children's Literature has Linear Plot

According to Perrine (1978), plot is the sequence of incidents or events of which a story is composed. Plot has *beginning*, *middle* and *end*. The Beginning of the plot introduces the characters and the initial conflicts. Gradually, the plot rises as the conflicts and complications intensify. This is the middle of the plot. Gradually again, the plot begins to fall from the climax when eventually at the end (denouement), all the conflicts and complications get resolved. Some plots, especially plots of advanced literature start from the middle or even the end and then, with the aid of flashback, the reader understands what had transpired in the beginning. The plot that starts as such, is said to have started *in medias res* or else, the child



will find it difficult to follow the plot. The plot of children's literature has to be chronological – it has to be linear and simple, devoid of too many conflicts and complications. What this means is that the storyline should be straightforward without too many subplots that may tend to confuse the neophyte reader. However, there must be suspense and surprises in the plot of the work. Without suspense and surprises, the novel becomes boring. It is only when the plot of a work of art has suspense that the reader reads till the end to get the whole information of the work. The writer achieves nothing when the reader fails to read his or her work till the end because the theme of a work of art becomes very obvious at the end of the novel and drama.

In this work, we have continued to emphasize on prose fiction (Novel) and drama as if these were the only literary genres. No! Poetry is one of the genres. In fact, poetry is the chief of the three. Poetry and drama were the only two literary genres in existence during the classical era. Why it seems as if little is said about poetry in this article is because poetry unlike prose fiction and drama, does not always make use of characters to pass across moral lessons. Children's poetry is usually rhyming that appeal more to the ears. In most occasions, children's rhymes are not usually meaningful, but for the sound effects and the simplicity of language, they are enjoyed by children as children's literature. Consider for instance, "Coati-Mundi". Though the language is simple, it carries only meaningless information that has nothing to offer to the child. However, because of the rhyming scheme and the simplicity of language and of course, for the fact that it contains no erotic material, it is a typical example of children's poem like the popular "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star."

It is funny what some people believe to be children's literature. In a conference organized by ASUBEB, Awka, on children's literature, one of the presenters made a ridiculous statement when she said that length is what distinguished children's literature from adult literature. This is a remarkable lie. Though children's literature is not expected to be unnecessarily long, one must not nurse the illusion that length is a major determinant. A work maybe long but if the major characters are children and the work is didactic with the diction apt to enhance understanding, the work is apt for the child and it is a good example of children's literature. We must not forget that another good thing worth mentioning about children's literature is that children's literature has many colourful pictures. The pictures are attractive and they draw the attention of the child to read. The pictures captivate the child and spur him or her to read on. Again, the font size of early reader should be very bold and not tiny. 16 or 18 font size, times new roman is apt. However, depending on the target audience, the author may choose any other font provided it is not too tiny for the child's liking.

CONCLUSION

Wellek and Warren are of the view that art does not merely reproduce life, it in addition, shapes it. This is akin to submission of Perrine Laurence who says that a good literature is not such that only entertains, according to him, a good literature must in addition to the entertainment, also educates. In the same vein, T.S Eliot, states that "the fiction that we read affects our behaviour towards our fellow men, affects our patterns of ourselves. When we read of human beings behaving in certain ways, with the approval of the author, who gives his benefaction to this behaviour arranged by himself, we can be influenced towards behaving in the same way" 14.



Writers of children's literature are to be guided by the observations enshrined in this article. A writer must not continue nursing the illusion that writing for children is an easy task. When the writer has this at this in mind, when he or she writes, he or she bears in mind that literature goes beyond giving mere pleasure. A good literature, like Matthew Arnold maintains, should help the reader to understand life better. A child's life needs to be positively affected after reading a work of art. If any children's literature fails to pass morals across, it fails to affect the life of the reader positively and it fails to share the experiences of the child. It is believed that a reader of this article would be well equipped on the tenets of writing for the child.

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