

Children's Literature: The Significance and Other Impacts

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Abstract—It is worth noting that children's literature is one of the rapidly growing fields in the literature on one hand, but on the other hand, it is also the most argumentative area of study among critics and all interested persons. The debatable feature of this literary genre underlies the broad scope of the literary texts that can include under its umbrella; fairy tales, short stories, novels, poems, and picture books. Additionally, these books' commercial success and readability can have a long-lasting influence, and we can trace these impacts from one generation to another and from one culture to another. These books occupy a vital position in the scholar's discussion to examine the suitability and goodness of their content to fit the mentality of children. No one can deny these books' profound impacts on the young generation's personal development, but we must admit that other impacts may scratch this bright image of these memorable books. In this paper, the researcher tries to detect both sides of children's literature by referring to the role of the writer's ideology.

Index Terms—children's literature, childhood, ideology, fairy tales, goodness

I. INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, children's literature plays a vital role in forming the young generations' personalities and leaves an ever last impression and impact. So, offering different varieties of literature is essential to pursue their future life successfully and smoothly. Here, we have to pay more attention to the role of the adults, parents, educators, and all caregivers in monitoring and mediating this reading process and the quality of these books. They have to urge children to read more and interact less with these books. As per many critical articles and academic studies, the value of children's books may extend from the development of cognitive skills to the emotional and spiritual aspects of the child's personality. These books may support the child in nurturing his/her social skills, fostering emotional intelligence, and maintaining a sufficient level of success in the future. On the other hand, these books may be manipulated to support the growing new generations as per the specific standards of morality and nobility required in society.

To start with the constructive side of children's books, the reader can trace the following advantages and positive impacts on the child's personality. First, these books reflect the cultural background of a specific country or group of countries so that the child can learn many things about his traditions, values, beliefs, and history. In this regard, Donna Norton and Sandra Norton assure the importance of children's literature as it helps young boys and girls to appreciate their cultural heritage and others' culture (Norton & Norton, 2011).

Second, these books urge children to extend their imagination and enrich their language skills (vocabulary and sounds) at this age. Third, the young boys and girls can develop their skills in understanding their personalities and others throughout this process. Fourth, these books can help children appreciate and respect others' backgrounds when reading books about different ethnic groups. Fifth, these books can help children learn how to interact, play and work in groups regardless of their apparent differences. They can learn how to solve their problems collectively and successfully avoid their obstacles. Ultimately, they can learn the value of humanity, and all human beings have the same feelings and emotions and may share the same level of anxiety and fear. All of that may leave them with a better understanding of the concepts of fairness and equality.

On the other hand, low-quality and inappropriate children's books may destroy all the qualities and advantages mentioned above and leave children with a long-lasting negative impression about different groups or even specific gender. From this angle, we need to be cautious and skeptical about selecting good quality books and filter the content of these books carefully before offering them to young kids. Generally, these books should avoid any relevant bias against certain groups, stereotyping, and discrimination based on social levels or ethnic backgrounds.

As per many studies, adults have a significant active role in reading and appreciating children's books. This active role of adults counters another "passive" role of children, who sit in a passive position to receive the outcomes of the adults' efforts according to their ideologies. Adults play different roles as books writers, publishers, and buyers in this process. On the other hand, the child's position in this process is a recurring argumentative point in many debates among scholars and critics interested in examining these books' impacts. In this paper, we will highlight the value of children's literature, examine the different impacts of children's books, and finally look at the active role of adults in this process.

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II. ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS

As per different academic studies, many literary texts (fairy tales, stories, or poems) offered during the early years of the child's life by any care providers influenced their personal, mental, and psychological development from different perspectives. These books' impressions and moral lessons may have lasting impacts.

No one can deny the significance of children's books and their impacts on our personalities during the early years of our childhood. These impacts can be reflected in our behaviors, attitudes, perceptions, and understanding of ourselves and others until now. As Hunt (1994) has pointed out the importance of children's literature as a "remarkable area of writing" (p. 1), many critics and academics highlight the profound impact of these books not only on the psyches of the child but also on the adult's mood. The tremendous amount of enjoyment in reading these books can be taken from the nostalgic feelings as the adult starts to recall some of the pleasant and happy memories from his childhood when he did not have any worries, anxieties, or burdens. So, we can describe this impact as "less evident, less confessed, but deeply seated" (Maybin & Watson, 2009, p. 1). However, it is worth noting that this attention to studying and examining or appreciating children's books started recently with the beginning of the 20th century. Before that date, children's literature had been considered "childish" and with trivial value and could not be compared with the other genres of literature. Accordingly, the debate over the importance of this newly established academic discipline has been heated with a conclusion or giving apparent reference to an end. Some critics consider all children's books lower than adults' texts as per their content and literary perspective. Others look at these books with a high level of respect and appreciation, considering the impacts on the coming generation of young boys and girls.

Undoubtedly, children's literature has acquired new ground over time. Many readers and critics re-examined and re-evaluated the content with much appreciation and better understanding after considering the cross-cultural and generational impacts of many well-known children's books. Here, the reader may examine the different versions of the same story with some adaptations in different cultures to suit the tastes of different generations. Based on the multiple versions of these books, many children's books have achieved astonishing commercial success and financial benefits through millions of sold copies of the same book over history. Additionally, throughout certain historical stages, many of the community's (political, social, religious, and educational) entities and organizations tried to manipulate children's books to raise young generations to meet their standards and to formalize their mentalities up to the imposed restrictions and expectations in these communities. To these entities, these stories were the best channel to convey the standards of morality and nobility they wanted to teach the young generations. Now, if we can imagine the process of offering these books, we can find three contributors interested in producing more books; we can refer to the writer, the publisher, and the buyer. All of them need to achieve their purposes through these books.

As parents and educators, we need to look after the value and quality of these books to ensure that they have enough limits of value that can suit the child's mentality and the cultural and social context. Nevertheless, assessing literature's quality or "goodness" is a contentious debate and may include two different views. Peter Hunt, in his article "Instruction or Delight," states that "the first view is that there are absolute standards of quality or goodness; these are generally undefined (and undefinable)" (Hunt, 2009, p. 18). Accordingly, we need to wait for the instructions from the community's highly defined classes/groups to decide the required standards and criteria of the good and bad books to be offered to children. In certain situations, we may examine a significant issue about the maltreatment and manipulation of these books and how they do their best to achieve the objectives of this group or this organization. We may also find some literary texts touched with religious or political flavors. Hunt extends his discussion to mention the second view, calling it an "alternative view." This view values everything as "fit for purpose" (Hunt, 2009, p. 18). In other words, according to these views, we do not have clearly stated criteria or conventions to assess the quality and "goodness" of children's books. For example, certain cultures' valuable and excellent books may not be good or "not suitable" for others. Alternatively, what is accepted in some countries can be forbidden or undesirable in others. This ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the quality and goodness of children's books pay more attention and require more effort to assess their quality of them and evaluate their potential impacts on children. As a result, we can find the massive responsibility of adults as a must to sustain the social and contextual standards on board.

This responsibility is highly connected to examining the messages and lessons of these books. Unfortunately, many of these books may include inappropriate (socially, morally, or religiously) messages we do not want to give to the young generations. For example, some children's books may contain stereotypes and biases that we can find in our daily lives or other forms of entertainment. Due to the exciting plot and the attractive sequence of incidents in these tales, children may become more impacted or heavily influenced by these distorted examples (characters or behaviors) and will be retained in the long run attitudes and become a part of their personality.

Here, we can start talking about the adults' responsibility to assess the quality of these books and evaluate their content's goodness. Before handing these stories to our children, we must ensure that they provide the appropriate and accurate representations of all people, and their messages should fit the social context. It is well known that these books have been read and checked millions of times by millions worldwide and over different generations, so the adult's responsibility is indispensable to check the suitability of the content of these books and their potential hazardous impacts. For instance, we can check the stereotypical images of female characters in most well-known fairy tales like *Cinderella*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *Snow White*; all heroines are passive and naive. Moreover, the traditional versions of these stories presented them as helpless objects to male characters' lust and fantasies. These lessons may not

be superficial lessons or messages, but the readers can quickly grasp the passive images of the female characters. So, educators and parents should play an essential role in encouraging children to think critically to align with their cultural, religious, and social context.

From another perspective, many critics refer to these books' innocence issues. Some critics move to the extent of saying that children's books are not innocent or straightforward at all. This lack of innocence and simplicity can come from the writer's agenda (political or religious) or his/her personal experience. As mentioned above, those critics refer to the influence of these two factors in formulating the intended lessons and unconscious messages in their stories. Guin (1992) points out this issue by saying, 'sure it is simple, writing for kids/ Just as simple as bringing them' (p. 49). The reading process and examining children's books can be more complicated and broader than producing only some books for kids. This process involves active interaction with the different social values that dominate one society. Also, this process is exceptionally inevitable in developing children's personalities to meet society's aspirations. Kim Reynolds refers to this significance by saying: 'If children's literature fails to offer young people ways of thinking about themselves and their world that suggest that they make a difference and help them construct a discourse of their own to empower them as political subjects' (Keenan & Thompson, 2004, p. 147).

Accordingly, selecting the most appropriate children's book is crucial for assuring the appropriate children's development. Many academic studies refer to these books' impacts on children's cognitive and psychological development. These studies highlight the most critical factors and elements of children's stories that may help children read and enjoy these books. For example, young boys and girls are highly affected by the content and quality of the books they read (Rudden & Nedeff, 1998, p. 181). The essential elements that affect young boys and girls to decide to read or ignore a story are characters, plots, and themes. Also, Bayraktar mentions that "having characters that were animals, good-hearted, and funny as well as having action and adventure within the stories made the storybooks the children's most favorite" (Bayraktar, 2021, p. 341).

Based on the outcomes of many academic studies, parents and educators are encouraged to examine different elements to assess the value and goodness of those books. These elements include; the story, characters, themes, plots, and other references. To examine these elements, we have to check different points regarding each element. For example, we need to check the book's main story and whether it is enjoyable to children. Also, we must check this story's different types of conflicts. Are the conflicts related to the nature of children or not relevant to this age? Children are most interested in finding a proper resolution to these conflicts in the story that may match their expectations and enable them to tackle their issues and internal conflicts. One of the most exciting elements in the story for children (and adults) is the characters. One of the questions we have to evaluate the story is can those characters be found in real life, or are they purely magic? Do these characters represent the good and bad categories? Do these characters represent a variety of different backgrounds? What moral lessons may be learned from those characters, and what messages do they want to convey?

Children are also interested in the logical sequence of the story's incidents. Do the story's actions move according to an ascending tone to attract children's attention till the end? Do the story's actions represent any reference to an unexpected shift? Are the motifs of these actions clear and explicitly stated in the story? Finally, as a parent or educator, there is an urgent need to check other elements like the setting and its references. The following are some questions to be asked before reading these books: does the story represent the cultural diversity among the characters? Does the book represent any examples of stereotypes related to gender roles or female or male representations? Does the book include any political or religious references that may disturb the child's natural development? Does the book reflect any "inappropriate" references related to sexuality or male and female interaction?

Undoubtedly, the reader can not find all of the elements and references mentioned above in a single book, but the parents need to ensure the book's appropriateness according to the minimum level of the cultural context. Also, these elements evidently highlight the massive responsibility of the adults or all caregivers who are responsible for monitoring the different impacts of these books. In many cases, the value or goodness or at least the quality of those books is problematic and argumentative.

III. THE VALUE OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS

According to definitions and explanations of children's literature, it can be defined as books explicitly written to enjoy children and teach them something that may have long ever impact. As per the discussion above, these books should have specific standards of quality, goodness, and suitability. Also, these books can include a wide range of literary texts, from tales, stories, and novels to poems or picture books. So, the value of children's books may have a vast and noticeable impact on children's behavioral, psychological, cultural, and cognitive aspects. Melanie Koss states that "through children's literature, children receive cultural messages, values of the society they live in, and information regarding the world" (Koss, 2018, p. 32). In this case, children interact with these messages, construct perceptions about different cultures, and prepare themselves to react positively according to these perceptions. These books enable children to appreciate their own cultures and others' cultures.

On the personal level, Harits and Chudy (2017) confirm that children's literature can be a "mirror to children in terms of showing them who they are as well as clarifying their feelings, goals, and ideas. In addition, they can also be windows through which children learn about others' feelings, customs, and experiences" (p. 29). Thus, realistic stories

and novels encourage children to interact with the characters and help them understand how they solve similar problems in their daily lives. So, we can see that children's books can be considered the best channels to support children in dealing with their fears and anxieties. Also, they help children to express their internal issues and conflicts safely and smoothly. Moreover, we can consider these books as an informal way of therapy that educators and parents can exploit to grow up their children efficiently.

Undoubtedly, children's books can nurture children's personal and social development by moving them from being egocentric to appreciating and caring about others and trying to learn more about their problems and spending some time thinking about those characters. The caregivers may be aware of the type of story that they should offer to children at this age or stage. For example, children in the preschool stage may be concentrated entirely on their own needs and interests. So, they should be exposed to some characters to learn how to appreciate others' needs and interests and respect others' opinions. Children learn how to interact with others actively and positively through the different types of characters and various topics of these stories. They may learn to be proactive in dealing with others' problems and issues and how to handle specific problems at this early stage. Finally, their personality should be fostered and nurtured entirely in the coming years to have well-behaved and qualified citizens in the future that may be respected and appreciated by society.

Additionally, different studies refer to the fact that children's books enable the young generations to develop emotional intelligence and think deeper about their true feelings and emotions towards some topics in real life. These books have the required elements to strengthen their moral development and value system. Children's stories "contain numerous moments of crisis, when characters make moral decisions and contemplate the reasons for their decisions." (Norton & Norton, 2011, p. 34). So, these books may allow children to imitate the models to learn how to behave appropriately in certain situations. Moreover, they can step down with the characters of these stories to understand different abstract values and notions like loyalty and betrayal, love and hatred, and commitment and indifference. We can also see that children may learn much about complicated topics that need a high level of emotional intelligence and understanding, like death. This topic may be obscure and vague for children, mainly when they may link to one of the close persons like a father, mother, or family member. However, this topic is more complicated and not favorable to be discussed, but it is essential to share the different aspects of this topic with children at a certain age to make them aware of it and familiar with the possible consequences. As mentioned, these stories and books can easily convey all complicated real-life topics to children. So, we can confirm that children's books may be the most appropriate channel to transfer moral messages or argumentative topics to children. Some of these books may use a straightforward style, and others may use implicit and indirect writing styles.

Moreover, these books may urge young boys and girls to understand the family's values and the family members' proper roles. These stories can enhance the importance of some concepts like cooperation and love among the family members to foster their relationships. In addition, another concept like friendship may exist in many children's stories to instruct children how to behave friendly with others and give them different insights about the significance of friendship. In these stories, the reader can find several situations to reveal the value of friends and how friends can support each other in different situations. From another perspective, these books, with their intergenerational and intercultural features, can be the main channel to develop the children's appreciation of their literary and cultural heritage and others' heritage. Through different literary texts from different cultures, children can bridge the gap between different cultures and different generations. Finally, as we mentioned before, the impacts of children's literature can be extended throughout the child's life on different levels and aspects. These stories support the children's personal, social, and cognitive development. To ensure this proper development, adults should take responsibility for maintaining the standards of the proper quality and goodness of these books.

IV. THE OTHER IMPACTS OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

It is worth noting that the impacts of children's books are not exclusive to the bright side and positive side effects of the child's development only; they also have some hazardous effects on long-term personal development. If the reader needs to know the dark side of these books, he should examine the content of some children's books and check the topics, issues, hidden themes, and implicit messages mentioned in these stories. The reader may find many social problems that can be considered taboo in some cultures at certain times, but these books have discussed them freely and openly. The problem is not only offering these problems in this way, but the severe problem lies beneath the capability of the child's mentality to understand and appreciate these topics at this age. The topics like violence, family breakdown, sexuality, rape, murder, incest, drug, and alcohol abuse, can appear in these books concurrently. So, we need to refer to the adults' authority and responsibility versus the child reader's role. Many children at certain ages cannot understand these topics, particularly with frank and detailed discussions. In this case, many parents and educators should stand against including these topics in these stories or at least not offer them to young children to avoid misunderstanding or unexpected consequences. The problem of tackling these topics may be clear and profound in some cultures and not severe or even regular in other cultures according to the community's traditional heritage and nature. Generally, accepting these issues cannot be justified when they are offered to children, particularly if they exceed the limits of the childhood stage to jump into adolescence or older stages. J.R.R. Tolkien refers to this issue by saying, "the association of children and fairy stories is an accident of our domestic history. Children as a class – except in a common lack of

experience, they are not one – neither like fairy stories more nor understand them better than adults do” (Tolkien, 1964, p. 34). What we (as adults) think of as fit and understandable for children, we may find that we need to check the complicated social value and other factors. It is a painful process to match what is mentioned in these stories with the expectations of children.

The question is, do we have pure and 100 percent children’s books? Academic studies may need more than 100 years to conclude this open end debate and answer this question. Nevertheless, we need to check the factors that play a significant role in producing these books. Firstly, the writer’s background and ideology play a tremendous role in constructing the literary text. Can we ensure that the writer will write something fit for children and not impose some of his or her “negative” or “traumatic” experiences? The answer will be no. Do we confirm that he does not idealize some characters, ideas, or beliefs? The answer will be no. Accordingly, the writer’s ideology and personal experience play an essential role in forming the content of these stories and giving what is called hazardous influence. The second factor in this discussion is the publisher’s role. In this regard, we can confidently say that many publishers are interested in these stories because of the expected substantial commercial success and financial benefits, regardless of the content or the impact. The publishers push the writers to write something that should meet the standards of commercial success. Definitely, the “commercialization” of children’s books harms children’s development. So, we can recall the repeated conclusion of many critics about the “innocence” of children’s books compared to the “innocence” of childhood. In addition to that conclusion, children’s reactions to these stories are unknowable and unidentified according to their social, familial, and cultural backgrounds. In this regard, Peter Hunt (2009) states:

The study of children’s literature is often hampered by mysterious thinking, [...] it is a complex field, traversed by literary idealists and commercial marketers, literary experts and committed parents, and graced by some of the most innovative talents at work in the arts, [...] the study of children’s texts is technically *more* complex than the study of adult books, partly because the audience is different (p. 25).

So, it is crucial to identify our responsibility and duty to make the right decision about these books and examine the “right” and “suitable” content. The question is to what extent the content of these books can influence children. According to the answer, the reader can identify another issue, censorship. Many societies and cultures practice censorship to some extent, but it varies from one place to another according to the level of understanding of children’s needs. In addition, the liberal space in these communities and how the writer can write freely and limitlessly. Some researchers consider censorship the essential adult’s duty, and others consider it as superior monitoring and restricting the reading process and creative thinking. However, undoubtedly, censorship can be practiced throughout the different stages; before writing the book by imposing some limitations via the value system and cultural, social, religious, and political redlines. During the writing process, these limitations hamper the creative ideas of the writer. After finishing the story, the publishers may have another view and different aspects to ensure the commercial success of this book. Later, the parents and educators may have other opinions to practice another level of censorship. West (1996) refers to this matter by saying:

Throughout the history of children’s literature, the people who have tried to censor children’s books, for all their ideological differences, share a rather romantic view of the power of books. They believe, or at least profess to believe, that books significantly influence children’s values and attitudes and that adults must monitor nearly every word they read (p. 506).

Identifying the influence of these books and the potential harmful impacts should require a high level of awareness and understanding of the content and topics of these books. Parents and educators must ensure that these stories are written *for* children or *about* children. Also, they have to dig deeper into the writer’s background to understand his reasons and motifs for writing his/her book. Finally, they need to be updated with the children’s needs, interests, and the mechanism for understanding their books. If we can ensure that we have complete confidence in all of these factors, we can say we have a child-friendly book, not an innocent one.

V. CONCLUSION

It is worth noting that the debate over the value of children’s literature and its impacts on children has no end. Children’s books have been underestimated from the early beginning by critics and readers and described as childish, trivial, and temporary. Later and gaining some ground in the cultural context, these books started to be criticized from the adult’s point of view, not from the child-reader point of view. Generally stated, children’s books are incredibly significant in literature and the childhood stage. Millions of readers from different cultures and communities and over different successive generations have read these books. Also, the impacts of these books may have a long-lasting influence on personal, social, and cognitive development. Some of these positive impacts are worthy of being shared and learned early. On the other hand, some of the effects are dangerous and disruptive. The decisive criterion, in this case, is the content.

In this respect, we can draw attention to the inevitable responsibility of adults to filter and purify the content of these books to ensure that it matches the social and cultural context and the expected standards shared in this community. Even this responsibility is debatable as critics consider it a part of parental or adult censorship. In other words, adults play a significant role in producing, mediating, and reading children’s books. However, many academic studies examine and discuss children’s books to discover different perspectives; there is a space for further studies for different ages.

Finally, publishers play essential roles in enhancing the process of publishing these books by all means, regardless of the standards of goodness, quality, value, content, and their impacts on children. They look for books that can achieve commercial success in the literary arena.

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