



CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: AN UMBRELLA TERM

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores that several definitions were given and critical comments passed on regarding the term 'children's literature' so far. None of them can be taken as a final and no one can be rejected so for the broadness of the term is concerned. At least these definitions and critical comments are adding many features to children's literature to form a general idea about it. In order to form a specific idea related to children's literature that it compels us to say it is possible only by bringing all these valuable definitions and critical comments on a single platform to justify. Collectively all this contribution can make an umbrella term related to children's literature. It is the broadness of this term; that it accepts all what is said concerning to a single theme.

Key words: children's literature, relationship, influential, contribution, readership, challenging, transcend, dilemma

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Children's literature is an umbrella term to be valid to a body of texts which by name seem not anything in common other than the ages of their audience. Children's reading is not restricted to that which is planned for them and defining the word 'child' in itself is not without difficulty. So children's books collectively structures a body of literature which is very broad. It is useful to look at them as a whole because there are distinctive features which are relevant to almost all books for children. Children's literature is not always looked at in the similar way as other literatures. Its readership is viewed as requiring a form of protection. Consequentially the main frequent questions asked of a text for children are concerning its aptness, substance and ideological attitude.

Children's literature is always a message from the experienced adult to the inexperienced child and this relationship means that children's books comprise an influential and significant literature. Apart from this, children's literature is as

important as any literature is. It accounts for an immense and important contribution to English literature as a whole, the worth of which must not be mistreated or undervalued. The term 'children's literature' initially sounds like a simple term used to point to books for children. On the other hand the sense of this easy term is a seriously debated topic and its use has been carefully discussed. Critics have worked very hard over defining this term, drawing boundaries around the body of literature and making nonspecific statements about the way this literature for a young readership works. The exercise of defining the term is ready to lend a hand insofar as it helps us to observe patterns and resemblances which we can supportively apply to the type in the course of knowing how these texts tend to function we can get on intelligent dialogue of them. It is very important to scrutinize the specific ways in which children's literature, as a literary combination, tends to function. It is a more compound literature to draw boundaries around than many. It is difficult to

be certain about, who the audience of such a literature is and in many ways it is more challenging literature to pass judgment on. Hunt says “when we enter the world of children’s literature we are entering a world where the centre of the texts is concerned with play and where the pleasure of the text” is chief. (Hunt: 1994, 26)

The major essential task is to differentiate which books we are talking about when we say ‘children’s literature’. Does children’s literature mean books which are written with a child audience in mind or are we merely referring to books which children themselves read, whether they are intended for children or not? The dilemma is that many books which seem to be children’s books are often not read by children and other texts which are not wished-for for children are very well-liked by them. If either of these is true of a book should we then unavoidably exclude it from an unreal standard of children’s literature? The problem with children’s literature is that children themselves are often left out of the act.

Moreover, children’s books are extremely read and entertained by adults and not always in the capacity of the parent reading to a child. There is interest from an extensive adult readership in some children’s books, an interest totally self-governing from a connection to children. In the case of J.K. Rowling when we see his immensely popular Harry Potter series, which is unquestionably written for children, have been published with a ‘grown-up’ cover for its older readership.

Now Sheila Egoff a critic points to two texts with the reverse problem. Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* both contain adult, political content and were certainly not written with a child audience in mind but are nonetheless popular with children and have been since times immemorial. Egoff excludes these texts from a supposed norm of children’s literature on this basis “the authors did not write with the difficulties of writing for children in mind” (Egoff: 1981, 1).

There is a full favour in using authorial intention as a sign in the way Egoff does, and a large number of critics would agree with this means of recognition. Peter Hunt, though conscious of the

problems of using such means states that “the definition of children’s literature is an immensely complex and variable one, and generally rests upon authorial intention (however deduced), or the reader ‘implied’ in the text” (Hunt: 2001, xvi).

Another critic John Rowe Townsend, on the other hand, suggests that the classification of a book as children’s or adults’ is down to the publisher. “If he puts a book on the children’s list, it will be read and reviewed as a children’s book and will be read by children (or young people), if it is read at all. If he puts it on the adult list it will not - or at least not immediately.” (Townsend: 1990, 197)

Karin Lesnik-Oberstein also supports this point of view saying, “the definition of a ‘children’s book’ is still variously based on publishers’ and editors’ decisions...” (Lesnik- Oberstein: 1994, 5).

Children’s literature, restricted in a sense by its very terminology, is a literature for a particular and less experienced reader.

Apart from Lesnik-Oberstein in 1994, Peter Hunt described the place of children’s literature in the literary hierarchy as at the ‘bottom of the heap’. He suggested that children’s books be removed from the literary hierarchy altogether and “be treated as a separate group of texts, without reference (at least in principle) to ‘literature’ as it is known and misunderstood.” (Hunt: 1994, 7)

By separating this body of literature from other texts in its criticism, its own attempts to transcend the implied limits of its classification are left without. Andy Sawyer has criticised Hunt saying he ‘still speaks of children’s literature as a subordinate genre which must be justified.’ (Sawyer: 2003, 11)

Children’s literature is all too often referred to as a ‘genre’, probably because it is treated as a genre and for simplicity of terminology, but it should not be referred to as such. Children’s literature is a broad field of study; a grouping necessary for publishers who are targeting juvenile readers; a term to point to books which belong in a definite area of the library or bookshop. It is a term meant for teachers and parents to specify books for pupils of a specific age and reading ability. It is comprised of as many genres as the grouping of ‘adult literature’ would, be in common use.

Defining which texts we are discussing under the heading of 'children's literature' is a difficult task for the reasons summarized above and it is similarly complex and questionable, yet necessary, task to define the term childhood. The perception of childhood by society is important not only in terms of who is reading children's literature but also crucially in terms of how children's authors write for their readers. Perceptions of childhood are forever changing and not just from one period to the next. Different societies and cultures have vastly different perceptions of childhood. Maturity amongst children from similar backgrounds varies enormously without taking into account social, economic and political factors. It is impossible to say that childhood ends at a certain age and in turn it is restricting to say that a children's book is for children up to a certain age. Sheila Egoff defines children's literature as follows "she says that put simplistically it has 'two basic characteristics: it is writing for children (that is, people up to the early teens) and it is intended to be read as literature.'" (Egoff: 1981, 1)

Children's books are a site of play, entertainment and development and often a book read as a child can make us feel intensely longing later in life. Hunt sees children's literature as a crucial part of childhood and furthermore describes it as an origin of western culture. He emphasises the critical role played by children's books in our culture, going so far as to say that "its characters are part of most people's psyche" (Hunt: 1994, 1). There is something about children's books and the approach we read them when we are children that make them special and it is therefore necessary to remember these differences when looking at them critically.

As mentioned briefly above, children's literature is subject to interest and influence from a number of groups. It is of interest to educational academics, children and publishers. Each of these groups has a diverse purposes and different reasons for their interest in the subject and so we find that the literature on the subject is various. Hunt says, that "children's literature is not so much suffering from neglect, as from a cacophony of approaches..." (Hunt: 1994, 20)

As an important and powerful literature, what is said in children's literature matters. Its audience is far reaching and its influence in our society is deep and significant. "Literature written for children must constitute one of the largest and most important social domains in this country." (Knowles: 1998, 2). In this competence, what we find being conveyed in literature for children must be seen as important. Peter Hunt says, "Children's literature is a powerful literature, and...such a power cannot be neutral or innocent, or trivial." (Hunt: 1994, 3). So all of these critics and writers are trying to draw us towards their ideas by their contribution in the field of children's literature. If taken their ideas in isolation cannot lend us towards perfect meaning of this type of literature. So now it becomes necessary to take their ideas collectively on a single platform. In this way everyone's ideas can contribute a feature in clearing the meaning of children's literature. When we say umbrella term, it gives the same sort of refuge to all those ideas of various intellectual people that are regarding a single theme to incorporate in getting the real meaning.

Conclusion

'Children's literature' is an umbrella term in the sense, that it encompasses a lot of definitions and critical comments passed on by writers and critics all over the world related to this single theme. Collectively in their efforts they have shown in defining and criticizing children's literature can help us to form a real idea regarding what children's literature is?

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