

Then and Now: Approaches to Understanding Children's Literature in Two Volumes

Baker M Bani-Khair (Corresponding author)
English Department, Hashemite University, Jordan
E-mail: bakribakr@yahoo.com

Imad M Khawaldeh
English Department, Hashemite University, Jordan

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Abstract

This research paper investigates two main volumes taken from Children's Literature Association Quarterly; the earlier one is Vol. 11 published in 1986, and the other one, a more recent one, Vol. 32 published in 2007, as to understand the differences and similarities regarding the approaches used in the articles to understand Children's Literature in terms of its multifarious aspects such as us, literary genres, styles, themes, and methodologies. Such kind of comparison yielded that those differences between those two volumes cover new thematic suggestions, new treatment and projection of characters, and strict scholarship which make the newer volume different in terms of approaches from the earlier one. The research also concluded that modern analytical perspectives are probably the most obvious transformations and changes in the second volume.

Keywords: Volume, approach, childhood, construction, scholarship, transformation, modernism, historicism, analysis

1. Introduction

One of the insightful ways to learn more about children's literature is to study two whole volumes of articles that represent different time periods. Such volumes of articles published in Children's Literature Quarterly, United States, might significantly pose slight similarities and differences about the way children's literature has been viewed by scholars, critics and writers over an extended period of time. Children's literature in particular has taken a tremendous space and attention in the modern world from the public domain and educational institutions, due to its rising scholarship and sponsorship from various representative sectors, such as scholars, thinkers, and educators. Because of the new emerging standards and innovations like the visual and cinematic adaptations of children's books and novels, the need to understand and study the methodologies and approaches of children's literature teaching has increased more than ever before. Within the dynamic and catalytic framework of pedagogy of modern literature, it becomes especially important to look at the new transformations and changes that have taken place over the last decade regarding the way scholars dealt with and approached children's literature. For this purpose, this essay focuses on two different volumes taken from *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, established in 1975. Two volumes have been chosen, the first one is Vol. 11 published in 1986 and the second one is Vol. 32 published in 2007. As a matter of fact, the Journal continues to publish on a regular basis till nowadays.

2. Discussion and Analysis

Having read the articles and the issues in each of these two volumes, we found out that children's literature has significantly been viewed from totally different perspectives over the last three decades. While Vol. 11, has a huge number of different articles which all tackle children's literature as a literary genre that revolves around many central issues, such as philosophy, psychology, race, and religion, it seems that the whole volume converges into one main direction which is the internal construction of childhood in children's literature and its coincidence with psychoanalysis. Regarding the direction of research, both of these two volumes share some points of interest, including the thematic content, stylistics, and cultural pluralism. Apparently, approaches to these issues are significantly different. Throughout these two volumes, scholars seem to view children's literature from different specific angles through their explicit as well as implicit references to psychoanalytic theories and psychology in general such as Barbara Will's "And then One Day There was a War: Gertrude Stein, Children's Literature and World War Two" in Vol.32. She looks at Rose's dilemma in the *World is Round* from double perspectives, she states, " in the *World is Round*, Rose the terrified child confronting an illusory adult world becomes the uncanny double of the author trying to escape her world through the illusion of storytelling." (347)

Such a psychoanalytic argument is complicated and hard to deal with simply because it combines the psychological possibilities with the fictional world of the protagonist, but for a direct and explicit and less complicated psychoanalytic argument, we think that Watson's "Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner: An Encounter with Faerie" in Vol.11,

would be the one as it directly and straightforwardly deals with psychoanalytic concepts. While the differences might not be vast between these two volumes such as the philosophical content and the critical theories which scholars show in the children's novels they examine, there are still some differences in terms of the approaches and methodologies used to deconstruct and analyze children's literature in each one of these two volumes. Therefore, it is quite obvious that Vol. 32 seems to concentrate on the modern perspectives and transformations of children's literature from new contemporary perspectives that relate to modernism, post-modernism, and post-colonial theories.

Having the idea of theory and scholarship in mind, it seems that there is a big difference between these two volumes in terms of the scholarship used. Most of the articles in Vol. 11, are short and restricted to the boundaries of the primary texts the authors deal with, and for most of the articles, the number of work cited and resources is very limited compared to the number of works cited that appear in Vol.32, where most of the articles are long and strict because their authors used many other secondary resources outside the primary texts they deal with. In this way, the journal has undergone a big transformation in terms of scholarship that could actually make it deeper, and able to give a solid background to the readers about the texts analyzed and criticized. Katherine R. Chandler has cited almost 45 resources, in addition to the primary text in "Thoroughly Post-Victorian, Pre-Modern Beatrix". Conversely, the articles that appear in Vol.11 seem to use a very restricted number of secondary resources outside the primary text itself. Reed in "Female Oedipal Complex in Maurice Sendak's *Outside Over There*", deals with Sendak's novel psychoanalytically using a very limited number of resources including five works by Sigmund Freud. This is not the only example we see in most of the articles that appear in Vol. 11, but we have many other scholars like, Watson in "Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner: An encounter with Faerie", and Plante in "Object and Character in *The Dark is Rising*", and Moore and MacCann in "The Uncle Remus Travesty, Part 1: Julius Lester and Virginia Hamilton", just to name few.

Regarding book reviews, we think that there is a big difference between these two volumes in terms of the number of book reviews listed in each volume. While there are only few book reviews in each section in Vol.11, about two book reviews in each section, we see many book reviews in each section in Vol.32. We think this is another developmental transformation in the history of this journal, as it began to include new book reviews since many scholars and writers began to publish books about children's literature as time goes on. This is very clear evidence that the scholarship on children's literature began to move forward as we see in Vol.32 compared to Vol.11.

3. Then and Now: Methods and Approaches

Despite the fact that some authors have mixed some different approaches in their analyses like, psychoanalysis and historicism, we think that Modernism is the primary approach used for the most of the articles in Vol.32. There are many scholars who talk about modernism in many articles in Vol. 32, like Chandler in "Thoroughly Post Victorian, Pre-Modern Beatrix", in which she explained that Potter's prose and tales follow modern literary styles similar to Ezra Pound's modern literary techniques in her poetry, such as the use of imagination, irony, and "the economic use of words." (61), and the new different treatment of plot and characters despite the obvious Victorian influence noted in her literary works. There are also many other critics and scholars who implicitly refer to Modernism through their understanding of some children's novels, like Barbara Will in "And Then One Day There was a War: Gertrude Stein, Children's Literature, and World War II", in which she focused on the modern perspectives of Stein's works such as cultural pluralism, accepting humanity, and the rejection of war. The issue of modernism and its ramified aspects are not only restricted to some few articles in vol.32, however, we can touch and smell modernism in almost every article in this volume. For example, in Vol,32,1 Ellen Butler in "Disorienting readers" focuses on the theme of Cross-cultural representation in her treatment of Staples's *Shabanu* in which she explained the importance of cultural communication and understanding through children's literature. Butler argues that such a novel can widen the children's experience of different cultures other than their own, and this will significantly lead to cultural understanding, she writes, "Staples trusts that her readers, despite their status as children, can engage new perspectives and experiences and can generously exercise their imaginations to witness *Shabanu's* experience." (43)

However, as we see in Vol. 11, attempts to psychoanalyze and understand children's literature are not only restricted to children's novels but also to poetry. For example, Watson in her article, "Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner: An Encounter with Faerie," analyzes Coleridge's poem *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as being a poem that has profound psychological implications when it is viewed as an imaginative fairy tale which has a complicated structure of four main contexts; fantasy, recovery, escape and consolation. These are, in fact, some of the basic concepts of psychoanalytic theories explained by Freud, Lacan, and Jung. The author emphasizes the idea that the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a poem that could help scholars understand fairy tales simply because it has a great influence on the audience, especially children because it moves them from the boundaries of the physical world to the ultimate truth of the "spirit world." It is also interesting to see how Watson could implicitly explain Coleridge's poem as a psychologically deep structured poem that can be part of the fairy tales canon, he states, "Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is fundamentally about an encounter with Faerie and is, perforce, a tale of faerie." (169)

In the same way, MacGavran in *The Children Sport Upon the Shore: Romantic Vision in Two Twentieth-Century Picture Books*, tries to explain the construction of childhood in Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollection of Early Childhood* from Wordsworth's imaginative conception of childhood in his poems. Like Watson, MacGavran follows the psychoanalytic trend in his analysis of "innocence vs. experience" in Wordsworth's and Blake's poetry. Interestingly enough, both Watson and MacGavran refer to the inner construction of childhood in poetry by emphasizing the role these texts play in promoting the self-consciousness in readers, including children and young adults. He directly refers to Jung's theory of the *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* when he explains

Wordsworth's idea, "The child is father of man," suggesting that the unconscious is part of childhood, and, thus it is an essential part of adulthood and manhood, which keeps associating consciousness as long as one lives.

Apparently, childhood and psychoanalysis seems to be the major focus and approach in most of the articles written in this volume. Another example on this issue would be Reeds' *The Female Oedipal Complex in Maurice Sendak's Outside Over There*, in which Reed primarily approaches Sendak's story from a Freudian point of view, and relies heavily on Freud's theory of the Oedipal Complex when analyzing Ida's character and her childhood wishes. The search for identity is also one of the basic aspects in psychoanalytic theories which Hunt tries to explain in *Counterparts: Identity Exchange and the Young Adult Audience*. Hunt tries to raise the philosophical question of identity from a psychoanalytical point of view through her study of some novels like, Mary Rodger's *Freaky Friday*, and *Daisy Summerfield's Style* by Goffstein and Charles Dickens's *Christmas Carol*. Definitely, the idea of 'identity exchange' is one of the essential psychological themes that she extensively talks about in her article. As Hunt explains in her article, characters usually undergo transformations in their characters as they approach to discover their inner self, and usually they become good after their first encounter with an unconscious experience with evil. For example, Scrooge's character in *Christmas Carol* turns into good and generous at the end after he sees the horror of the evil side of his own self in a nightmare. In addition to the 'identity exchange' theme, Plante in *Object and Character in The Dark Is Rising*, explains the philosophical argument of good vs. evil in the *Dark is Rising* series by Susan Cooper, in which she explained the conflict of good and evil, and the development of characters as an outcome of the inner conflict.

4. Conclusion

While there are many similar ideas in Vol. 32, it seems that "modernism" and "postcolonial theory," and their multifarious aspects, are the central issues throughout the whole volume. Modernism poses an important approach towards understanding the structures of children's literature. Scholars view children's literature from a contemporary point of view through making parallels between children's literature and modernism, and then some other scholars look back through the chronological line of children's literature and its roots in the Victorian age. While the whole volume seems to study children's literature from this specific angle, it seems that, unlike (vol. 11), there is a different trend in psychoanalysis other than the Freudian theories.

According to Vol. 32, and from the scholars' point of views, children's literature has developed and modified the criteria, rules and stereotypical literary patterns of the Victorian age. New standards have to replace the old ones with more profound ideas and representations that address the contemporary worries and concerns of the age. Like any other autonomous literary genres, children's literature could include all the new political and social demands that rose out of colonialism. The focus seems to be cast on the literature that focuses on the new postcolonial theory and postmodernism. Thus, the approach used by the scholars in Vol. 32 is evidently different from those we see in the articles that appeared in Vol. 11. While the general trend in most of the articles in Vol. 11, seems to relate to the issue of good and evil and the dark side of human nature in children's literature, scholars seem to draw a concentrated attention on the post war scene and modern views that coincide with the new spirit of the age which could substitute the Victorian fetters with new free modern standards. The emphasis, as we see in most of these articles, is placed on the postcolonial theory, religion, race, the orient, social theory, and multiculturalism. For example, Bradford's article *Representing Islam: Female Subjects in Suzanne Fisher Staples's Novels*, sheds light on the cultural boundaries and distinctions between the western ideals and the oriental ones through her analysis of the construction of the female characters in Staples's *Shabanu*, *Haveli*, and *Under the Persimmon Tree*. Bradford, in fact, examines the image of the female characters from a western point of view showing the cultural parallels between individualism and liberalism on one hand, and the oriental and patriarchal view of gender from the other hand. Such kind of focus on the postcolonial theory is relatively seen in Barbara's *And Then One Day There Was a War": Gertrude Stein, Children's Literature, and World War II*. Barbara examines Stein's *The World is Round* when she explains Rose's, the main female protagonist, search for identity from both a postcolonial and feminist point of view. In her article, Barbara, tries to answer the question, "Why does Stein—who wrote so eloquently of an adult woman's search for self in an early text like *Melantha*—choose to focus on a child in this comparable text from the late 1930s? Why does Stein include the iconography of war—for example, the searchlight—in her account of Rose's quest?" (342) obviously, the identity question is a repeated theme in both of these two volumes. Despite the fact that Barbara, Reed and Hunt have dealt with this issue; they all brought new ideas as they used different approaches and perspectives. While Reed sticks to psychoanalysis, Barbara and Hunt looked at the identity issue from both a psychoanalytical and feminist point of view.

Finally, despite the few similarities between these two volumes, it is still clear that the approach seems to turn towards postmodernism as children's literature began to leave the Victorian and classic disciplines behind even though we still see them as little scarring residues in recent children's literature. However, it seems that the journal has tremendously developed over the last three decades. New topics, new treatment of characters, a more profound analysis, strict scholarship, and modern analytical perspectives are probably the most obvious transformations and changes that the journal has developed as we compare the past with the recent present in this journal.

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