



Structural Shifts in Children's Literature from the Victorian Era to the Contemporary Era

Hirva Ashok Popat

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Engineering and Technology, GLS University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India

Research Scholar, Department of English, Sardar Patel University, Vallabh Vidyanagar, Anand, Gujarat, India

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Abstract— This paper is an attempt to explore structural shifts in the Children's literature from the Victorian to the Contemporary era. The Victorian era is believed to be the 'golden age' for this genre. It was this time when the Children's literature became a separate entity having influenced by John Locke's and Darwin's theories, and it received much popularity in the field of English literature. On the other hand, in the present time, the children literature has witnessed several cultural, social, political and economic changes. As a result, this genre must have faced many changes, especially structural-based, which this research work tries to show.



Keywords— Children's literature, Separate entity, Structural shifts, The Contemporary era, The Victorian era.

I. INTRODUCTION

Children's literature is a dynamic entity in its own right that offers its readers many avenues for pleasure, reflection, and emotional engagement (Kerry Mallan). It encompasses several other genres appealing to the views of several other readers belonging to different age groups. Earlier being the best only at an embryonic stage, this entity emerged as a distinct and independent form of literature in the later part of the 18th century. With time, children's literature developed with the influence of the constant changes that was seen throughout the world. It can rightly be said that to know this dynamic form thoroughly one needs to enrich one's understanding through sociological, literary, and historical approaches.

Studying this form, from its embryonic to its present stage, I feel that it had undergone many structural shifts over a period of last 200 years. A structure of a work or any literary piece is a pivotal part or base on which the rest other contents or things stand. In literature, structure can be understood through mainly genre, but when one tries to look into the work itself, the whole matter can be understood by narrative aspect—which creates the base-structure of the work, which further can be understood by

plot, characters, settings, themes, and language. The paper argues that there are shifts in plot, characters, themes, settings, language, and genre in the works of children's literature hailing from the Victorian to the contemporary era.

II. SHIFT IN PLOTS—A STRUCTURAL SHIFT IN THE WORKS OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE FROM THE VICTORIAN TO THE PRESENT TIME

Plot of a work encompasses beginning, middle and concluding parts. They could be in sequence or sometimes it can also deviate from the traditional conception. Plot has Exposition, rising action, climax, falling actions and resolution.

Children's literature in the Victorian age has been linear in terms of story-telling as compared to that of the contemporary age. For instance, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* are the famous works of Victorian era where in both the works the story develops in a sequential manner. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is developed in such a

linear way where Alice, a little girl, sees a rabbit moving around while she was drowsy and suddenly falls into the rabbit hole in her dream on falling asleep. The falling into the rabbit hole is a sequence of the appearance of the rabbit before Alice falls asleep; not only this, but also there is a sequence in falling asleep and seeing dream and awakening—all these together go as per the logical sequence.

In the present time, the non-linearity is a unique characteristic of the story-telling or narratives, which means there is no definite beginning, or definite ends in real sense. "A Non-linear narrative is when the scenes are not in order and the story can switch between different points in time. A linear narrative is when the scenes in a film are in chronological order throughout the film. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* is a linear narrative until the moment in the film when Harry and Hermione travel back in time. Here it changes to a nonlinear narrative because the scenes begin to occur before the scenes we have already seen. When Harry and Hermione travel back-to-back the present, the film resumes a linear narrative." (Lewis Kitchenham, Charlotte Lodge, Fenn Bradley, Josh Latimer and Tyler Goodwin). This nonlinearity is the product of the original text which somewhat tells the same story.

Furthermore, this plot's nonlinearity is compounded by the modern media and technology which purveys enough scope for the same. Exposure to digital and technological resources and global access to information have changed the boundaries, topics, and perspectives represented in books for children (Dresang, 1999, 2003). These changes in print texts include the use of non-linear plots that are organized not by a typical beginning, middle, and end, but tell the story out of order and/or lead readers in multiple directions through the text (e.g., *The End*, by David LaRochelle, 2007). Children literature in modern age has become more interactive. It strives to make children more active while reading which in a way gives importance to practical learning rather than mere reading. Multimodal texts started coming up which "are capable of drawing on student's strength and preparing them for a multimodal society where individuals communicate through audio, gestural, visual, spatial, and print resources, as well as various combinations of these modes" (www.courses.lumenlearning.com). Whereas earlier plots of the stories would have a linear storyline which would lead to a destined end.

III. SHIFT IN CHARACTERS—A STRUCTURAL SHIFT IN THE WORKS OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE FROM THE VICTORIAN TO THE PRESENT TIME

Childhood can be understood as a phase of "observational learning" which leaves a great impact on the child's mentality. Child gets influenced by the personality of the character present in the work that s/he reads. Earlier there was no specific work written for children. In fact, they were seen as "small adults". So, no conscious attempts were observed in case of writing such literature. Patriarchal notions were observed in the writing of those times, where women characters didn't have their independent identity. Their existence could be seen only in the light of their male counterparts. This kind of instance is seen in William Grimm's *Cinderella* published in 1812. In this work the protagonist Cinderella is portrayed as an ordinary girl who gets recognition only after getting in relation with the prince and that too, only when she gets dressed up in a beautiful ball gown. As compared to present thinking of the people, earlier small girls were asked to behave like a princess so to have a prince like husband to take care of her. Moreover, the Victorian literature was highly influenced by colonialism and racism, when the heterosexuality was the only accepted condition. We are aware about the imprisonment of Oscar Wilde on his deviational sexuality.

But in the present era, with the widespread of education and the growth of scientific spirit, the need of gender sensibility, and the need of developing sensibility for understanding the marginalized or non-mainstream people, children literature is written in such a way that it sometimes portrays: woman as 'superwoman', socially-politically marginalized as protagonists, LGBT as accepted characters. The significance of 'female reputation' came up. The shift can be seen in one of the works the *Wonder Woman* written by John Byrne.

From the late 18th century in Europe, the idea of the child as closer to nature and the spiritual began to take hold. According to the Romantic poet, William Wordsworth, the child's soul was borne to Earth "trailing clouds of glory" from "God, who is our home". It is arguably from these Enlightenment and Romantic philosophers that many modern cultures derive their belief that children are inherently innocent and need to be protected from corrupting knowledge. (Rutherford) In the modern era, liberality is observed while creating the characters specially in its dressing. Earlier the concept of clothing was decent as compared to the children's literature of modern age. For instance, if we talk about Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, we find that once it was noticed that a character in the poem kisses the other

one, represents nudity. Therefore, the work had gotten its place in the genre of adult literature with the mindset of the Victorian society; whereas in the contemporary children literature, characters present nudity through the clothing style in the name of fashion, accepted worldwide.

A recently published work named *Naked!* (2014) tells a story of a child who dislikes wearing cloths, and is shown naked throughout the work. In the same way, the presentation of mermaids' physical feature and clothing in the mermaid stories is another example of boldness, focusing on partial nudity as an aspect in children literature. A very famous contemporary work *Lily the Little Mermaid* by Lindsey Scott is an example of this partial nudity.

Queer characters in the dominant children literature were presented physically different in the Victorian era as compared to the present era. Edward Lear was famous for his nonsense elements in his poetry. He would populate his work introducing strange things coming to life, where people will come from different corners to fulfil their desires, and would name the characters in an unusual way attracting little readers towards it. He was also an artist were drawing pictures of his characters eased his art of displaying them. 'His "Nonsense Botany", for example, imagines plants that bear unusual fruit: the Guittara Pensilis that bears guitars, the Phattfacia Stupenda with a big head for a flower. His poem "The Table and the Chair" imagines both these objects alive and speaking, going off on a walk into town, getting lost and finding their way home to bed' (Lerer Seth) (fig.2).

Earlier the notions, creatures and things were animated into action where once animated, they become superiors to the characters in the work. "We stand, in Carroll's words, subordinate, submissive, and in waiting to "sovereign will and pleasure" of these creatures-- a condition vivified to brilliant narrative throughout the Alice books. For there, the very life of Wonderland lies in the ways in which strange things not only come alive-- playing cards or toys—but how they come alive to rule. "Off with their heads!" says the Queen of Hearts (p.109), and the poor human creatures have nothing to do in this book but ascertain what is their sovereign's will and pleasure and submit to it" (Lever Seth, 196). One can notice that once when Alice herself becomes a queen, she faces dilemma of decorum. "'You must return thanks in a neat speech," says the Red Queen, and "Alice tried to submit to it with a good grace" (p. 334)" (Lever Seth, 197). Characters faced terror and strived hard to fit in the society which is highly opposite in the children's literature of contemporary world.

Whereas in present times characters have become more imaginative than mere fantasy, and more realistic than

romanticized. Instead of blindly believing what the writers show, children have started questioning. Rather than being oppressed by the notions and things and creatures, characters of present times are seen as more powerful and superior to other entities. This paved way towards the upcoming of more logical works. Children literature has dealt with many sorts of fiction: romance, fancy and realism. Contemporary era has witnessed realism in the children's literature. Realism deal with the real-life situation and life-like characters which can be possible to exist in the real world.

"The term realism and realistic fiction will be used... Island of the Blue Dolphins, a Newbery Award book, by Scott O'Dell, was chosen as my example... Island of the Blue Dolphins is based on sketchy, historical facts concerning the Lost Woman of San Nicolas who lived alone on an island from 1835 to 1853. This island lies off the shore of California and was inhabited by Indians." (Rhoads, 938)

IV. SHIFT IN THEMES—A STRUCTURAL SHIFT IN THE WORKS OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE FROM THE VICTORIAN TO THE PRESENT TIME

To turn a kid into a reader, themes play a very important role. Themes seen in earlier works of children's literature have changed remarkably in the works of contemporary period. During the early nineteenth century Darwin's theory had a great impact on children's literature which "went beyond imaginary animals or fantasies of growth or fears of regression" (Lever Seth, 190). This concept of evolution in writing was imagining strange creatures, as compared to those imagining strange languages. This Darwinian theory brought with itself the nonsensical elements in the work. Thus, this idea of nonsense emerged as a challenge to the logical world of adulthood and the laws of civil life which became a prominent theme in the works of Victorian English period. The masters of such nonsensical aspects were Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear.

Nonsensical works were considered to be queer. "Queer comes from a term that originally means off-center, diagonal, or askew" (Lever Seth, 195). For instance, in Lewis Carroll's *Wonderland*, the world of Alice expressed in it can be described as queer where odd incidents take place frequently. "It is the defining word for the Carrollian experience, and it will become the term not just for eccentricity, but for the whole aesthetic experience of children's literary fantasy" (Lever Seth, 195). The same can be seen in Allen's short story *The Kugelmass Episode*, where a man invents a machine that takes him into the book which would make possible for him to live with famous characters such as namely Madame Bovary or

Alex Portnoy. Lives lived by the characters in the earlier times were more of a diagonal and off-center kind, where world was looked through an upside-down glass which highly appealed to childhood.

In the contemporary era Postmodernism brought changes in the areas of arts including architecture, visual art, music, and literature. "Illustrations within children's books were originally to enhance the reading of the text, bringing with them tangible or elusive reflections, through time as our culture has developed so has our literature, and subsequently their illustrations" (www.ukessays.com). Postmodernism has brought a profound shift in societal perceptions and behavior of children which is being observed in almost last thirty years. The most significant change seen through this is how the picture book tells a completely different story compared to that of the words. "Postmodern influences are also seen in terms of how stories are told, including the portrayal of multiple versions of a story within the same book, telling the story through multiple narrators and perspectives, telling stories within stories, or blending genres, such as mixing science fiction and history" (www.courses.lumenlearning.com). Using postmodernism teachers are tasked regarding how to use texts in the class. It is remarkably noticed that when teachers use a text with postmodern characteristics, students increase their ability to interpret visual images and their thinking ability increases.

In earlier times Darwin's Naturalism had a great impact on the writing of children's literature. Themes based on nature were being presented as compared to the works of present contemporary world. In present works realistic themes are highly expressed connecting the reader with the present world. Contemporary works of children's literature are the "products of changing times that require new understandings about text and are well suited for teaching and preparing students to be multiliterate individuals" (www.courses.lumenlearning.com). The development in technological resources in the present era have changed the way how information is communicated, and teachers are expected to prepare students as to how to make students understand information from all different types of texts. Thus, such books were published which would bring children closer to the world through technological advances.

CONCLUSION

The area of children's literature has gone through many shifts in the last 200 years especially the structural shift which is remarkably seen. Shifts are the results of many social, political, cultural, and economic changes that the world went through and which also made an everlasting

impact on the field of children's literature. The way of looking at children has also changed, where earlier they were looked upon as "small adults", which was changed taking into consideration John Locke's view where he put emphasis on considering children different from adults and impart knowledge accordingly, which led to a great difference in this form.

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