

TOWARDS THE REFORMATION OF THE CHILD: A STUDY OF ZOE AND JANET GRAHAM'S *MY GRANDMA IS A WITCH*

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ABSTRACT: *Children are precious gifts from God and so they are seen as the root of love binding families together. In many parts of Africa, any family without children is assumed not complete yet. This is why men and women who are married do anything to have children. In many parts of Africa, women who have no children for their husbands are derided. In most cases, their husbands are under pressure to marry another wife just to have children. Those who have children are happy. However, it is better for a family not to have a child than to have children not trained; untrained children are threats to parents and to the society at large. The researchers are of the view that literature is an indispensable means of educating the child. The researchers see the structural approach as the appropriate theory for analyzing the paper. They have explored Graham's *My Grandma is a Witch* and have observed that the authors have used apt method of characterization as a means of educating the child.*

KEYWORDS: Didactic, Characterization, Children, Graham, Children's Literature

INTRODUCTION

Zoe and Janet Graham are aware that literature is an indispensable tool for bringing up the child. This, they have demonstrated in their children's book, *My Grandma is a Witch*. In contemporary societies, written literature has overtaken oral literature which used to be the prominent means of educating the child. It has been said earlier that children are special gifts from God and so they need to be brought up to be meaningful to the parents and the society at large. The Holy Bible vivifies the importance of the child's upbringing when it enjoins parents to bring up the child in the way he should go so that when he grows, he will never depart from it. A couple without children grieves but those with untrained children live in perpetual hell. The task of training the child is not an easy one and that is why it should be a holistic approach because a spoiled child is a menace not only to the immediate family but to the society at large. In Igbo, a child is seen as that of the society. This is why, when a child does something bad, anybody, not necessarily the child's parents or relations can correct him or her.

Literature is one of the major strategies for educating the child. The term "literature" here, goes beyond that which is written down for one literate in the language to read and understand. According to Baldick (2004), it is "a body of written works related by subject-matter (e.g. the literature of computing), by language or place of origin (e.g. Russian literature), or by prevailing cultural standards of merit." Baldick makes it more vivid when he adds that "literature" is taken to include oral, dramatic, and broadcast compositions that may not have been published in written form but which have been (or deserve to be) preserved (141). Etymologically, Muller and Williams (1985) disclose that fiction (literature) began as storytelling, perhaps at night around warming campfire or anywhere else that people gathered (1). According to them, "In those times the stories were sung or told in verse. ... These early stories usually were about figures or events familiar to particular groups, and such stories often

became well known” (1). Muller and Williams’ assertion consolidates the fact that literature is first conceived, usually spoken before being written down.

In the traditional African society, simple didactic stories were used to educate the children. Usually, parents, during the moonlight, told stories to their children. At the end, the children would demonstrate what they have learnt from the stories. Sometimes, a professional raconteur would be paid by the parents to tell their children stories. Every story must teach one good lesson or the other. The lessons learnt would go a long way influencing the child. Such stories that uphold virtue thereby discouraging vice are known as folktales. They are usually interesting and as Nnyagu (2015) observes, African people are industrious; in the daytime, they would be in their various workplaces. When they came back from their farm or the river where they had gone to fish or from other workplaces, they told stories to their children to keep them awake pending when the food on fire would be done. While the children listened to the tales which kept them awake, the tales helped a lot in shaping their lifestyles positively. This is why Mike Ejeagha, known for incorporating folktales in his song made it vivid that he can never conclude his song without making obvious, the moral lessons of the song. Folktales therefore, are indispensable part of children’s literature

Theoretical Framework:

For children’s literature is more interested in using the appropriate language suitable for the subject to communicate, the researchers have decided to use the Structural Approach in the analysis of the text. According to Abrams, M. H., this approach originated from Russian formalists, especially Roman Jakobson, but consists more prominently of a group of writers, with their headquarters in Paris, designates the practice of critics who analyze literature on the explicit model of structuralist linguistics. He makes it vivid that this approach was inaugurated in the 1950s by the cultural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss and the primary interest is not the cultural parole but in the langue; that is, not in any particular cultural phenomenon or event except as it provides access to structure, features, and rules of the general system that engenders its significance.

Children’s Literature

Nnyagu (2010), describes children’s literature as the totality of literature including the three genres; drama, prose and poetry specifically prepared, not just for the enjoyment of the children but also for their positive upbringing. By this, he means that children’s literature has a duty to effect the life of the child positively. He adds that children’s literature is completely devoid of any corrupting influences since the essence of the literature is to positively shape the child. Okafor N. R. in his *Children and Literature* laments the rate to which charlatans feed the children with poor literature. According to him, “The children’s books are deliberately written for children. The child is like the yam tendril which goes anywhere it is directed while it is still tender, once it is matured, it becomes too difficult to tame. It is based on this fact that the Bible enjoins us to bring up the child in the way that it should go so that when he or she grows up, he or she will not depart from that.

Parents obviously are glad when their children read. However, they must be wary of the kind of stuff that their children read. Some authors nurse the illusion that it is very simple to write children’s literature and they end up feeding the children with poor literatures that would corrupt them. It must be stated vividly here that children’s literature is one of the most difficult aspects of writing. It is difficult in the sense that the writer has to come down to the level of

the child to be able to communicate with the child. Apart from that, the subject matter and the theme of the children's literature are delicate. If the writer fails to understand these, he would end up feeding the children with poor literature that would rather corrupt than reform. Children tend to believe everything they see and read. That is why Plato, the classical critic condemned the kind of imaginative literature being produced by his contemporaries. He believed that such stuff would corrupt the minds of the youth.

Nwahunanya (2010), 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 meaningless nursery rhymes that are being fed children in nursery and kindergarten schools, to the stories published as novelettes for more advanced teenagers. As he puts it, "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 circle in which such writers operate" (370). He adds that such uninformed writers fail to establish and work with the ideal objectives of children's literature behind their minds.

Among all aspects of literature, children's literature, contrary to the perception of some uninformed, is the one that requires more attention and seriousness. In other words, it is not easy to write. The writer of this type of literature must come down to the level of the children otherwise, he ends up producing the stuff that rather corrupt than reforms. This type of poor literature is everywhere in the society because many people who do not possess any writing skills write and self publish uncensored material and send to the market. Nwahunanya frowns at this practice when he said that the literature addressed to children in Nigeria today has turned out to be of such an appalling low quality because of absence of a systematized critical tradition that provides checks and balances for the writers.

Characterization in Children's Literature

In children's literature, characterization is taken seriously. Characterization refers to the way the author presents his characters. According to Kennedy, Gioia and Bauderlein, it is the process by which a character is introduced, revealed, and changed in a story (22). According to Lostracco and Wilkerson (1996), characterization can either be direct or indirect. In the direct presentation, they are of the view that the author uses explicit statement to tell what a character is like. In an indirect presentation, they say that the author shows a character's personality through actions, words, or thoughts (20). This method is known as dramatic method of character presentation. The method does not explicitly tell the reader all that he or she needs to know about the character, rather, he allows the reader to decode via the character's actions, speeches and thoughts.

In adult literature, the reader is expected to reason along as he reads; there are untold facts that he or she is expected to understand about the characters. Of course, the writer in this type of literature, when he or she is explicit in saying all that needs to be said about the character, the reader is rather made a robot. For instance, in his *Arrow of God*, Chinua Achebe's major character Ezeulu is seen as a stubborn person even though the author never said this about him. Through the author's presentation of the character, the reader is able to decode this fact. The writer, for instance, writes that Ezeulu had now been held for thirty-two days. The white man had sent emissaries to beg him to change his mind but had not had the face to see him again in person (178). Achebe has disclosed that Ezeulu had given enough warning to the white man during the four markets he had been locked in prison (178). The white had wanted Ezeulu to

be his warrant chief which he unequivocally has rejected on the ground that he can only be a priest to Ulu. Ezeulu is pleaded, coerced and eventually, incarcerated, all in a bid to make him to accept the offer. The reader is able to infer from the actions of the character, without being told, that Ezeulu is not docile neither is he gullible.

Achebe's characterization here is the indirect. Nnyagu (2018), disclosed that while a mature writer writing mature literature incorporates both the direct and indirect methods, the indirect method is used more than the indirect. According to him, a novel with more of the indirect characterization (especially when the author is a veteran writer), looks more real than imagined and it is more natural than the novel with more if direct characterization (43). The direct method of characterization is more apt for the children's literature. Nnyagu (2018), maintains that in this method, the writer believes that the reader needs not crack his brain trying to ascertain who the character is when he can describe him. The mind of the child is not yet matured to be able to infer who the character is via the character's actions. At this stage, for the reader to be able to appreciate the literature meant for him, the literature needs to inform.

Grahams' Characterization

Meniru (2012), says that the author of children's literature should be able to choose a principal character who is going to be the hero or heroine. Such a principal character should be someone with whom the children can identify. She maintains that the chief character in children's literature should neither be a villain nor an angel so that children can emulate him or her. She goes further to disclose that the development of the story is the development of the hero's/heroine's until the end of the story where he/she overcomes the conflict. According to her, "If you handled the story properly the character of the hero should have matured by the end of the story" (48). She goes further to affirm that in children's literature, moderation is the key to appreciation. She believes that in presenting the character, the writer needs not be too verbose or else, it will hinder appreciation. In her own words,

Over characterization is a problem for some authors. But you have to keep a reign on your imagination because every character you introduce must have an entry, give a performance and then have an exit. When you introduce too many characters, they get lit of hand and deflect the author's attention until some of them get lost, while he kills the others off by magic! (49)

She adds as a kind of instruction to would be writers of children's literature that before one writes, one must be clear in one's mind what characters one is going to introduce, the roles the characters should play, how and when they should make their exit (49). Joe and Janet Graham have Joshua, a boy of about six as their major character. It is an obvious fact that children are interested in their own world. Therefore, literature meant for them should be about characters of their own age. The authors telling us at the beginning of the novel that Joshua is six immediately tells us that the work is for children.

As part of the features of children's literature, the number of characters should be less and major characters should be children. This is exactly what we have in Zoe and Janet Graham's text. There are very few characters in the book and they are easily spotted. Zoia is Joshua's sister, quiet but not too docile. The children are intelligent and Zoia and Allison demonstrate this in their subtle decline to listen to the grandma's tales. Zoia plays with Joshua and their cousin, Allison in their grandparents' place. They love their grandparents. The love is what

keeps them in the house but they fail to understand why their grandma should become a witch. The book states that ‘Joshua was sure that he loved grandma, but really didn’t like her when she was a witch. According to him, ‘I don’t like grandma when she is a witch. Especially when she wants to give me a goodnight kiss on my forehead. I get really scared of her green teeth. I really don’t want the witch to give me a green kiss on my forehead at all.’

True to the fact that children enjoy stories, the children always long to listen to their grandparents’ tales. However, the fear that grandma Corona is a witch makes them skeptical about listening to her tales. The book reads that after an exhausting day, with the children, grandma said, ‘Time for a bedtime story, children!’ Despite the profuse love children have for stories, one would think that Zoia and Allison despite being incessantly reminded by Joshua that their grandma is a witch, would sit to listen to grandma’s tales. As children that they are, they believe Joshua even without any tangible evidence, that she is a witch. In any case, they politely agree with Joshua that they do not want to listen to stories. According to the book, Zoia and Allison nodded their heads in agreement. ‘No story today grandma, we are much too tired.’ The grandma believes that the children are truly tired when the authors write that *She just tucked them in and tried to kiss their forehead but they hid under the covers and grandma just smiled*, ‘I expect they are much, much tired.’

There is no much gap in the age difference of the children. A child reading the work will fully appreciate it because as the characters are children, the book shares their their own experiences. As children, when grandma Corona leaves, the authors report that ‘But before they fall asleep, the three of them discussed the green teeth, the broomstick and the green liquid.

Grahams’ Method of Characterization

The authors are aware that they writing for the young audience and so, they have adopted the direct method of characterization as the major technique. Joshua is the protagonist of their novel. Almost everything the reader knows about him is told by the author. The novel majorly makes use of the direct exposition of the character. Thus

Joshua was six years old and lived close to his grandma Corona and Grandad Donald in Scotland. He enjoyed fun and fun time was always at grandma and grandad’s house, Joshua always visited them with his sister, Zoia and cousin, Allison. They always enjoyed day trips or sleepovers.

The reader immediately understands who Joshua is without having to crack his or her brain trying to decode via the character’s action. The method of the author telling the reader all that he should know about the major characters heralds understanding and appreciation. The reader has been told by the author that Joshua enjoys fun. This immediately arouses the curiosity of the reader who reads with great enthusiasm. Meniru (2012) observes that characterization in children’s literature is one of the features that determine to what extent the work would be appreciated by the target audience. She believes that characterization is a major tool of the author. She says that “For a book to succeed, there should be clever characterization.

The fact that Joshua has penchant for fun, as directly disclosed by the author, enables the reader to be focused. As the reader reads on, he keeps appreciating the character even when the authors eventually adopt the indirect method. Zoe and Janet Graham are aware that one method of characterization makes a work of imagination boring, so they subtly incorporates both methods.

Kennedy, Gioia and Bauerlein do not see anything wrong about using both methods. To Nnyagu (2015), children's literature is better appreciated when the direct method of characterization is more prominently used than the indirect. He is however, not of the view that the indirect method should be completely avoided. To further consolidate on the fact that Joshua is fun loving, Zoe and Janet Graham write that Joshua "played cricket in the garden with grandad; then they fed the fish in the pond with a huge waterfall built by daddy." This indirect method of characterization is well appreciated because the authors had earlier stated the fact using the direct method.

Grahams' Subject Matter/ Theme

Baldick (2004), looks at subject matter as a topic recurring in a number of literary works. To Lostracco and Wilkerson (1996), it's what the story reveals about some aspects of existence - as perceived by the author. Every story has a subject matter, different from the theme. The subject matter is that idea that the writer has in mind to write about. It is not the theme, rather, the way the author handles it leads to the theme of the work. Zoe and Janet Graham's subject matter is grandma as a witch. The reader at a glance, sees the subject matter and longs to see the result which is the theme. Joshua, the chief character, nurses the impression that his grandma is a witch. The reader at this point, is anxious to know if she actually is a witch. The search for the theme, makes the reader curious. Theme therefore, according to Abrams(2005), is sometimes used interchangeably with "motif." To Meniru, theme is the universal idea which a story hangs".

In children's literature, the theme is the moral in the story. Meniru says it is the very meaning behind the story. She is of the opinion that the writer of children's literature should strive to make his or her story show qualities like perseverance, honesty, selflessness and sympathy. Children's literature is such that would help to shape the life of the child and that is why the theme is such that encourages virtue and discourages vice. Meniru says that the theme of children's literature must be clear in the writer's mind so that he might know what his characters must do and say in order to achieve the desired end (48).

Zoe and Janet's *My Grandma is a Witch* has such a positive theme. In contemporary societies, a lot of children are under the illusion that every old person around them is a witch. Like Joshua, they not only avoid such old ones but they loath them. The theme of *My Grandma is a Witch* is Unverified human thoughts could be misleading. His belief that the old woman is a witch is only contingent upon illusion. He sees her drink some green liquid substance and then he concludes that she is a witch. The authors write that "One day, Joshua saw grandma Corona standing in the kitchen drinking green liquid from a tall, clear glass. He watched her very intently and quickly concluded that she was a witch. When he later saw Zoia, he said to her, 'I think grandma is a witch'" (1).

As Lostracco and Wilkerson have observed, theme of a fiction can only be decoded when the reader has read the last word of the work. The reader has in the very beginning of the story, understood the subject of the author but not the theme. Children who share the same notion with Joshua would be eager to see what happens at the end. The denouement of the story disillusioned them. All the while, his cousin, Allison and Zoia never believed him that their grandma is a witch since those who drank grandma soup never turned to stones. Joshua has tried to no avail, to convince them that grandma is a witch and as the authors put it, the following day, when Joshua saw Zoia and Allison eating grandma's food with others, he was surprised. 'Zoia! Allison! What are you doing? Why are you eating the witch's food?'

Zoia's response 'Don't be silly, Joshua... . Grandma is not a witch... Those who drank her soup did not turn to stones. She is not a witch,' gradually begins to disillusion them. At this point, the message of the author is becoming obvious. The novel climaxes with the theme that *human mind could mislead* when grandma walks in. As the authors put it, She was carrying some food. She had heard Joshua ask about her green teeth. 'Joshua, your grandma is not a witch. My teeth are green only when I drink my green liquid vitamin,

Smilingly, Zoia happily says to him, 'Did I not tell you that grandma is not a witch. At this point, the story ends in a happy mood as it becomes obvious to them that she is not a witch and they also understand why she has always drunk the green liquid.

The theme of any work of art is determined by the fictional character. Nnyagu (2015), discloses that if the author's major characters are adults, the work is an adult literature and the theme definitely is going to be that pertaining to adults and when the major characters are children, it is children's literature because the subject matter and the theme pertain to children (57 -59). Zoe and Janet at the beginning of their work, vividly gives a picture of the age of the major character. The reader who immediately understands that Joshua is a boy of about six years old, knows the target audience. It is a fact well acknowledged that a work of such, whose characters are kids would discuss only such that pertains to children in that age range.

Children's Literature and Didacticism

Nwahunanya (2007), observes that children are people whose minds are still in their formative stage, and can easily take in even the wrong information undiscerningly as the right one. This is a fact well upheld by the Igbo belief that the child is like the yam tendril; wherever position it is staked by the farmer, there it goes. The Holy Bible understands the need for the positive upbringing of the child when it enjoins parents to bring up their children in the right way that they should go so that when they become matured, they would not depart from it. By this injunction, we understand that the best time to train the child is when the child is still very tender. This is why parents must monitor the type of novels their children read as well as the type of movies that they watch. It must be understood that although it is good to encourage the young ones to read, it is better to sensor the stuff that they read because some novels, instead of helping to reform the child, rather corrupts him or her.

Good writers of children's literature know that the essence of children's literature is to teach moral lessons and so when they write, they bear it in mind to make their works didactic. As has been said elsewhere, this type of literature aims to help the child see dangers in ills and the need to avoid ills. This is why the predominant theme of children literature is encouraging virtue to discourage vice. This theme can only be possible when the author is meticulous in selecting his or her characters. If the author's major characters are children, the theme undoubtedly would be about virtue encouraged because at that age, the writer would not be talking about something beyond them. Things like amorous affairs and juvenile crimes would be avoided because such would be esoteric to them. On rare occasions when the subject matter of children's literature is about such immoral acts and crimes, the veteran author of children's literature would try as much as possible to get the children understand the negative consequences. The work would end encouraging the children to avoid ills. Zoe and Janet Graham are aware of this and so, in their *My grandma is a Witch*, they have crafted the work to have good moral lesson apt for the children. In different societies in the world, there are children with the ill belief that their grand parents and other aged men and women around them are witches and wizards. They thus, hate them even though they have no evidence that their

thoughts and beliefs are true. Such children, when they read *My Grandma is a Witch*, they will understand the truth and change. The authors have so vividly made the moral lesson of the children's literature glaringly clear when at the end of the novel, Zoia tells Joshua, "Did I not tell you that grandma is not a witch?"

Joshua who had been avoiding grandma, at this point, understands that his thoughts had been misleading him and the authors report that vividly that when grandma places the food in the table Joshua joins in the eating of the food. He says, "Grandma, I know now that you are not a witch and I love you,"

The novel in addition, teaches the children to love and not to hate. When Joshua tells his grandma that he loves her, the authors report that everyone is happy.

The Authors' Style

Style in literature, refers to the peculiar way a particular author writes which makes him or her different from others. Generally, no two persons behave alike. Baldick (2004), asserts that style is a distinctive manner of expression; an author's style results from a combination of aspects, such as diction, rhythm, imagery, and so on. Style varies from one author to another and what usually endears an author is his or her style. Meniru observes that although each author has his or her own peculiar style, in children's literature one has to adjust and make one's style to be light, vivid and interesting. She puts it categorically that the author of children's book should have a stock of simple words and expressions and should be able to paint vivid pictures with words but still not make his writing verbose (49).

Good children's literature is that which the children can easily read with maximum appreciation. It has to be reiterated at this juncture that the essence of writing is to inform and not to impress. Therefore, it becomes a futile effort when a writer feeds children with books that they cannot benefit from. The diction of Zoe and Janet Graham's *My Grandma is a Witch* is apt for the children. There is hardly any word, phrase or even sentence that would pose a threat to the target audience. They are aware that they are writing for the young audience and so, they use very simple language, with very minimal use of compound and complex sentences.

Literature is like a door closed. If one tries to get the door open but to no avail, one simply goes back, leaving the door alone. The child is like the person at the door, when he or she reads without comprehension, he tends to develop aversion for literature. *My Grandma is a Witch*, rendered mainly in simple sentences, makes the child all over the English speaking societies to read with optimal appreciation.

Another strategy adopted by the authors as a means of getting the child appreciate the work is starting what is presumed to be a chapter with interesting and captivating captions. Although they do not write **chapter** or **unit** on top of any new segment as has been the popular style, they simply indicate the beginning of a unit with a caption rendered in an independent clause or a clear phrase. At a glance, the reader has a glimpse of idea of the segment. For instance, the clause "**I Think My Grandma is a Witch**" written on top intensifies the curiosity of the child. He or she is anxious to ascertain really who the grandma is and of course, her reasons for becoming a witch.

Other Important Features of Children's Literature in *My Grandma is a Witch*

Children's books need to be well packaged as to attract the child. A saying in Igbo has it that eyes eat any pudding first before the the mouth. In this context, both the writer and the publisher have a task in ensuring that the book meets the requirements. Some of the features have been discussed earlier in this paper. On the part of publishers, the work should be made colourful and durable. Children are not as careful as adult. Therefore, quality and thick paper should be used in the production of their books. If this is done, the book tends to last in their hands. The publishers of *My Grandma is a Witch* had this in mind and so, they have used very thick paper to print the book. In addition, the quality of their printing is good and the idea of using colour paper instead of the seemingly conventional white paper adds to the beauty of the book.

The illustrations in the book need commendation. Children are inquisitive in nature. Whatever they see, they aspire to know more about. Based on this fact, good children's books need to be rich in apt illustrations. The illustrations are what inspire the aspirations of the child to find out exactly what happens in the work. They look at the illustrations and gaze what the story is about. To ascertain if they have guessed correctly, they are forced to read. *My Grandma is a Witch* is rich in illustrations. There is hardly any page without illustration. The authors did not just put the illustrations for the sake of it, all the illustrations cohere with the story.

Another important feature of children's literature seen in the book is the bold print and double line spacing. Children are amateur readers and as neophytes, their books are presented differently. While matured literature could be presented in thiny font size with no space between one line and the other, children's literature must be in large fonts with enough space between a line and the other. Zoe and Janet Graham's abiding by the rule, make it easy for the children to read the book with ease.

CONCLUSION

It is appalling and heartbreaking when what should be beneficial to a particular person becomes rather detrimental to him or her. It has been made very clear that children's literature does not just delight but it's major function is to inform. Any literature that has no positive impact on the child, despite the author's mastery of the language, is not children's literature. *My Grandma is a Witch* has almost all the features of children's literature. Although, it was authored by a European, it has a universal theme. A child in any society of the world can read it with maximum understanding. There is absolutely nothing in the book that would corrupt the mind of the child. The authors have effectively demonstrated their apt knowledge of the concept, children's literature by subtly incorporating the major techniques of children's literature in the book. Meniru's view that authors of children's book should have a stock of simple words and expressions is vividly seen in the book. Above all, the authors' plot, like every other good plot, has a conflict, a problem, to be overcome or sorted out by the hero. As the hero of the book, Joshua is faced with the problem of ascertaining who his grandma is. The conflict intensifies and eventually resolves at the denouement when the truth about the real identity of the old woman is disclosed so that he understands that he has all the while, been living in illusion.

Despite the good qualities of the book, it is observed that page numbers are missing. This poses a serious problem to one researching on the book as he or she cannot give page numbers where necessary. This is a serious plight which needs to be corrected in the subsequent production.

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