

## THE BASIC CONCEPT OF CHILDREN LITERATURE

*(Konsep Dasar Sastra Anak)*

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### **Abstrak**

Sastra anak adalah bentuk karya sastra yang khusus diciptakan untuk konsumsi anak-anak. Bentuk-bentuknya antara lain berupa cerita, puisi, cerita rakyat dan drama yang secara khusus diciptakan untuk anak-anak, balita dan remaja sebagai target audiencenya. Bentuk sastra anak pada dasarnya sama saja dengan sastra dewasa, hanya saja keduanya berbeda dari segi tingkatan dan muatannya. Hal ini disebabkan karena tingkat pemikiran anak-anak masih terbatas dibandingkan orang dewasa. Oleh karena itu, pengungkapan ide pada sastra anak haruslah lebih sederhana, baik dalam bentuk dan bahasa.

**Kata Kunci:** *sastra anak, cerita, tingkatan dan muatan*

### **Abstract**

*Children's literature is defined as literature exclusively about children. Children's literature refers mainly to stories, poetry, rhymes, folk tales, drama, exclusively created for children such as infants, toddlers and the young people as target audience. Literature for children is different from literature for adults in degree but not in kind. Because children's understanding is more limited, the expression of ideas for children in literature must be simpler, both in language and form.*

**Keywords:** *children's literature, stories, degree*

## A. Introduction

It is hard to imagine a world without books for children. There have been children's stories and folk-tales ever since man first learned to speak. Many of them have been narrated, almost in their present shape, for thousands of years. Children's books, however, are a late growth of literature. Yonge (in Hewins, 2012) says, "Up to the Georgian era there were no books at all for children or the poor, excepting the class-books containing old ballads, such as Chevy Chase, and short tales, such as The King and the Cobbler, Whittington and his Cat."

Children are not little adults. They are different from adult in experience, but not in species, or to put it differently, in degree but not in kind. We can say then of literature for young readers that it differs from literature for adults in degree but not in kind (Lukens, 2003: 8). Literature for children can and should provide the same enjoyment and understanding as literature for adults.

## B. Definition of Children Literature

Literature includes not only novels, but also certain stories, letters, biographies, and history. Beside that, literature also includes the oral tradition, legends, myths and sages from classical times. Literature further includes the living tradition of children's games, songs and stories (Hunt, 1994: 3).

Literature is an art; not because of what it is writing about but because

of the artistic point of view, the artist's transformation of ideas and notions.

It is worth noting that the word literature can be found in a number of different kinds of statements and human activities. We can talk of literature as something associated with, a characteristic of a particular nation or people or groups of people; for example, Arabic literature, American literature, African literature, Nigerian literature and so on. Then again we can talk of the literature of a particular historical period or movement, which may often be found in a number of different cultures; for example, Renaissance (French) literature, Romantic literature, Colonial literature, the literature of independent of Africa, and so on.

In all these forms, the raw material of literature is language either written or spoken. It consists of certain rather specialized forms, selections and collections of language. Through language, the distinctive speech sounds which are used in various kinds of systematic pattern to communicate all necessary messages. Anyone who is concerned with literature is also concerned with language (Donoghue, 1971: 33). It is with language that literary writers present their views to the reader with one or two emphasis. The first emphasis is on his experience and other people's experience, in which case the reader adds something to his store of knowledge about the world; for example Daniel Dafoe's '*A journal of the plague year*'. The second emphasis is on the experience in such a way as to

help the reader learn something more about himself as a human being; for example, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. We cannot learn more about ourselves in literature except through someone else's experience which in itself enlarges our knowledge about the world; and we cannot learn more about the world without learning a little about humanity and therefore ourselves.

Language is the raw material with which literary writers articulate their artistic point of view as a means of furthering experience of the world and as a means of finding out more about oneself. This is the reason literature is defined as language.

Children's literature as a concept is defined as literature exclusively about children. Children's literature refers mainly to stories, poetry, rhymes, folk tales, drama, exclusively created for children such as infants, toddlers and the young people as target audience.

Children's literature which is exclusively written for children seems to rest on three criteria (Oby, 2010: 3): the first is whether the heroes are children or teenagers, the second is whether the themes, that is the ideas, relationships and language, are simple or complex. Literature is literature for children if the ideas, relationship and language are simple. However, literature is not children's literature if the ideas, relationship and language are found too complex whether oral or written. For example, a classic literature like *Gulliver's Travels* is admitted into children's literature because of simplicity of its ideas,

relationship and language. Thirdly, children's literature is often aimed at teaching moral lessons.

### **C. Kind's of Children Literature**

Kinds of children literature are not different from literature for adult. They are only different in degree but not in form. According to Lukens (2003: 13) generally, it can be divided into:

#### **1. Short Stories**

A short story is a kind of children's literature. Story here means account of past events or account of imaginary events. Short stories may be found in special collection but may appear from time to time in periodicals. Since they are short, stories of this kind are usually somewhat restricted in their scope, number of characters, etc. Short stories have the great practical advantage of being more manageable. A story can often be read to a class at a single sitting or studied as a single assignment whether in or out of classroom. The short story, also be experienced simultaneously by the whole class, which often makes discussion easier and invites comparison and imitation. To the child, reading means listening to stories acted as well as reading by oneself.

Talking about children's literature somehow makes us thinking of children in Elementary/Primary schools within the age range of 6-14 years as well as those in junior secondary schools. The range of what stories to write and the themes are

limitless. Children love school stories, family stories, adventure stories which are meant to entertain and amuse, instruct, teach morals, history, geography and problems solving. Children's stories are about what people do, why they do it and what results from the doing and not what people think about what they do for thought processes are generally a bore thing to the young.

Children too like familiar stories about animals, toys, pets, parents, grandparents. Children also like themselves who get cross, play, play up, get up, go shopping; and who are fed and scolded, loved, taken out and put to bed. Children up to the age of four like stories of the familiar. Indeed, at some stage, children love the made up story that is obviously about themselves and their own recent activities. From this delight in the familiar, children move on to the kind of story which opens up in their familiar world a wider range of possibilities than they normally exploit. Children too, like stories of actual children whose behaviour is somewhat unconventional, and who break the rules or are just unable to cope with them, who get into trouble, challenge authority, and triumph over people who are bigger or older than themselves. *My Naughty little sister* is an example of the kind of story book that bridges the gap between the familiar world of the average child, and the unconventionally familiar world of little people such as *Peter Rabbit*, *Little O* and *The Urchin*. Stories within this range of experience, and at this level of

simplicity, will continue to appeal to children at least up to the age of eight.

## 2. Folk Tales

Folk tales refer to popular stories handed down orally from past generation. Folk tales give children a sense of security as they find that they belong to the life of the different environments that they have to adapt to. Parents tell children these folk stories at home, and then when they go to school, the teacher tells them too. The children go to a new class and the stories are repeated or read or at least talked about. If the stories should feature in the life of the first year of their junior school, they will ease children's transfer from the infants and develop confidence between them and the new teacher.

The child's first experience of the story will be through an adult who tells or reads and shows him pictures. Later he will find himself able to join in parts of the story, to tell parts or all of it himself, perhaps to act it or write about it; and often the greatest thrill comes when he finds that he can read the story for himself in his own book. The story of how the child comes to possess a traditional tale through, perhaps, three years of nursery and infant days may well reflect the history of his whole development as a person during that time.

Children's tastes may move from the very simple rustic tale like *Jack and the Bean Stalk* to the more literary work of Walter de la Mare, Oscar Wilde and Arabian Nights. Folktales like giants, monsters and wicked step mothers for example, can become the source of a rather

stereotyped vicarious horror, while a story like *Beauty and the Beast*, which presents the horror figure ambivalently, can start a much needed vein of new sympathy. Between the ages of eight/nine and eleven years, allegorical stories of the type of pilgrim's progress, kind of the *Golden River*, and *The soldier and Death* -often tales of moral struggle, following the structure of an arduous journey -can take hold on the imagination of children.

### 3. Myths and Legends

Myths mean person or thing, etc that is imaginary, fictions or invented. It refers to unreal story, handed down from olden times, especially concepts or beliefs about the early history of a race, explanations of natural events, such as the seasons.

A mythical story is usually an illustration of the origins of life and death and the fundamental pattern of nature. The stories of *Persephone*, *Prometheus and Loki*, for example, are metical. Persephone was the daughter of Zeus, who allowed her to spend six months of the year on earth and six months in the underworld, a symbol of the buying of the seed in the ground and the growth of the corn. Prometheus made mankind out of clay and when Zeus in his anger deprived them of fire, Prometheus stole fire from heaven for them and taught them many arts. If myths embody beliefs about life and the nature of mankind, then legends usually tell of the shaping of a nation through the exploits of its heroes. Legends are often quasi-historical and their characters, their actions and the environment in which

they live and struggle are fully realized. The action is rooted in recognizable human behaviour, although this may be transcended from time to the time by magic and superhuman powers.

Myths are more abstract than most kinds of stories that the child will meet. Their characters tend to be more unworldly, and the action is often less firmly rooted in the circumstances of a particular environment. For this reason they may seem remote from the child, but they will appeal to some children at a level beyond concrete understanding and are well worth telling to any age group.

The dividing line between myth and legend is blurred for two main reasons. First, both kinds of stories express reflect and communicate a picture of the human condition held more or less in common in the minds of men. Second, myths covers all language and literature, including legend.

Legendary stories as those of *Robin Hood* can be told, suitably scaled to junior school children of any age, but they can normally be explored more successfully in the sustained and coherent way that makes for deepening understanding, with children between the ages of nine and twelve.

### 4. Novel

Novel is a kind of children's literature. It is a story in prose, long enough to fill one or more volumes, about either imaginary or historical people. The novels by Dickens are examples. Novels tend to have fairly complex structures, in which some or

other of the following element can be recognized:

- a. setting
- b. characters
- c. plot
- d. language
- e. theme

*Setting* means the geographical, historical, social and political environment or background in which the story is set. The setting of a novel may be unchanged throughout; in many works, however, there may be deliberate contrasts between two or more types of backgrounds. Example could be between life in the urban big city and life in the rural areas as in Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana*.

*Character* refers to an individual who takes part i.e as a *dramatis persona*. Character also refers to indications of special notable qualities, or characteristics of particular individuals. An important part of the reading of any novel is the attempt to determine the valuation which the author has placed upon each character, remembering that it will not be always an absolute clear-cut distinction between bad and good. Very often, it is important to follow the author's explanation of what makes his character.

The interpretation of a character in a novel can be a valuable exercise in the collection and interpretation of evidence. Students should learn to give consideration to the following in interpreting a character:

- 1) What the author himself tells us.

- 2) What a character himself says or does.
- 3) What other characters say about each other.
- 4) What a character is represented as thinking, feeling, doing or refraining from doing.

It may be useful to observe certain kinds of grouping or patterning amongst characters or types of characters. Always, of course, the reader will be bounded by what the author has put into the book and represented in the words used. Sometimes, it is quite difficult to remember that characters have no independent existence outside the book. If the reader fails to remember this, his interpretation can easily become distorted by his personal views.

*Plot* is the story line. The order in which the stories narrated the *narrative technique* is therefore concerned with how we learn what happens for example events normally follow each other in some chronological sequence.

*Language* is the raw materials for writing novels. In some cases, authors maintain a uniform style throughout. In other cases, authors modify the language they employ, whether in direct speech or narrative, to reflect the thoughts and feelings of particular character at particular moments.

*Theme* is the culmination of the study of a novel will be to recognize and express, in terms which indicate that we have genuinely grasped the underlying themes which it may

embody. Sometime, the themes may be obvious, as for example, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* that there is an inevitable conflict between old and new in a changing society. Sometimes the themes may not always be easy to identify. Themes of a novel should be given to the children by the teacher. Children must be allowed to grow into consciousness, as a result of their experience of living through the novel assisted by useful discussion. The children must be seen to grasp relatively simple concepts, as of character, plot, cause and effect, before going on to more high-level abstractions.

#### **D. Criteria for Choosing Children's Literature**

The following are the criteria for choosing literature for children (Obi, 2010: 68):

##### **1. Suitability**

The most evident general criterion for choosing literature for children is suitability. The criterion of suitability poses the question: How do the literature theme and treatment of ideas, characters and plot and the level of language suit the child's or children's maturity and interests, personal problems, social situations, creative abilities, understanding, responses and feelings? Overall, this means the suitability or the appropriateness of the literature (novel, short stories, drama, folk tales, legends, myths poultry, etc.) to the child or children.

The criterion of suitability demands that a book or novel, short

stories, drama, folk tales, legends, myths poetry and so on should be produced largely with a child's developmental needs. Indeed, such literature must be one that deals honestly with children, portrays them candidly and in a medium to which they can respond with imagination and pleasure.

You will recall that children present different levels of development, maturity and interest as well as different relations to the written language of 4 – 5 years, 7 – 8 years and 9 – 12 years. At 7 – 9 years the child's mind is not just impressionable but also stores experiences capable of building up associations when properly stimulated. At 12 – 18 years, as the child approaches adulthood, his psychology, understanding and interest become mature and distinctive more than his linguistic skills and conceptual powers have by now developed sufficiently to enable him derive aesthetic pleasure from his literature reading. All teachers of literature must be aware of these children's characteristics and should not allow their own tastes, interests and preconceptions to influence choosing children's literature.

A teacher must determine the stage of a child's development before he chooses literature that will suit, stimulate and please the child in any genre of literature given to him.

##### **2. Enjoyment**

Enjoyment is the second criterion of choosing literature for children. This is because literature for children or anyone else is to be read because it is enjoyable; if it is not enjoyed it won't be read. For example, books specially written for adolescents should deal with their everyday concerns and problems of adjustment to approaching adulthood, like problems about love, parent-child conflict, careers, and drugs are enjoyable to adolescents.

### **3. Availability**

It is one thing to select a wide range of literature to suit needs and experience of children, it is another to see that they are available and they reach the children. A look at book stands, schools and public libraries up and down the country will reveal a dearth of children's literature. If the situation is poor in the urban cities, the situation in the rural schools could better be imagined. Many of our children come from impoverished reading background with no opportunities and encouragement to widen their background in primary schools. Those who show initiative have constrained by the unavailability of libraries.

How many books can he buy with limited funds? And at school how does the child gain access to a library perhaps locked up in principals, offices. Where are the neighbourhood libraries to which he can go to borrow books outside school hours? The answers to all these questions are depressing as the library facilities and bookshops are very few where they exist. There are not

adequate children's sections in public libraries. This results in the scarcity of children's books or literature. The result is that children have now very little to read outside their textbooks. They therefore have little to talk about commonly. Since children do not have enough to read, they spend their leisure hours in other undesirable ways. They are easily frustrated and their intellectual growth is stunted.

### **4. Remedy**

In order to make more suitable reading materials available to children, families, communities, schools and Government should strive to establish more libraries for children at least in every Local Government Area. Authors and publishers could also take the wind out of the sail of apathy towards children's literature by organizing symposia, writing workshop and seminars for authors.

Finally, government has a part to play towards improving the present supply of children's literature. This will encourage reading. Reading is the key to wisdom. If we want good resourceful citizens, then we should provide them good children's literature. It is desirable for a teacher to allow these criteria to influence his choice of children's literature instead of his own tastes. The teacher is a guide, helper, and clarifier. To be able to decide what literature is suitable or appropriate for his class children at any point in time, the teacher should be widely read in literature for children. It implies that the teacher's task too, is to familiarize himself with a wide range of children's literature, so as to be able to match the literature to the



individual child's needs and interests. In doing this, the teacher is putting himself in the best position to know what is exactly right as literature for the direct experience of the children in his class, both as a group and as individuals.

We should note that the range of literature for children either to read or to learn about oneself and others, or for information, fun and for escape is so wide that it is possible to suit the literature to children's needs and experience. The implication is that it is only the literature that satisfies identified criteria that children should be reading and if such literature that meets these criteria for all children are not available then they should be written.

### **E. Conclusion**

Since children have limited experience than adults, they may not understand the same complexity of ideas. It is because their understanding is more limited. Therefore, the expression of ideas for children in literature must be simpler, both in language and form. Stories should be more directly told, with fewer digressions and more obvious relationship between characters and actions, or between characters themselves. Literature is more than a piece of writing that clarifies, but it gives the child pleasure as well as understanding.

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