

## THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN CHILDREN'S UPBRINGING: A STUDY OF SELECTED CHILDREN'S PROSE

Uche Nnyagu PhD

Department of English Language and Literature,  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

&

Amalukwue Lotachukwu L. PhD

Department of English Language and Literature,  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

### Abstract

Children's literature remains one of the most indispensable aspects of literature because of its immense contributions to the moral, emotional, intellectual, and social development of the child. Yet, many people mistakenly assume that children's literature is easy to write. Such a misconception has led to the proliferation of poor quality literary works that fail to positively influence the child and, in some cases, even corrupt the young mind. If we accept the African proverbial wisdom that a child is like a yam tendril that bends in the direction in which it is guided, then we must also acknowledge that children's literature cannot be carelessly written or produced. It requires great artistic discipline, moral consciousness, simplicity of expression, and a sound psychological understanding of the child. This article critically examines the nature, purpose, and qualities of children's literature, with particular emphasis on selected children's prose works. It argues that children's literature should not merely entertain but should also educate, reform, and guide the child towards responsible adulthood. The paper further highlights the dangers of exposing children to unsuitable literary materials and demonstrates why writers, teachers, parents, publishers, and educational authorities must ensure that children are provided with wholesome and morally enriching literature.

**Keywords:** Literature, children, didacticism, character development, folktale

### Introduction

The term *literature* is derived from the word *literate*, which denotes the ability to read and write in a particular language. A person who can read, understand, and interpret written material is regarded as literate. Consequently, whatever is written down for the literate to read may, in a broad sense, be regarded as literature. By implication, every written material intended for reading falls within the broad conception of literature. Calculations and mathematical symbols, however, are generally excluded because they rely more on figures and signs than on the alphabetic system of language. Thus, texts in Agricultural Science, Biology, Geography, History, Creative Writing, and related disciplines, once written in a language understandable to those literate in that language, may broadly be regarded as literature.

This broader conception of literature is what critics describe as literature in the broad sense. According to Baldick (2004), since the nineteenth century, the earlier understanding of literature as the totality of all written and printed works has gradually given way to narrower and more exclusive definitions based on imaginative, creative, and artistic value. In other words, literature has increasingly come to be associated with works possessing aesthetic quality and artistic merit.

As Baldick further points out, apart from literature in the broad sense, there is also literature in the narrower sense. In this narrower conception, literature refers specifically to imaginative works of art presented in the three major genres: prose, drama, and poetry. Such works are not merely written to convey information but are artistically designed to entertain, instruct, and illuminate human experiences.

Abrams (2005) equally traces the word *literature* to the Latin *litteratura*, meaning "writings." According to him, since the eighteenth century the term has been commonly used, much like the French *belles lettres* ("fine letters"), to designate imaginative and fictional writings such as poetry, prose fiction, and drama. Abrams, however, expands the scope of literature beyond imaginative writing by observing that the term may also include writings in philosophy, history, criticism, and even scientific discourse, especially when such works are distinguished by excellence of form, emotional depth, and artistic expression.

In a similar vein, Baldick (2004:142) observes that:

Until the mid-twentieth century, many kinds of non-fictional writing—in philosophy, history, biography, criticism, topography, science, and politics—were counted as literature; implicit in this

broadier usage is a definition of literature as that body of works which, for whatever reason, deserves to be preserved as part of a given culture, unlike ephemeral writings such as newspapers. For the purpose of this study, emphasis is placed on imaginative literature. Edgar and Jacobs (2004) describe imaginative literature as compositions that tell stories, dramatize situations, express emotions, analyze experiences, and advocate ideas. Although literature is fictional rather than historical documentation, a good literary work must possess a high degree of realism. Readers often continue reading a literary work because they find in it reflections of life and experiences that resonate with their own realities. Thus, while literature may be imaginative, it must also maintain a meaningful relationship with life.

### **Children's Literature**

According to Nnyagu (2010), children's literature denotes the totality of literary works—including prose, drama, and poetry—specifically prepared not merely for the entertainment of children but also for their positive upbringing. The child is highly impressionable and easily influenced by whatever he or she encounters. In many African societies, it is often said that a child is like the yam tendril which bends towards whichever direction it is led. This proverbial understanding underscores the importance of guiding the child carefully during the formative years of life. It is for the same reason that the Bible enjoins parents and guardians to train up the child in the proper way so that when he or she grows, the child will not depart from it.

Children's literature, therefore, is not ordinary literature casually assembled for amusement; rather, it is literature meticulously designed for the moral, intellectual, emotional, and social development of the child. Unfortunately, many people erroneously believe that writing children's literature is an easy venture. On several occasions, one hears individuals say that if they are unable to write "serious" novels, they can at least write children's literature so that their names may appear as authors. Such a misconception has contributed immensely to the proliferation of poor-quality children's books in society.

Nwahunanya (2007) vividly captures this unfortunate trend when he observes that one of the major problems with children's literature in Nigeria is the assumption by many literate adults that they can write whatever children should read. Consequently, children are often exposed to meaningless nursery rhymes, poorly conceived stories, and badly written novelettes that fail to satisfy the objectives of genuine children's literature.

The belief that children's literature is simple to write is therefore a mere illusion. In reality, children's literature is one of the most difficult aspects of literary creativity. The writer must not only descend psychologically and linguistically to the level of the child, but must also exercise great artistic discipline and moral caution. The language, themes, characterization, and events presented in the work must be carefully moderated through deliberate bowdlerization and expurgation where necessary. Otherwise, the writer may end up feeding the child with literary trash capable of negatively influencing the child's moral and intellectual development.

Indeed, writing for children demands deep understanding of child psychology, social responsibility, and artistic maturity. A careless writer may entertain the child temporarily yet destroy the child morally. For this reason, children's literature should never be treated as an inferior or less demanding branch of literature. Rather, it should be approached with seriousness, caution, and a strong sense of responsibility because of its enormous influence on the future of society.

In Nwahunanya's word,

One consequence of this erroneous assumption is that these writers set out with their own notions of what children's books should be, with the result that they choose as their models stories which are popular within the social circles in which they operate. They often fail to establish and work with the ideal objectives of children's literature.

The implication of this observation is that many writers of children's literature fail to appreciate the sensitive nature of the child's mind. Instead of writing with the psychological, moral, and intellectual needs of children in mind, they merely reproduce stories and experiences drawn from adult environments. The consequence is that children are often exposed to literary materials that neither educate nor reform them positively.

This concern over the effect of literature on young minds is not entirely new. Plato, the classical Greek philosopher, had long expressed anxiety about the influence of literature on society, especially on the youth. Based largely on the imaginative works of Homer, Plato regarded literature as capable of corrupting the minds of young people if not properly guided and censored. To him, literature possesses immense power over human behaviour and morality; hence, it should only project morally uplifting ideals and socially enriching values. Although Plato acknowledged literature as a valuable source of knowledge, his major concern centred on the moral consequences of the knowledge conveyed through literary works.

The relevance of Plato's position becomes even more evident in contemporary society where many parents derive satisfaction merely from seeing their children read novels without making any effort to ascertain whether such books are suitable for them. It is undoubtedly good to encourage children to cultivate the habit of reading, yet an important question remains: what kind of books are they reading? Are such books capable of contributing positively to the child's growth and development, or are they the type that may destroy the child morally and psychologically?

A child who can read fluently may easily read and understand virtually any novel placed before him or her. Nevertheless, not every novel is appropriate for the child. Some literary works may contain ideas, language, actions, and attitudes that are harmful to the moral upbringing of young readers. While adults may possess the maturity and critical capacity to separate positive lessons from negative influences, children are often unable to make such distinctions. An adult who reads a novel containing erotic scenes, violence, or corrupt tendencies may consciously reject the immoral aspects and retain only the useful lessons. The child, however, is more likely to absorb and imitate everything encountered in the text.

This explains why writing children's literature is far more difficult than many people assume. The writer must constantly bear in mind the psychological vulnerability and impressionability of the child. It must be stated categorically that bad habits are often learnt more quickly than good ones, and any negative behaviour acquired during childhood is usually difficult to correct later in life. For this reason, parents, guardians, teachers, publishers, and educational authorities must remain vigilant concerning the kinds of literature made available to children. Children's literature differs fundamentally from adult literature because its primary audience consists of minds still in the formative stage of development. If society desires morally upright and responsible future generations, then the literary diet of children must be carefully monitored.

### **Characteristics, Features, and Qualities of Children's Literature**

According to Nwahunanya (2007), many critics are of the opinion that children's literature in Africa has for too long been relegated to the background. This concern arose largely because many of the literary works produced for young readers fail to conform to the accepted standards and objectives of genuine children's literature. A considerable number of published texts intended for children lack the artistic, moral, and psychological qualities necessary for the proper upbringing of the child.

As far back as 1802, the Romantic poet William Wordsworth emphasized the importance of children in the continuity and preservation of society. In his poem *My Heart Leaps Up*, he famously declares that "the child is the father to the man." Though the statement appears paradoxical, it expresses a profound truth: the future of every society depends largely on its children. The adults of tomorrow are the children of today. Consequently, whatever shapes the child today ultimately shapes the future of society itself.

It therefore becomes necessary to pay close attention to the quality of literature children are exposed to. A child should not be allowed to read every book encountered merely because he or she possesses the ability to read. While children should indeed be encouraged to cultivate reading habits, they must also be guided towards literary works specifically designed for their age, emotional condition, and intellectual development. Good children's literature possesses certain identifiable qualities which distinguish it from ordinary writing.

#### **1. It Must Be Didactic**

One of the foremost qualities of children's literature is its didactic nature. According to Catherine Acholonu (1990), the quality of many works produced as children's literature in society remains disturbingly low. Although literature generally aims at entertainment and artistic expression, children's literature goes beyond entertainment to embrace moral instruction and character formation.

Matthew Arnold, the Victorian critic, observes that literature helps people interpret life and live meaningfully. In relation to children's literature, this implies that literary works meant for children should assist them in developing morally sound and socially acceptable behaviour. Perrine (1978) supports this position by arguing that literature must offer more than pleasure; it must also educate the reader. According to him, unless fiction provides something beyond amusement, its value remains limited.

To ensure that children's literature educates while entertaining, the themes and subjects presented in such works must encourage positive living. In *The Flute*, for instance, vice is condemned while virtue is rewarded. Through the actions of the jealous second wife and her son, Achebe exposes the destructive consequences of envy, hatred, and malice. A child reading the text clearly understands the dangers associated with wickedness and jealousy.

Similarly, in Uche Nnyagu's *Lizard and Chameleon*, the consequences of disobedience are vividly portrayed. Although the story is presented as a folktale employing animal characters, the characters themselves are highly symbolic. Lizard disobeys the wise counsel of its mother, who warns against associating with Chameleon, described as an untrustworthy companion. Ignoring the advice, Lizard follows Chameleon into theft and criminal behaviour, only to be betrayed and handed over to the enemy. As Lizard faces punishment, Chameleon mockingly laughs at it. Like *The Disobedient Child*, the story is rich in moral lessons suitable for the child's moral upbringing. In Ginikanwa Gloria Ugochukwu's *My Dream Comes True*, the protagonist Afamefuna possesses a strong ambition to succeed in life. Despite severe difficulties and obstacles, he remains determined and hardworking. Eventually, his perseverance yields success, thereby reinforcing the moral lesson that hard work and persistence ultimately pay. The novel teaches children the value of determination, discipline, and self-belief.

Likewise, in *A Journey to Maturity*, Nwachukwu O. Nwachukwu presents the story of Sopuru, an intelligent and obedient boy who believes strongly in education as the pathway to success. However, through his association with Ikpeama, a wayward childhood friend, Sopuru gradually becomes involved in undesirable behaviour. The novel reflects the age-old wisdom that bad company corrupts good character. The work shares thematic similarities with Uche Nnyagu's *Price of Disobedience*, where youthful characters learn painful lessons after finding themselves in police custody due to negative influences and wrong decisions. Having realized their mistakes, the characters eventually repent and return to school.

The moral lessons conveyed in these works reinforce positive values capable of guiding children towards responsible adulthood. The warning against bad company, for instance, echoes the teachings found in the songs of the renowned Akuko na Egwu musician, Mike Ejeagha, whose music consistently promotes moral instruction and social discipline. Through such literary and artistic works, children learn practical lessons about life, morality, responsibility, and human conduct.

It is for this reason that Acholonu insists that writers of children's literature must remain deeply conscious of the relevance of their works to the moral health and growth of society. Children's literature should therefore not merely entertain the child temporarily; it should also mould character, shape behaviour, and contribute meaningfully to the development of a morally balanced society.

## **2. Major Characters in Children's Literature are Mainly Children**

It is an obvious fact that children are naturally interested in what happens to other children. This explains why they are often curious about the activities, experiences, successes, and failures of their peers. A good writer of children's literature must understand this important aspect of child psychology. Since the primary aim of literature is communication, and since literature is often regarded as a mirror of life, literary works meant for children should reflect the world and experiences familiar to them. For children's literature to communicate effectively and achieve its intended purpose, the stories must largely centre on children themselves. Consequently, the major characters in children's novels and plays are usually children who engage in adventures, confront challenges, learn lessons, and grow through experience.

This does not imply that adults are completely absent from children's literature. Adults may appear in such works, but they often function as minor characters who serve as guardians, instructors, advisers, or moral guides. In most children's literary works, emphasis remains on the child and the child's experiences. In works such as *My Dream Comes True*, *A Journey to Maturity*, *The Deserved Wage*, and *The Disobedient Child*, the major characters are children. Young readers easily identify with such characters because the experiences portrayed often resemble their own realities, aspirations, and fears.

In Uche Nnyagu's *Adamma Goes to Jail*, although Adamma herself is an adult, the central concern of the play revolves around the child entrusted to her care. Through the play, the author condemns the maltreatment of children by guardians and strongly discourages child hawking, which he presents as one of the dangerous social practices contributing immensely to the corruption and exploitation of young people.

A competent writer of children's literature must therefore write from the perspective and experiences of the child. This further explains why writing children's literature is far more demanding than many people imagine. Nwahunanya rightly observes that whenever writers of children's literature impose purely adult experiences upon juvenile readers, the resulting works become unsuitable for the target audience. According to him:

We find, for instance, that simply because some of the writers are from backgrounds where horror stories, love and sex stories, and stories of crime and violence are common, they go ahead to write children's stories that reflect and incorporate an unpardonable degree of horror, crime, violence, and sex, without considering the possible impact of such stories on their intended audience. (370)

The implication is that many writers fail to distinguish between adult literature and children's literature. Subjects and themes that may be appropriate for mature readers are often carelessly transferred into books intended for children. Yet the child's mind is still developing and therefore highly vulnerable to harmful influences.

Supporting the argument that children's literature should primarily centre on children, Nwahunanya further maintains that books in which the protagonist is presented merely as a drunkard, criminal, violent individual, or habitual offender should not occupy children's bookshelves unless such behaviour is clearly condemned and punished within the narrative. In other words, where crime or deviant behaviour appears in children's literature, virtue must ultimately triumph over vice.

This principle is evident in *A Journey to Maturity*. Sopuru, the protagonist, allows himself to be negatively influenced by Ikpeama and gradually becomes truant and morally wayward. However, in the end, discipline and virtue prevail as he realizes his mistakes and reforms. Similarly, in *The Strong Desire*, Emeka conspires with criminal gangs to kidnap an innocent boy, Ekene. Eventually, Emeka suffers greatly because of his wicked actions. A child reading the novel naturally learns to avoid evil behaviour in order not to experience the fate suffered by the antagonists. Although the novels contain themes of crime and moral deviation, the authors carefully structure the narratives in such a way that wrongdoing is condemned rather than glorified.

### **3. The Diction of Children's Literature Is Relatively Simple**

Diction refers to the choice and use of words in a literary work. If the writer of children's literature understands that the essence of literature is communication, then he or she must constantly consider whether the language employed is appropriate for the intended audience. For a child to develop interest in literature, the language of the literary work must be sufficiently simple and accessible. When the language is clear and understandable, the child enjoys and appreciates the work better. On the contrary, excessively difficult language acts like a closed door, discouraging the child from further reading.

The simplicity of language in children's literature is therefore extremely important. However, simplicity should not be mistaken for shallowness or complete absence of sophistication. The language should not be so simplistic that it fails to enrich the child intellectually. One important objective of children's literature is to help the child acquire new vocabulary and improve linguistic competence. Consequently, the diction of good children's literature should maintain moderation: simple enough to be understood, yet rich enough to stimulate intellectual growth and vocabulary development.

The language must therefore correspond with the age, educational level, and psychological condition of the expected reader.

### **4. The Plot Is Linear and Devoid of Excessive Complications**

According to Perrine (1978), plot refers to the sequence of incidents and events through which a story is structured. Every plot possesses a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning introduces the characters and the initial conflict, while the middle develops the complications and intensifies the action until the climax is reached. Thereafter, the plot gradually declines towards the denouement where conflicts are resolved.

In some advanced literary works, plots may begin from the middle or even from the end, while earlier events are revealed through flashbacks. Such a narrative technique is known as *in medias res*. Although this technique may enrich sophisticated literary works, it is generally unsuitable for children's literature because it may confuse the child reader and make the storyline difficult to follow.

For this reason, the plot of children's literature is usually chronological, linear, and straightforward. Events are arranged in a simple sequence that enables the child to follow the story easily without unnecessary confusion. The plot should avoid excessive complications, multiple subplots, and complex structural patterns that may overwhelm the inexperienced reader. Nevertheless, the story must still contain suspense, excitement, and occasional surprises; otherwise, it may become dull and uninteresting.

### **5. Characterization Is Usually Direct and the Number of Characters Relatively Few**

Characters are the fictional persons used by writers to tell their stories. In a good literary work, fictional characters symbolically represent real human beings and real-life experiences. The most prominent characters in a literary work are usually referred to as major characters. A major character who struggles against opposition and attracts the sympathy of the audience is known as the protagonist or hero, while the character who opposes the protagonist is the antagonist.

In *The Strong Desire*, for example, Ekene functions as the protagonist because he remains innocent, optimistic, and morally upright. Emeka, who conspires against him, functions as the antagonist. Since both characters play central roles in the development of the story, they qualify as major characters.

In serious literary works, characters are often presented as round characters—that is, fully developed and

psychologically convincing individuals who resemble real human beings. In children's literature, however, especially in folktales, characters are frequently flat and symbolic because the writer's major intention is usually moral instruction. In the folktale of Tortoise and Elephant, for instance, the characters are not developed with psychological complexity. Instead, they represent symbolic traits. Tortoise consistently symbolizes cunningness and deceit, while Elephant represents foolishness or excessive simplicity.

Such characters are often static rather than dynamic. Static characters remain unchanged throughout the story regardless of circumstances, whereas dynamic characters undergo noticeable transformation as events unfold. In F. C. Ogbalu's *Mbediogu*, the animal characters remain consistent in behaviour from beginning to end because they exist primarily to convey moral lessons. If Tortoise is portrayed as cunning at the beginning of the story, it remains cunning throughout the narrative irrespective of changing situations.

Characterization, according to Baldick (2004), refers to the representation of persons in narrative and dramatic works. Writers may employ direct or indirect characterization. Direct characterization occurs when the author openly describes the character's qualities, while indirect characterization requires readers to infer character traits through actions, speech, appearance, and behaviour.

In children's literature, although both methods may be employed, direct characterization is usually preferred because it enhances clarity and comprehension. Young readers may find it difficult to decode highly subtle or complex character presentations. In *My Dream Comes True*, for example, Ginikanwa Gloria Ugochukwu directly describes Arinze and his wife as successful, sincere, honest, and hardworking individuals. The author leaves little room for ambiguity, thereby enabling the child reader to understand the characters easily.

While excessive use of direct characterization may sometimes make a literary work monotonous, it remains highly useful in children's literature because it facilitates understanding among young readers.

Throughout this discussion, emphasis has largely been placed on prose fiction and drama. Poetry, however, remains the third major genre of literature. The relative absence of extensive discussion on poetry in this study does not suggest that poetry is unimportant in children's literature. Rather, children's poetry often differs from prose and drama because it does not always depend heavily on characterization and elaborate moral instruction.

Children's poetry frequently consists of rhymes designed to appeal to the ears of children through rhythm, repetition, sound effects, and simplicity of language. In many cases, such rhymes may not carry deep philosophical meaning, yet children enjoy them because of their musical quality and entertaining nature. Poems such as "Coati-Mundi" and the popular "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" illustrate this tendency. Although some of these poems may contain little substantial meaning, they remain attractive to children because of their rhythmic patterns, simplicity, and harmless content.

It must also be emphasized that illustrations play an important role in children's literature, especially for younger readers. Pictures capture the child's imagination, sustain interest, and encourage continuous reading. Likewise, typography is important. Books intended for beginners should employ bold and easily readable font sizes rather than tiny prints that may discourage reading. Font sizes such as 16 or 18 are often more suitable for early child readers.

## Conclusion

According to Wellek and Warren (1978), art does not merely reproduce life; it also sharpens and interprets it. In a similar manner, T. S. Eliot (1979) observes that:

The fiction that we read affects our behaviour towards our fellow men and affects our patterns of ourselves. When we read of human beings behaving in certain ways, with the approval of the author who gives his benediction to such behaviour, we can be influenced towards behaving in the same way. (14)

Writers of children's literature must therefore be guided by these important observations. Literature goes beyond mere entertainment; it possesses the power to shape attitudes, mould behaviour, and influence society. As Matthew Arnold maintains, literature should help individuals interpret life meaningfully. Consequently, a child's life should be positively transformed through engagement with a literary work.

Any children's literature that fails to communicate moral lessons, positively influence the child, or reflect the experiences and realities of children loses much of its educational and artistic value. Perrine rightly argues that literature which offers nothing beyond amusement possesses little value beyond ordinary recreational activities.

Teachers, whose major responsibilities include moral instruction and intellectual guidance, must therefore be

extremely careful about the kinds of literary works recommended to pupils. Unfortunately, even governmental educational agencies sometimes fail in this responsibility. In many cases, books of poor literary quality containing harmful influences and inappropriate content are recommended for use in primary and junior secondary schools merely to satisfy commercial interests or favour publishers and self-sponsored authors. The unfortunate consequence is that children are continually exposed to substandard literary materials.

If society genuinely desires morally upright, intellectually developed, and socially responsible future generations, then serious attention must be paid to the quality of literature made available to children. Children's literature should remain a powerful instrument for moral instruction, intellectual development, and the preservation of societal values.

### References

- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Thomson Wadsworth, 2005.
- The Flute. Heinemann, 1988.
- Acholonu, Catherine. "Writing and Publishing for Children: Nigerian Children's Literature in English: A Critique." In E. N. Emenyonu (ed.), *Literature and Black Aesthetics*. Heinemann, 1990.
- Baldick, Chris. *Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Eliot, T. S. "Religion and Literature." In *Five Approaches to Literary Criticism*. Pearson, 1979.
- Ginikanwa, Gloria Ugochukwu. *My Dream Comes True*. Greatmen, n.d.
- Kennedy, X. J., Dana Gioia, and Mark Bauerlein. *Handbook of Literary Terms: Literature, Language, Theory*. Pearson, 2009.
- Muller, Gilbert, and John A. Williams. *Literature*. McGraw-Hill, 1985.
- Nnyagu, Uche. *The Deserved Wage*. Pacific, 2011.
- Nnyagu, Uche. *The Disobedient Child*. Pacific, 2010.
- Nnyagu, Uche. *Lizard and Chameleon*. Pacific, 2011.
- Nnyagu, Uche. *Price of Disobedience*. Moorhen, 2008.
- Nnyagu, Uche. *The Strong Desire*. Noble, 2010.
- Nwachukwu, O. Nwachukwu. *A Journey to Maturity*. Basic Steps, 2008.
- Nwahunanya, Chinyere. *Literary Criticism, Critical Theory and Post-colonial African Literature*. Springfield, 2007.
- Roberts, Edgar, and Henry E. Jacobs. *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing*. Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004.