

# A Hermeneutic Reading of Children's Novel and Drama

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## Abstract:

*Children's literature is an umbrella term that includes many genres, discourses, and texts. It is difficult to define the term according to the literary work itself; instead, it can be defined according to the function, target reader, and elements of the work. In other words, a work can be recognized as a children's literary work if it achieves the functions of children's literature. That is to say, children's literature can be defined as a work, with complete literary elements, that is intended to entertain, educate, and motivate children. Like any intellectual human production, either literary or artistic, children's drama and novel require a well-established mechanism of explaining, interpreting, and construing it in order to be well-perceived. The process of reading and understanding any artistic-literary work not only necessitates perceiving the literal meaning of the text, but also it requires understanding its deeper meaning as well. Thus, the present paper aims at defining and analyzing the main elements of children's novel and drama in terms of hermeneutics theory. Born in the womb of theology, mutated as a philosophy to discuss and analyze all kinds of texts either religious or secular, hermeneutics has emanated as one of the most effective intellectual practices which is able to interpret any human activity due to its comprehensivity and logical approach. The main purpose of applying hermeneutics theory to children's novel and drama is to avoid telling and teaching "poisonous literature" to children as it bears two interpretations: the first is simple and clear, whereas the second is negative and mentally, psychologically, and morally destructive.*

**Key Words:** Hermeneutics, Children's Literature, Children's Novel and Drama, Poisonous Children's Literature

It is difficult to define children's literature according to the literary work itself; instead, it can be defined according to the function and elements of the work. In other words, a work can be defined as a literary-child work if it achieves the functions of children's literature. These functions are "entertainment," "learning," and "motivation" (Stoodt 110). However, achieving these functions is not the only standard to categorize the work as children's literary work because it must include the elements adult literature, such as plot, themes, characters, etc. To put it another way, children's literature can be defined as a work, with complete literary element, that is intended to entertain, educate, and motivate children. Here, it is worth mentioning that if the work is intended to entertain, educate, and motivate children; however, it does not imply the literary elements, it can be described as *children's* discourse.

Children's literature is a subclass of children's discourse which includes all the educational and entertaining works that are presented to children with or without typical-literary elements. Children discourse includes educational materials and videos, animations movies, children's TV shows, drawing books, comics, etc. However, children's literature can be categorized as children's discourse but not vice versa.

To read and understand a children's literary work, it is necessary to define and investigate some important elements. Some of these elements exist within adult's literature, whereas others do not. Here, it is worth mentioning that unlike adults' literature that is analyzed on the academic and critical level, children's literature is analyzed according to both academic and pedagogical levels. The analysis of children's drama and novel is mainly based on the objectives of children's literature as the analysis must highlight and elaborate the objectives of the work: to entertain,

to learn, and to motivate. That is why, child's novel and drama must be analyzed, read, and discussed according to both academic and pedagogical levels.

Hermeneutics is the art of understanding and interpreting any human-intellectual work. Hermeneutics' origin goes back to the Age of Greeks; however, it developed and gained its significance as a theological theory that aims at interpreting and analyzing religious texts. Recently, the term gained its new version through modern hermeneutics that is mainly intended to interpret and analyze secular texts. Here, the Egyptian scholar Mohamed Enani (1939-2023) lists three functions of modern hermeneutics: 1) explaining the text to remove ambiguity; 2) "Construing the meaning" is to make an assumption based on "evidence;" 3) Illustration means to shed light on certain points in order to reach the accurate understanding of the text (*A Hermeneutic Reading of Modern Visual Poetry*, Sokar 22).

In children's novel and drama, it is necessary to give a full hermeneutic analysis of the text as children's works of literature have a significance role in making up children's mentality, psychology, and morals. Therefore, children's discourse, namely children literature must be put under a comprehensive method and strategy of understanding and analyzing the text in order to avoid presenting "poisonous" discourses for children.

In children's novel and drama, it is necessary to apply the main principles of literary hermeneutics in order to understand the main ideas and elements of the work. Literary hermeneutics is a branch of general hermeneutics that aims at clarifying and analyzing the implicit and explicit meaning of the literary work. Here, Sokar mentions:

Literary hermeneutics not only aims to interpret the text, but also to judge, investigate and search for the hidden meaning. Thus, there are some steps and rules which achieve the reasonable understanding. First, the reader has to

investigate the historical circumstances of the text in order to understand the unseen world behind the text. Moreover, the reader has to create a reconstruction of the historical situation of the author and recipients of the text. For example, the reader's point of view of Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* may change from considering it a social novel into a political one. If the reader takes into consideration the era in which the novel was written during the industrial revolution and how children were used as possessions besides the absence of security, his understanding of the novel will ultimately change (Sokar, *A Hermeneutic Reading of Modern Visual Poetry* 50).

Here, it is worth mentioning that it is necessary to apply certain hermeneutic strategies for investigating children's discourse for avoiding introducing poisonous intellectual material for children.

One of the main principles of literary hermeneutics that must be applied to children's novel in drama is "authorial intent" (Wilke 5). Authorial intent is a Schleiermacherian philosophical principle of hermeneutics which investigates the author's intention for writing through tracking his behavior, philosophy, political attitudes, religious belief, doctrine, insights, and reasons for writing. (Demeterio 3). "Authorial intent" asserts that the reader has to search beyond the written words in order to get the intended meaning of the text. This meaning can be conveyed through the author's personal behaviors, philosophy, political attitudes, and religious doctrine.

After discussing the term, "authorial intent" it is necessary to shed light on the types of meanings of children's novels and drama: explicit and implicit meanings. The explicit meaning is the clear and direct meaning which is represented by the text itself and by the relation between its entire parts without taking any other outer elements into consideration. The implicit meaning is hidden meaning that cannot be

easily recognized by the reader. Sometimes, the author introduces the meaning he wants to convey in a hidden way for avoiding criticism. Thus, many works has “double meaning” as the following describes:

One of the most controversial issues of children’s literature is the double meaning of the literary work. Some works of children’s literature introduces what can be describes as a “poisonous” children literature. On the surface level, some works of children’s literature introduce a simple tale with a simple language. However, on the deeper level, these works may imply some hidden ideas such as racism, sexuality and violence. (Sokar, *Stereotypes, Racism and Cultural Bias in Children’s Literature 2*)

Author’s ideological and cultural backgrounds are very necessary element in reading any literary work, especially in case of children’s novel and drama. Sometimes, authors aim at conveying hidden messages in their works as they want to promote a certain doctrine, ideology, or philosophy. In this regard, to perceive the hidden meaning of the author it is necessary to apply the hermeneutic approach “Part-whole/whole-part.” Part-whole/whole-part relationship is another important hermeneutic principle whose function is to relate a work by an author to another by the same author in order to make a full understanding of his point of view. (Marino and Bley-Vroman130) Consequently, it is necessary to define the author of the work before presenting any discourse to children. Children’s novels and plays are very sensitive material as they make up children’s mentality, psychology, and morality.

Reading symbols is another important rule for literary hermeneutics (Bourgeois 93). Symbols are a very necessary element for understanding children’s discourse, especially novel and drama. For example, the use of rainbow slogan in Disney’s works and products is totally rejected in many conservative societies. Other

children's novels and plays are mainly intended to children in order to spread the ideas of LGBT communities either directly or indirectly. Thus, symbols like "rainbow" must be hermeneutically investigated for defining the real purpose of using the symbol.

Setting is a very important element of any literary work; it may reveal many implications about the main ideas of the work. Generally, setting, in literature, is the location and time frame in which the actions take place. In children's literature, setting must be appropriate to children's mentality and psychology. It is not acceptable to use the Shakespearean's settings such as gloomy places, scary setting, and haunted houses. In addition, the Gothic settings are not acceptable to be presented to children. These Gothic settings raise the feelings of fear and horror for children. Thus, it must be avoided in any children's novel and paly.

In terms of hermeneutics, the themes of the children's novel and drama are designed according to the objectives of children's literature. In other words, as children's literature aims to entertain, motivate and educate children, its themes must cover these objectives. Consequently, children's literature's themes must include the themes of love, friendship, patriotism, nature, family, and gaining knowledge. On the other hand, children's novel and drama must avoid the unpleasant themes, such as violence, sexuality, stereotyping, and racism:

Then she took the heart and liver of  
the little girl, and she stewed them  
and brought them into the house for  
supper. The husband tasted them and

shook his head. He said they tasted very strangely. She gave some to the little boy, but he would not eat. She tried to force him, but he refused, and ran out into the garden, and took up his little sister, and put her in a box, and buried the box under a rose-tree; and everyday he went to the tree and wept, till his tears ran down on the box. (Jacobs17)

In the above mentioned lines, the author presents the themes of death, murder, and violence. These inappropriate themes are introduced through expressions that may affect children's psychology and morals. In this regard, applying the hermeneutic principles to such work will prove its inappropriateness for children either on the literary level or the pedagogical level.

In adult literature, "character sketch" and "character psychoanalysis" are very important elements for understanding and perceiving the literary text. Here, the literary work uses flat or round character either this character is major and round. On the contrary, children's literature must avoid using round characters as children's mentality are not able perceive the development of the round characters. In addition, it is necessary to avoid using minor characters as they mislead and disturb children's concentration which is mainly focused on the protagonist (his idol or motivator) or the main characters.

In terms of hermeneutics, the visual element in children's novel and drama is a part and parcel of the understanding of the work. In the written texts, children can

perceive the meaning through the illustrations added to the text (Sokar, *A Hermeneutic Reading* 20). These visual elements motivate and strengthen the process of reading for children. However, some illustrated works raises doubts about the objectives of the literary work itself. In other words, some illustrated works of children, such as *Little Black Sambo* elaborates sense of racism and stereotyping that are not found in the original non-illustrated work:

Whereas the plot of the tale narrates a story of an ordinary Indian boy, the illustrations of the work raises many doubts about the work's objectives and ideas. On the one hand, the protagonist of the tale may be considered the first black protagonist in children's literature. On the other hand, according to critics of the time, and the book is praised for positively portraying black characters in both text and illustrations, especially in comparison to books of the time that depicted blacks as simple and uncivilised. However, in the mid-twentieth century, the book was accused of racism since the characters' names were racist slurs for dark-skinned people, and the pictures were in the pickaninny style, as Langston Hughes called it (Sokar, *Stereotypes, Racism and Cultural Bias* 3).

Accordingly, the visual element in children's novel and drama has a significant hermeneutical role in understanding and interpreting the verbal element as it may assert the textual meaning or change the explicit meaning perceived through the non-illustrated work.

In terms of both hermeneutics and pedagogy, children's novel and drama must achieve their functions of entertainment, motivation, and learning. Learning can be achieved through many aspects that can be understood in implicit-hermeneutical approaches. In children's novel and drama, learning can be achieved through



experience. Experience in children literature can be perceived through cognition as the following excerpt from the play of *The Wise Fool* elaborates:

*Scene One: Market Day*

Aziz: **Donkeys** for sale! Get your donkey here! Pull your cart! Plough your field! Free bag of **carrots!**

One or two of the SHOPPERS look at the donkeys stroking and patting them or looking at their teeth. *Naserddin enters carrying a big bag.*

(Farmer 87)

In this play, children perceive new life experiences they never experienced such as being in a market. Moreover, children know new vegetables, such as carrot. In addition, many children do not live in an environment in which a donkey lives. Thus, children's plays open children's imagination to new experiences they never lived. In addition, children's novels and drama have a great significance in teaching vocabulary through activation. Activation is based on making connections between similar and overlapped concepts of the language such as making a hierarchically relation between words (Leong et. al. 9). Here, it is worth mentioning that activation mainly depends on applying the language through making it more practical rather than theoretical. In other words, the teacher uses novels and plays enhance language production for students. In teaching novels and plays, the main part of the process of activation implies storytelling for "generating" new words and expression. Consequently, students will be able to produce vocabulary in real-life situations.

Ethics and values are very important elements in children's novel and drama. In terms of both hermeneutics and pedagogy, children's literature must be an important source for teaching ethics. That is why, it is necessary to define each literary and pedagogical element of the work for avoiding poisonous ideas that do

not fit children. For example, it is not acceptable to read or teach the original story of *Rapunzel* to children as it implies ideas about adultery and cheating. Here, adopting the hermeneutic principles to such works can help to define the unpleasant expressions and ideas that can be euphemized through substitution or omission.

In terms of pedagogy, children's novel and drama are considered rich and valuable source for teaching history for children. However, in terms of hermeneutics, it is necessary to investigate every information to avoid the poisonous history which is incorrectly made up by the author's ideology and doctoring.

Children's literature has motivational functions because it is an authentic source for learning and entertainment. On reading a novel or a play, a child reads an experience shared with a many adults and children of the target language culture, with variety of forms, contents, and ideas. Thus, children's novels and plays are necessary source of motivation through cognition.

### **Conclusion:**

To sum up, children's discourse, namely novel and drama is a very sensitive material that must be put under a comprehensive and logic approach of understanding. Hermeneutics has the ability to read and understand children's novel and drama due to its ability to touch and penetrate each literary or pedagogical element of the work. Firstly, it is necessary to define and investigate the author's "authorial intent" which reveals his ideology, cultural background, ethics, philosophy, and doctrine. Secondly, the work's symbols reveal many features about the implicit meaning of the text. Thirdly, it is necessary to investigate the literary devices such as setting, themes, and characters in a hermeneutic way in order to testify their appropriateness for children. Fourthly, one of the most hermeneutical elements in children's novel and drama is the pedagogical hermeneutics which includes the teachings that a novel or a play introduce. These teachings include

vocabulary, experiences, motivation, and, moralities. As a final point, this paper suggests further studies that apply many psychological, pedagogical, and philosophical theories to children's novel and drama for testifying the impact of the literary works on children.

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### قراءة هيرمينوطيقية لرواية ومسرح الطفل

د. محمود معوض سكر

المستخلص:

من الصعب الوصول لتعريف شامل ودقيق لأدب الطفل لتضمنه العديد من الأنشطة الأدبية المتشابهة والغير مكتملة أحياناً. لذا يمكن تعريف أدب الطفل طبقاً لأهداف العمل الأدبي

و القارئ المستهدف وكذلك عناصر العمل الأدبي. ومن هنا يمكن تعريف أدب الطفل بأنه عملاً أدبياً مكتمل العناصر الأدبية يهدف الي تعليم و تسلية وتحفيز الطفل. وكأي عمل إبداعي سواءً أن كان أدبياً أو فنياً, تتطلب رواية ومسرح الطفل آلية رصينةً وشاملة من أجل تفسير وتحليل وشرح وفهم واستيعاب العمل الأدبي. و تتطلب هذه العملية المعقدة و المتشابكة دراية كاملة بالمعني القريب و المعني البعيد للنص. ولهذا تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى تحديد وتحليل العناصر الرئيسية لرواية ومسرح الطفل طبقاً لعناصر وأسس نظرية التفسير "الهيرمينوطيقا" التي وُلدت و بدأت لتفسير اللاهوت ثم تحورت كفلسفة لمناقشة وتحليل جميع أنواع النصوص سواءً كانت دينية أو دنيوية، لينتهي بها المطاف بأن تصبح واحدة من أكثر النظريات و الفنون الفكرية فاعلية لقدرتها على تفسير أي نشاط بشري فكري نظراً لشموليتها

ومنهجها المنطقي. و الغرض الأساسي من تطبيق  
نظرية الهيرمينوطيقا على روايات الأطفال و  
مسرحياتهم هو تجنب سرد وتدریس ما يعرف  
"بالأدب السام" للأطفال والذي يحمل معنيين:  
الأول هو المعنى القريب البسيط الواضح  
والملائم للطفل، والثاني هو المعنى البعيد  
الضمني والذي يحمل في طياته الكثير من  
أفكار العنف و الجنس و العنصرية.

### **الكلمات المفتاحية:**

أدب الطفل - مسرح الطفل - رواية الطفل -  
" الهيرمينوطيقا " - أدب الطفل السام