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READER-RESPONSE, A VITAL DEVICE IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Ghandehari SHAGHAYEGH*

Abstract

An issue rarely questioned is the validity and reliability of adults' responses to children's literature, as they feel they have every right to criticize books for children. When an author such as Roald Dahl faces a diversity of different responses on his works, who was very popular with children but strongly opposed by several adults, the question takes a new turn. The reasons for this are discussed in this paper, including identification of children with the child protagonists of stories written for them and communicating with the story, whereas adults naturally fail to do the same in several circumstances. Roald Dahl alone, as a children's author, proves that children are the touchstone for evaluating works written for them, distinguishing the factual and fictional elements during the reading process.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Actual Reader, Implied Reader, Literary Criticism, Reader-response, Roald Dahl.

Introduction

It has always been common for children's books to be judged and evaluated by adults; whether it is literary critics, parents, the school authorities and the librarians. In fact this issue has a historical background and its appropriateness has never been really questioned or seen a second preview. But the point is; to what extent are the evaluations and criticisms done by such adults reliable; and can they be trusted no matter what? As a matter of fact, as long as the adults' views does not contrast with the original audience of the work- children themselves- maybe this could be justified and accepted without facing any debate and serious controversy. But obviously this is not always the case and therefore the validity of adults' criticism and judgment has a high potential to be questioned in different circumstances. Such issues were my concerns; especially regarding the position of the writer I had in mind; Roald Dahl. He faced diverse controversial criticism during his lifetime. On one hand children loved his work and proved his popularity and on the other hand, several authorities banned his books from school libraries; claiming that they have a negative impact on children.

Problem Statement

A problem is frequently raised in children's literature which has so far seen controversial discussions without leading to a final agreement. To be precisely clear, the author whose works met serious debate and contrasting oppositions between children on one hand and adults on the other hand are in mind. The problem is; each literary work is created for a certain group of readers and as a result this specific group should be the most reliable reference

* M.A. English Literature, Literary Critic & Professional Translator.

for judging, evaluating and criticizing the work in one way or another. So how come while this fact is generally true, in the case of children's literature this prominent point is missed and children's obvious right to review and evaluate their works is denied? Why do adults prefer to offer their comments on a book which is essentially not written for them at all without considering the actual and realistic perspectives of the real readers whom the author has created the work for in the first place? In other words, while children themselves are truly the actual, real and intended audience of a book written for them, why do so many different groups of adults – critics, parents, librarians and school authorities- evaluate books that essentially do not belong to them and based on their own opinions, further on decide whether the book can be read by a kid or not? How come the children's basic role in giving a comment is totally ignored and no one even wants to trust the children's instincts?

Research Question

Why are children- as the real, implied, intended and actual readers- of a story book written for them are deprived of their own right for speaking about the work and discussing their own perceptions and overall understandings? And how come the adults' views in not questioned and relied on; even at times when it apparently shows strong contradiction with children's views?

Aim

The purpose of the present research was to prove the reliability of children's perception when discussing a literary work. The present research was an attempt to reveal how children identify the literary elements- such as fantasy, magic and humor- utilized by an author to create a great work while they understand all along that this is a story and it does not happen in real life. The reader-response theory which has its base on the readers of different kinds, was the literary device used for reaching this purpose; added to the questionnaires designed for achieving this goal in the depth of questions asked from children about three specific fictions by Roald Dahl; "Matilda", "Danny the Champion of the World" and "The Witches".

Reader-Response Theory

The focus of this literary theory is on "the reader" (the "audience") and how he experiences and receives a literary work; a defining difference with other theories that are based either on the author or the content and the form of the work. In here the reader has an exclusive role in creating the meaning and therefore the text only exists when there is a reader and once these two- text and reader- join and unite together, the text finds a new life of its own. The modern reader-response criticism began in the 1960s, particularly in works by Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Hans-Robert Jauss, Roland Barthes and others. One of the major pioneers was I.A. Richards who showed his interest in the reading process in 1920s. Then Louise Rosenblatt declared that there is no particular way to receive a work in "Literature as Exploration" (1938). As a literary theory, it emphasizes that literature is a performing art and so the reader creates his/her own exclusive performance which directly relates to the text. Iser believed that the reading process is constantly subjective, and in "The Implied Reader"(1978) he observes reading a dialectical process between the reader and text. However Jauss argues that parameters such as time, previous assumptions and background shape a reader's aesthetic experience.

Why the Reader-Response Theory

My study depicts the contracting views on a children's author between two major groups; children as the actual and intended readers on one hand, and adult figures as authorities on the other hand. In this case, the most appropriate literary device for judging Dahl's writings for children is the reader-response approach.

When an author creates a literary work, he has a particular group of readers in mind In this research proving the true position of Roald Dahl in children's literature demanded the honest

and genuine opinions of the main readers; children themselves. In this respect, the sole theory which highlights the prominence of the "reader" was the reader-response theory; while other approaches mostly emphasis on the role of the "text" as the sole determiner of the meaning. This reason alone proved the vital and unique role of the reader-response theory and its high potential for evaluating a literary work. As I intended to prove "the validity of the responses of the actual readers of a work"; I had no other choice but to use this literary device to show how children's response towards the works written for them is truly reliable despite adults' objections. Considering the literary theories, I could base my discussion about the reliability of children- as readers- merely through this theory. For this research I needed children's original views, responses, understandings and their overall role in reading a text meant for them. Otherwise how could I create a solid discussion and compare adults' responses versus children's responses to a work created for children.

Application of Reader-Response Theory in Children's Literature

Critics have applied the reader-response theory in children's books; but in most observed cases; they have simply applied it to evaluate one work and in a short discussion; therefore this theory has rarely been applied in a comprehensive and thorough manner for evaluating a children's author, covering at least a few of his titles and the overall response he received for his works. In fact it seems that children have not yet earned their deserved position and right for expressing their views about a book written for them. This huge gap can be observed by the number of stories which have directly received the responses of children. And when this is compared to works surveyed and analyzed within other literary grounds, the gap becomes clearer.

Reading Roald Dahl through the Reader-Response Theory

Even the critics who praised Roald Dahl's books during his lifetime and admitted to his high potential in penetrating deeply into children's hearts did not use the reader-response as their device. None of such critics applied the reader-response theory to his children's books and reviewed it from the reader's perspective. There were hints on his popularity and how children loved him and the books he wrote, and how children understood the devices he used in his stories to make it appealing for children; still they never based their literary analysis on a comprehensive and thorough reader-response approach. As for the critics who harshly criticized Dahl's books and negated his place, even they didn't try to base the grounds of their discussions on children's responses; which if they actually had; they might have somehow and in certain cases proved their point. Yet when the "readers" are missed out all along, all such discussions become an adult issue and it does not resolve to a specific point.

Therefore as far as I am really aware, it seems that my literary research on Roald Dahl, carried out by using a literary approach for analysis, was maybe among the first serious works done on his literary contributions. I had a hard time finding any sort of resources about Dahl; be it in books, articles, journals, the web or whatsoever. Still I tried to make the most out of any possible source which even hinted to his name or tracked down his works in any dimension

Research Plan and Methodology

In this study I intended to survey Roald Dahl's books from the reader's point of view; that is specifically children. After I reviewed both the quantitative and qualitative research methods, I realized that a subtle combination of both methods will make my survey comprehensive and cover significant issues of concern. I started my work historically; I closely read the three novel of Roald Dahl several times, then I surveyed every single review, literary criticism, plain comment, and even interviews done with Roald Dahl about these titles and all the debates they raised. For this purpose I had to use the historical method; go through the library databases, journals, children's monthly journals and any sort of press or book that reflected the writings of Roald Dahl. Reading through all these materials gave me clues about how I should continue my path. I then knew that I have to use the qualitative research method

in order to read these fictions in the form of literary criticism. Therefore at this stage I had to define the most comprehensive literary theory; which regarding my case was the reader-response theory. I needed this theory as my device in order to approach readers' actual and true responses. So while I studied a number of the reader-response theorists, it crossed my mind that designing questionnaires for the readers will help me find my way in the labyrinth of this never-ending path. Among the theorists, I decided to integrate the major ideas of Iser and Jauss. But as for the questionnaires, they were the tools of quantitative research methodology which would support my argument and were in fact irreplaceable. As a result I had to combine both elements of the qualitative and quantitative research methods in a way that would function in my work.

Sample

Obviously the questionnaires had to be filled in by children and young adults who had already read the three novels; "Matilda", "the Witches" and "Danny the Champion of the World". I read children's simple books reviews in various sources in order to have a clue about how to design my questions. I paid special attention to the negative features discussed about these stories by some critics, adults and parents. The overall of these features led me through making up each single question with a specific purpose; to be analyzed through the reader-response. Most of the questions needed explanation in one way or another and so children's views could be clearly seen in them. One of my translation colleagues held storytelling classes for a few schools; and she told me the students of these secondary schools are fans of Roald Dahl's books. The students were aged in average 12-14. She mentioned that they have read most of his books and know him as an author. This alone was an amazing phenomenon in Iran; for the children to know a foreign author so well. I discussed my research with her and she accepted to distribute my questionnaires among readers of Dahl's books. In average 34 students who had read some of his books answered all the 4 designed questionnaires. "Matilda" was the most popular book and 39 students answered the 10 asked questions very carefully. As for "the Witches", it received 34 filled in questionnaires for the 8 designed key questions, but "Danny the Champion of the World" was apparently less known in these 3 schools and therefore only 32 students answered the 8 planned questions. The fourth set of questionnaires entitled as "common questions" covered 10 other unasked question concerning Roald Dahl and his works.

Questionnaires

My major aim in proposing some specific and general questions in the form of a questionnaire to the young adults was to observe and consider to what extent their responses and rate of perception are valid, to what extent they are able to communicate with these works, and how far these responses can be trusted. In addition, one of the major intentions was to find out whether they were close enough to understanding the limits of a story, make distinction between factual, fictional and fantastic elements and evaluate a story according to the basic principles of children's literature as far as their own limited knowledge allows them to do so; without basing their evaluation on any kind of prejudice, sheer subjectivity or referring to the so-called principal principles of literary criticism. Then every single question was analyzed, the common and contrasting views were discussed and the similarity and differences of children's response, the diversity of their perception and level of understanding was surveyed based on the purpose of the question initially designed and how they could be approached from the framework of the reader-response theory.

Brief Report

It was surprising to me how children were such clever and keen "readers"; an issue most often underestimated by parents and adult authorities. Through the overall responses of these young adults, it was shown that children had awareness and a clear sense of distinction for distinguishing different elements of a story. They even showed that they knew how to deal with the wide variety of elements, were quite conscious of what should be taken seriously and what is used as a means for making the story more funny and amusing.

Validation

The response of the readers to the designed questionnaires is considered a valid criterion in examining the range and domain of children's perceptions, their common insights, and understanding about a certain book. These questionnaires also reveal and determine the most popular elements of a story for children as readers. Most readers have directly or indirectly admitted that they really enjoyed all the funny parts of the book and all the humor, magic and fantasy was amusing to them. This issue makes it clear that even the young readers were still quite conscious enough to perceive that these features can be easily distinguished as story elements at the service of the created story. The interesting point was that most often they pointed to the subtle and humane issues which were somehow concealed in the depth of the hidden layers of the story; without being asked about it and their statements makes it clear that these realizations were just like a kind of discovery to them. They somehow at certain points identified themselves with the child-protagonist and analyzed his behavior in different occasions. Then a brief comparison between these two groups, children and adults, supports the reliability of children's responses and show the facts for itself. There was an undeniable fact traced throughout the responses of children; children are absolutely the best touchstone for evaluating any works written for them. A few examples will elaborate this issue; adults were totally against "The Witches" and this book was banned from school library shelves for quite a long time due to its use of black magic, portraying a negative image of witches and so on. Yet most of the respondents had claimed that they knew there is not such thing as witches and Dahl had meant to tell them other points through these imaginary creatures. They believed that Dahl had made up these witches to beware them of the strangers, to be careful, not to be fooled easily and etc. They even had mentioned that the boy's grandmother was somehow extraordinary and they do not think such a character would exist in real life. As for "Matilda" which was highly opposed for depicting the school authorities so negatively, besides giving a very nasty picture of parents, the children's views were quite interesting. Most of the readers had said though they truly hated Miss Trunchbull, but they believed such horrible people rarely exist at all; especially in schools. This issue was repeated by many of the respondents. Though children suggested that Matilda's parents were very terrible, they hoped such characters and parents would not be real. In between their answers, some readers had somehow pointed to the exaggerations and how they realized that the author intended to amuse them. Also, the study of responses given on "Danny, the Champion of the World" most of the respondents admitted that they wished to be in Danny's place and experience such wonderful adventures. They wanted to be just like Danny and fulfill their parent's wishes so bravely. The readers believed since Danny constantly fulfilled his father's wishes and rescued him just in time when he was caught, he was called the champion.

Findings and Conclusion

Children usually do not get a chance to propose their opinions on the works written for them. Even if this happens, it is mostly taken for granted and rarely does anyone pay any credit to children's judgment. Through the reader-response criticism, the way is paved for this realization. The responses offered by young adults and children in the questionnaires, reveals the rate of conflict between adults and children. Since adult figures were not meant to read the created work in the first place, and the world created by the author differs a lot from their own, such debates occur and the misunderstandings and accusations of adults show themselves. But as proved, the adults are not creditable for evaluating children's books, because they are not its audience and the most they can do, is judge a children's story by relating it to their own experience and knowledge. While a child is absorbed in the created world of a story-book, he is quite aware that a story is always a story, no matter how realistic it appears or how ideal it seems. Children proved that they can fall into the imaginary world of the writer without losing their sense of realization. In fact children can let their imaginations get over them and take them anywhere, and as they enjoy their journey in the created world, they are aware that the writer

has created a story to amuse them. Therefore children and young adults can easily identify themselves with the imaginary protagonist and live with him/her all through the story, but the adults can't. This lack of identification leads to lack of communication and so the adults feel that they just have to protect children from all the imaginary stuff in order to keep him safe.

What is more, just as adults cannot offer valid and reliable responses to the works written for children, the same issue is true if the vice versa occurs. Children can never communicate with a story written for adults and even if they perceive anything out of it, their analysis and perception is misleading and lacks crucial points.

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