

Rhetoric as Style in Children's Literature: A Study of Three Selected Storybooks

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Abstract

In children's storybooks, the essence of rhetoric is to persuade the reader and to pass across the cultural dialectics of the text to the reader through the message. Therefore, for the works of writers to receive wide acceptance of children audience, they must be interesting, clear, persuasive, and memorable so that the reader will strive to understand, believe, and remember the ideas the work communicates. In order to fulfil these obligations, the work of authors must have an appropriate and clear argument to support the text, as well as a logical, progressive and effective style of presentation of ideas. These informed the necessity to investigate rhetorical features in three selected storybooks meant for children of different age groups. From the study, it was found that author's point of view has a significant effect on the story's voice and on the type of information given to the reader. Metonymy as a figure of speech was used to establish that the status of the king is more important than

the name. It was recommended, therefore, that authors should employ rhetorical devices such as deviations and authors' choice of words in order to achieve persuasive rhetoric and also to foreground the setting of the story. Authors should also adopt the third person omniscient point of view since it is more effective in expressing the minds of characters in children's storybooks. Finally, figures of speech such as simile, metaphor and metonymy are useful in heightening the effect of language in children's storybooks.

Key words: Rhetoric, Stylistic, Children's Literature, storybook.

Introduction

Children's literature is a literary genre which caters for the interest of children. It is a material written and produced for the information or entertainment of children and young adults who are still under some parental or guardian's control. Children's literature covers books published for children who are not yet interested in adult literature. This definition cannot be said to be adequate, owing to the fact that an all-inclusive definition of children's literature is yet to be conceived. Authorities have attempted defining children's literature using parametres such as size of texts, content of texts, author's intention, language of presentation, subject-matter treated in the text and characterisation. Hence, it has been variously characterised

as books written for children, books chosen for children, books written by children and books chosen by children.

Townsend (1990:60) defines children's literature as "... all works of imagination which are transmitted primarily by means of the written word or spoken narrative, which is novels: stories and poetry with the addition of those works of non-fiction which by their quality of style or insight may be said to offer experience of a literary nature." The attempt to define children's literature becomes more problematic and more confusing with the fact that some books meant for adult literature are read by children and vice versa, (Townsend, 1990:61; Oberstein, 1996:17). Such books as *Oliver Twist*, *Animal Farm*, *Things Fall Apart* and *David Copperfield* were not intended for children but are read by both children and adults. Studies have shown that children's artistic ability reflects two main factors which are physical growth and cognitive development. These two factors must first be understood to effectively analyse and interpret the process of humans' artistic progress. This is the submission of cognitive psychology on children's artistic dexterity.

Scholars all over the world such as Oberstein (1996), Huck (2001), Chapleau (2004), Nodelman and Reimer (2008) and Jarrar (2010) have argued that most part of the history of children's literature was inherently conservative in its didactic approach to instilling proper behaviour in

children. In her introduction, Butler (1980: 9) asserts that "Without the help of adults, a baby or a small child has no chance at all of discovering books, of starting on the road to that unique association with the printed world which the mature reader knows and loves." Based on this premise, Smith (1990: 160) emphasises that "Books for Children are in many ways the most important books in the world." Similarly, cognitive psychologists have always stressed the importance of understanding the structure of language in the process of beginning to read a composed text or in discourse in a language repertoire. Hence Bruning, Schraw and Ronning (1995: 241) stress that "Children's knowledge about the highest level of language structure - discourse - also is vital to their learning to read."

Books have always been a source of information, comfort and pleasure to the people who know how to use them. Children are better informed about the world around them through information in books. They acquire knowledge about their environment and how to adapt to it, and the norms and values of their societies through lessons in stories. Also, books have been adjudged as a good comforter, considering the hypothetical instances in books and counselling messages in books which have always been a therapy to many a reader in discomforting circumstances. The pleasurable messages and stories in information and storybooks are a soothing balm to the battered and

disenchanted hearts of readers. There have been cases of people having their psychological problems solved after reading some books. All these add up to the invaluable benefits of books and indeed, literature to children. Children's literature also provides ample opportunities for children to understand other people's culture and values. In a country like Nigeria where there are diverse ethnic and cultural groups, it affords the child easy opportunities for national orientation, integration and unity. Hence Odejide and Sybil (1982) remark that:

Literature is acknowledged as a rich source for helping children to clarify their own values, understand themselves, examine and appreciate the complexity of the world about them and of human relations. In this respect "regional fiction" is invaluable because it gives pictures of child life in particular areas of the world by reflecting the way people live, the circumstances and situations that determine how they live, their customs and feelings, and the changes that are taking place in their society. It also sheds light on their cultural expectations, the roles each person played in the traditional society and is expected to play in a modern one. This, in part, explains the growing interest in literature across cultures.

Most books meant for children are usually written in simple language, published in large print sizes and letters, and have relevant illustrations to underscore the points

being made. Books for older children always have fewer illustrations and increasingly complex language and not too large prints. In children's literary texts, authors have messages to pass across to readers through the use of language. For children to decipher the message in the text, they need to acquire the reading skills in the language of the text. Discussing the prerequisites for learning to read by children, Bruning et al (1995:242) stress that:

Children's language capacities are a tremendous resource for literacy. Becoming literate, however, requires them also to develop their metalinguistic capacities—knowledge about the use of print, how print represents sounds, how words are formed, how sentences are put together and how sentences become stories or reports. Literacy both requires and enhances readers' knowledge about the abstract properties of language.

Language of children's literature, according to Buttler (1980: 151), should be reduced to “the flat, graded-vocabulary utterances of many modern retellings”, so that children will not be pre-occupied with such strange words and structures that can discourage them. Writers should be guided by these two words in writing for children: dignity and simplicity. If these words guide writers, there would not be the need for wordlist or glossary at the end of some storybooks for children. Such a glossary is a distraction to

the continuous flow of reading. This is more so in a second language context. In a mother language situation, the difficulty of transiting between writing for children and writing for adults is more controlled. This is why Smith (1990: 62) had it that “learning to read ... is not at all difficult if the language is already known or understood through the ear. What is extremely difficult is to learn a new language and to learn the art of reading at the same time.” The best way to make it possible is through simplicity of language in consonance with other features such as quality illustrations and good narrative structures.

Review of Related Literature

Rhetoric is conceived as the art of using language to communicate effectively. Scholars in rhetoric therefore investigate the art of using language for effective communication through semiotic and stylistic features. According to Nöth (1990: 338), rhetoric is the ancient art of persuasion. When rhetoric was conceived by the classical rhetoricians such as Aristotle, Cicero, Quintillion and St. Augustine, its essence was purely for persuasion; hence a Roman rhetorician, Cicero, defines rhetoric as “speech designed to persuade”. Aristotle also defines rhetoric as “the faculty of discovering the persuasive means available in a given case” (Burke, 1962). Aristotle identifies three kinds of rhetoric which are: deliberative, forensic or

judicial and demonstrative or epideictic rhetoric. According to Nöth (1990: 338), ancient rhetoric included stylistics in the branch of elocution. Nöth (1990) further asserts that in the traditional sense, three styles were identified: the lofty or sublime, the middle or common, and the plain style. He clarifies further that ancient stylistics comprises the whole sphere of *elocutio*, in particular, the rhetorical ornaments (*ornatus*) of tropes and figures. Significantly, these are now often referred to as stylistic figures.

For over 2000 years, and even up till the 19th century, rhetoric as a principle of pedagogy and learning was the centre of western education (Aull, 2015). In the twentieth century, the emphasis shifted from the speaker or writer to the reader (Aull, 2015). The essence of this shift could be traced to the fact that rhetoric was no longer a performing art. It became a productive art. According to Chandler (2007: 123), in contemporary trend, rhetorical forms are deeply involved in the shaping of realities through the inseparable use of form and content. Both form and content constitute semiotic elements which help to decode signs. These signs, in rhetoric, are embedded in rhetorical tropes. Chandler (2007: 124) remarks that tropes may be essential to understanding if interpreted "as a process of rendering the unfamiliar more familiar." Chandler (2007) further adds that whichever way tropes

are defined, the conventions of figurative language constitute a rhetorical code.

In children's storybooks, the essence of rhetoric is to persuade the reader and passed across the cultural dialectics to the reader. An appropriate literary text for children goes beyond writing a story with a good theme and beautiful illustrations. This is because every writer intends that their work be read by children who can reason independently especially children whose thinking faculties are undergoing development. Children readers do not make the same mental connections as writers. They do not see the world exactly as writers do. Therefore, for the works of writers to receive wide acceptance, in particular, by the children audience, they must be interesting, clear, persuasive, and memorable so that the reader will strive to understand, believe, and remember the ideas the work communicates. In order to fulfil these obligations, the work of authors must have an appropriate and clear argument to support the text, as well as a logical, progressive and effective style of presentation of ideas. This is what rhetoric helps to achieve in texts. While style is probably best learned through wide reading, comprehensive analysis and thorough practice, much can be discovered about effective writing through the study of some of the common and traditional devices of style and arrangement. These devices will help to heighten the effect of expression in written

texts and reveal the interrelatedness of form and meaning. The effective way these could be done is through the use of persuasive rhetoric.

In modern rhetorical researches, the study of rhetoric has been directed to the study of rhetorical tropes (Burke, 1969: 503-17), which are: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. White (1973, cited in Chandler, 2007: 137), in reference to Jakobson's (1956) adoption of metaphor and metonymy rather than the four master tropes, argues that "the fourfold analysis of figurative language has the added advantage of resisting the fall into an essentially dualistic conception of style."

In the analysis of children's literary text, rhetoric, stylistics and semiotics are inexplicably intertwined to the extent that an attempt to analyse one will surely lead to the analysis of others. For instance, from literature it has been established that stylistics is an offshoot of persuasive rhetoric. In the medieval period, style underwent the same theoretical classification as rhetoric, whereby rhetoric was divided into three:

1. the lowly (plain) style
2. the middle (mean) style
3. the elevated (grand) style.

Style was more than a manner of speaking: it was also a way of persuading; hence an offshoot of persuasive rhetoric. Thus the two elements in rhetoric "Res" and

“Locutio” were transferred into style (Fakuade, 1998:13). Whereas “Res” belonged to “what” aspect of speech making; the reason that informed the speech and the subject-matter of the speech, “Locutio” belonged to “how”, that is, the way and manner of expression as well as the way of speaking to please the audience.

From the foregoing, it is pertinent to infer that Rhetoric is an element of style in both written and performed texts as they characterise the individual way of persuading or expressing themselves in order to convince others. Stylistics studies these aspects of our daily use of language and how members of a linguistic community use individual and share features of a language in their daily relationship. Semiotics investigates how members of a linguistic community make meanings through these shared linguistic features in context of culture and situation. In the analysis of children’s literary text, rhetoric, stylistics and semiotics are inexplicably intertwined in such a way that an attempt to analyse one will surely lead to the analysis of others.

Themes of Selected Texts for the Study and Their Categorisation

The three texts selected for analysis in this study are: Sulaiman’s *Nadia* (in: *Nadia and other Story*), Olanlokun’s *Mystery River of Aporo* and Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *My Cousin Sammy*.

Nadia (Sulaiman, 2007)

This story emphasises the bitter prize of disobedience. Nadia, a kitten, defiles the advice and warning of her mother not to go into the wild for fear of getting lost in the forest. She eventually gets lost in the forest and learns her lesson in a hard way. This story is meant for children within the ages of four and six. The storybook is also categorised under fable and is pastoral as animals are created to live in huts within the forest in an organised family lifestyle similar to those of humans. The fact that they did not bear their specie names but those of human typifies them as human archetypes.

The Mystery Woman of Aporo (Olanlokun, 2001)

This is the story that emphasises reward for good and punishment for evil. It is the story of a beautiful goddess of the Aporo River who visits the village of Alaifo at long, irregular intervals. Her visit is to reward both the good and the bad people of Alaifo, accordingly. On this very visit, the river goddess rewarded the good people with wonderful gifts while the bad ones were disgraced. This in a way helps to sanitise the entire village.

My Cousin Sammy (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2007)

This is the story of love and acceptance. It also teaches the lesson of considerable culture and good up-bringing. It is

the story of an orphan boy, Sammy, who comes from the village to live with his uncle and his family in the city. He encounters a totally different lifestyle and has series of obstacles in adjusting to his new home. The uncooperative attitude of his uncle's family worsens Sammy's adjustment in the city. But Ene's love and assistance is a great impetus which propels Sammy to be fully accepted as a part of the family. In the end, coming to live with his uncle is a victory for Sammy. He is accepted as a full member of the family and his sister is to be brought from the village to live with them as a member of the family as well.

Analysis of Point of View as Rhetorical Device

Point of view in fiction refers to the source and scope of the narrative voice. Point of view can either be first person or third person. In first person point of view, the narrator tells the story from his/her point of view by using the first person singular, "I". A first person narrator may be a major character and is often the protagonist. The advantage of the first person narration is that the narrator shares personal experiences and secrets with the reader so that the reader feels part of the story. But in third person point of view, the narrator is not part of the story but tells the story in the third person (he, she or they). Third person point of view could also be the omniscient narrator in which the narrator is all-knowing and therefore can switch from one scene to

another, but from time to time focus on a single character. Third-person point of view occurs when the narrator does not take part in the story. In third-person omniscient, the narrative voice can render information from anywhere, including the thoughts and feelings of any of the characters. This all-knowing perspective allows the narrator to roam freely in the story's setting and even beyond.

The author's choice of point of view has a significant effect on the story's voice and on the type of information given to the reader. The authors' narrative point of view in *Nadia* is third person omniscient in the sense that the reader does not know the narrator of the story but got a full account of the story from the all-knowing angle so as to give full details of the events of the story. For instance, when Nadia is lost in the wood, she starts reciting the nursery rhyme, '**Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star**' and falls asleep in the process. The narrator then went into the mind of the little kitten to explain how in a dream, a monster attacks her. She wakes up and finds out that it is her aunty who comes looking for her, trying to wake her up. Without the story carve in this pattern, it would be difficult for reader to enjoy the suspense in it. *The Mystery Woman of Aporo* was presented in the third person point of view. Though not omniscient, the author was detail in the historical account that the information contained in the story does not require any further information outside the

one content of the story. Furthermore, the fact that the narrator did not focus on a particular character as the central character, there is hardly any unresolved question in the mind of the reader

In **My Cousin Sammy**, the narrator employed the first person point of view as the narrative view point, as one of the major characters in the story narrated the events of the story. Principally, there are two major characters in the work – Sammy and Ene. But Sammy on whom the story revolves is not the one giving the account but the second major character, Ene, who took part in all the events of the story. But in first-person narration, what can be shown is limited to the character's observation and thoughts, and any imaginable perceptions in the narrator will be passed on to the reader. Despite this, in **My Cousin Sammy**, the author was able to achieve a high level of rhetorical merit by making the two major characters feature together in all events of the story, thereby making it easy for the narrator to give a full account of the events of the story. But the reader does not know the inner mind of Sammy on whose life the story unfolds, that is to say, the narrator only gave the side of the story that bears significance with her in her own perspective. The inner thoughts of Sammy was deemphasised, which ought to bear much relevance in resolving the feelings of Sammy in her new home, considering the event of the death of his parents in an

accident and the separation between him and his sister. Also, the detail of the event of the Sammy missing his way home from school and the account of the days he spent with touts at the Marine beach was only summarised to Ene through conversation, in omniscient point of view, the details recounted fully.

Analyses of Figures Of Speech as Rhetorical Device

Simile as Rhetorical Device

This is literarily regarded as a comparison between two things that are generally not alike, usually introduced by *like* or *as*. Writers use similes to explain things, to express emotion and to make their writing more vivid and entertaining. In this case therefore simile is a rhetorical strategy as the above approach in explaining simile implies persuasive rhetoric.

This persuasive use of rhetoric is seen in ***Mystery Woman of Aporo***, where the author tries to use simile as a persuasive device:

*Suddenly, he heard a message. It was **similar to** those associated with the visit of the kind ageless river woman of Aporo (p. 11).*

In the above extract, the use of **similar to** is simile, even if **as** or **like** was not used. This is because, two things are being compared, by way of saying that the one looks like the other. Similarly, on p.14, we see two instances of the popular use of simile:

*They were tiny black birds, they were **as black as charcoal**. ... The last convoy of birds was **as white as snow**.*

There is no doubt that the above instances of the use of simile are familiar to children that they have almost lost their value as simile and have almost become cliché. Perhaps that accounts for the author using snow to compare whiteness, even in a literary text mean for Nigerian children who had never seen what snow looks like all through their life. But the child is not confused about the author's intention as such comparisons have oftentimes been used in their everyday life, more particularly those children living in the urban areas.

Metaphor as Rhetorical Device

Metaphor is a figure of speech in which an implied comparison is made between two unlike things that actually have something important in common. The word *metaphor* itself is a metaphor, coming from a Greek word meaning to "transfer" or "carry across." Metaphors "carry" meaning from one word, image, or idea to another. Metaphors also offer figurative comparisons, but these are implied rather than introduced by *like* or *as*. Metaphor enables art to provide a better understanding of human situations and actions. Even though conceptual metaphor does not set out primarily to teach or educate the reader; it provides a deep insight into the complex frames and

schemata that constitute our reality. It makes us to conceptualise one thing in terms of another.

According to May (1995: 91), stories are like parables; they teach as well as entertain readers. The stories of *Nadia*, *Mystery Woman of Aporo* and *My cousin Sammy* were created by their authors for the purpose of teaching and entertaining readers. At the level of entertainment, readers identify with scenes of celebration, the courageous actions of the protagonists, the triumph of good over evil and reward for virtue and punishment for vice. At the metaphorical level, the authors teach readers the importance of virtue; foreseen obstacles on the path to success; the triumph of good over evil, etc. The aim of the authors is to implicitly position their readers with the polarities that constitute our existing realities: good and evil, freedom and bondage, justice and injustice, life and death, etc; and allow readers to make their choices from these alternatives. In all the three texts for this study, the underlying metaphor divulges the fact that positive factors in our journey in life will eventually triumph over negative factors. The stories teach readers to be just in their decisions, honest in their dealings, brave and courageous in their actions, and patient in difficult circumstances.

In *Nadia*, a kitten named Nadia, who is a protagonist in the work, is disobedient to her mother who instructed her not to go into the forest in order not to get lost. But

Nadia disobeyed her mother and gets lost in the woods. The underlying message of the discourse therefore is to emphasise that children should not disobey their parents so as not to find themselves in danger. In ***The Mystery Woman of Aporo***, the river goddess visits the people of Alaifo once in a blue moon in order to pass judgement on the people of the land. She gives gifts to everyone but whoever is wicked and evil, yet collects her gift, is plagued by some strange illness. The story brings to fore the moral story of reward for good and punishment for evil. It also encourages children to eschew evil and embrace uprightness.

My Cousin Sammy, toeing a similar part, presents a boy, Sammy, who lost her parents in a car accident and is made to chart a new course in life with his uncle's family in Lagos. We see Sammy making mistakes in his quest to adjust to the realities of his new home. With the companionship of Ene, his female cousin and his own virtues, Sammy was able to overcome all the surmountable obstacles on his way and in the end, he is loved by all the members of the home and is accepted as a member of the family. The stories teach readers to be patient and courageous in difficult circumstances; and that the good will always triumph over the evil. These analyses confirm the viewpoint of May (1995:91), quoting U.C. Knoepflmacher as having argued that all journeys in

children's literature contain a lesson in metaphor for the reader to ponder at the end of the story.

Metonymy as Rhetorical Device

Metonymy is a figure of speech used in rhetoric in a situation whereby a thing or concept is not called by its own name, but by the name of something intimately associated with that thing or concept. Metonymy can also be referred to as a rhetorical strategy of describing something indirectly, by referring to things contiguous to it, in either time or space. Metonymy can either be real or fictional concepts representing other concepts real or fictional as well but they must serve as an effective and widely understood second name for what they represent. *The Mystery Woman of Aporo* being set in traditional Africa under the "rulership" of a King, the author used two Names to identify the king: "the king"; "My Lord"; "The Amuludun of Alaifo". His real name is never mentioned all through the work. "Name, therefore, does not just serve the function of identifier of a referent but indexes character and social relations" (Kamalu, 2011). The author has used this device to establish that the status of the king is more important than the name. The reader is not left in doubt about the identity of the king, despite the fact that his name was not mentioned all through the entire work.

In another instance, The goddess of Aporo river was referred to as: the mystery woman, ageless mysterious river woman, the river woman, the kind river woman, the kind ageless woman, the kind river goddess, the ageless river woman of Aporo, the mysterious woman, the great river woman, the river woman, the river woman of Aporo, the queen of the river, the mysterious ageless river woman of Aporo. The essence of this is to further mystify the awesome nature of the river goddess and esteem her mysterious sterling qualities. With the above appellations, the reader is left with no option than to believe that the river goddess is immortal and supernatural in nature.

Discussion of Findings

Due to the nature of our study texts: *Nadia* (pastoral), *Mystery Woman of Aporo* (fairy tale) and *My Cousin Sammy* (contemporary); the authors explore various rhetorical strategies to foreground their settings so as to be in consonance with the locale of the story. One of these strategies is authors' choice of words. Unlike the drama genre, in most fiction texts, the authors do not overtly state that the settings of their work are in the rural or urban areas but the readers deduce this through the authors' choice of words.

The author's choice of point of view has a significant effect on the story's voice and on the type of information

given to the reader. In first-person narration, what can be shown is limited to the character's observation and thoughts, and any imaginable perceptions of the narrator will be passed on to the reader. But in third person omniscient point of view, the reader gets all needed information about the characters of the work. Therefore, third person point of view is more effective in continuous narratives such as prose fiction, more particularly, children's literature.

Metonymy was used in one of our study texts, *The Mystery Woman of Aporo*, to establish that the status of the king is more important than the name. The reader is not left in doubt about the identity of the king of Amuludun, despite the fact that his name was not mentioned all through the entire work. Similarly, the river goddess was referred to with different appellations of her position as a goddess. The essence of this is to further mystify the awesome nature of the river goddess and esteem her mysterious sterling qualities. With the above appellations, the reader is left with no option than to believe that the river goddess is immortal and supernatural in nature.

Recommendations

1. In prose fiction, authors should employ rhetorical devices such as deviations, authors' choice of words to foreground elements in order to achieve persuasive

rhetoric and also to foreground the setting of the story in order to be in consonance with the locale of the story.

2. Authors should adopt the third person omniscient point of view since it is more effective in expressing the minds of characters in continuous narratives such as prose fiction, more particularly, in children's literature.
3. Figures of speech such as simile, metaphor and metonymy are useful in heightening the effect of language in children's literature. Therefore, authors of children's literature should explore such devices in children's literary production.

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