
THE ABSENCE OF DIDACTIC VALUES IN CHILD LITERATURE: A STUDY IN THE TWO PICTUREBOOKS

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Abstract: In children's literature, it is important to present positive educational values in order to develop the character of children as the main target. However, not all children's literary works contain educational values. This paper discusses two children's picturebooks, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle and *I am The Dog* by Daniel Pinkwater, from a reader-oriented perspective. The two picturebooks are seen as the representation of children's literature of the modern era which tends to give more pleasure, enjoyment and entertainment than educational values. This study questions the absence of didacticism in the works, especially dealing with instructional elements, and interprets it based on its impact on children as their target readers. It uses a participatory research method which places the researchers in the center of the study object, to read, observe and interpret the data. It applies reader-response criticism proposed by Wolfgang Iser, and accordingly treats the two picturebooks as literary works. The result shows instead of displaying the didacticisms, both of the books support the freedom and creativity, and satisfy children's curiosity.

Keywords: picturebook; didacticism; participatory research; reader-response criticism.

ABSENENYA NILAI PENDIDIKAN DALAM SASTRA ANAK: STUDI PADA BUKU CERITA BERGAMBAR "I AM THE DOG" OLEH DANIEL PINKWATER DAN "VERY HUNGRY CATERPILLAR" OLEH ERIC CARLE

Abstrak: Dalam karya sastra anak penting dipresentasikan nilai pendidikan yang positif agar dapat mengembangkan karakter anak sebagai pihak yang menjadi sasaran utamanya. Akan tetapi, tidak semua karya sastra anak bermuatan nilai pendidikan. Artikel ini meneliti dua buku anak berjudul "*The Very Hungry Caterpillar*" karangan Eric Carle dan "*I am the Dog*" karangan Daniel Pinkwater. Penelitian ini dilakukan dengan pendekatan pembaca. Kedua buku tersebut merupakan representasi sastra anak modern yang cenderung berfungsi untuk hiburan dibandingkan sebagai media edukasi. Penelitian ini berfokus pada tidak adanya unsur didaktis khususnya dilihat dari elemen-elemen yang mendikte anak dan kemudian diinterpretasikan bagaimana efeknya terhadap pembaca anak. Dengan menggunakan metode partisipatif, peneliti mempelajari objek studi, membaca, mengamati dan menginterpretasi data. Sedangkan untuk analisisnya menggunakan pendekatan reader response (respon-pembaca) dengan berlandaskan pada teori Wolfgang Iser dan menempatkan objek sebagai karya sastra. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa alih-alih menonjolkan unsur didaktis, kedua buku tersebut mendorong kebebasan dan kreativitas anak, serta mampu memuaskan rasa penasaran anak.

Kata Kunci: buku bergambar; didaktis; penelitian partisipatif; kritik respon-pembaca.

INTRODUCTION

Matthew Grenby once stated that children's literature can refer to any text that children read, or it can also restrictedly refer to texts specifically intended for them (Grenby, 2007: 277). Children's literature includes both the textbooks they read half-heartedly at school and the joke books they enjoy excessively, often in secret, when they are at home. When a text begins to describe a child's character realistically, in this case a factual approach, or when a text presents a character, real or imaginary, according to the point of view of a child, then that is where children's literature appears (Grenby, 2007: 278). Grenby further stated as follows:

It is regrettably reductive, but in this essay the term will be used loosely, referring generally to books that were not exclusively didactic or religious and that were designed especially for girls and boys, rather than young adults.

One of the things that distinguishes children's literary works and novels commonly read by adults is the existence of myths about homes, dwellings or places to live which are often the ultimate goal or just appear at the end of children's literary works either in the true sense or figuratively (Wolf, 2004: 86 qtd. in Wilson, 2011) This can be recognized from the usual

pattern of storylines in children's literature, namely the home-away-home pattern, as stated by Perry Nodelman (2003). However, an explanation of the concept of home can lead to various interpretations. There are several possible answers, especially if the question arises in modern society in the 21st century era of globalization and information. Furthermore, it has also been suggested by Nodelman that the idea of a home may appear as an abstract and metaphorical thing. A person can claim that an area or place is his home just because he has emotional closeness to the people who live in that area. However, a person can also recognize an area as his home because he has been there for a long time, or since he was born, with or without seeing the similarities between himself and the characteristics of the area (Nodelman, 2003).

The very striking difference in the change of the Romantic and Postmodern eras is the reason for choosing children's literary works that were published after the romantic era and the postmodern era to be discussed in this research. Works written before the romantic era tend to be didactic and instructional. After the romantic era appeared, literary works in general, including children's literary works, made more human and humanity elements at the center. Since then, the

so-called "liberated era" has emerged in children's literature (Hunt, 2004).

Lockean ideas were so influential to children's education in the 18th-century British Atlantic world through the rise of a new book genre—children's literature. This new style of literature was about children, for children. Even those books that were not about children modeled virtues and clearly showed material rewards and punishments based on behavior. In 1744, the father of children's literature and an Englishman, John Newbery, who ascribed to John Locke's theories about the child's mind as a *tabula rasa*, started to publish books that taught children through entertaining them through the use of pictures. Since reading was primarily oral and aural, pictures added to text involved sight and hearing in understanding the topic at hand. Newbery's print shop was in London, but his books made their way across the Atlantic and into the hands of colonial children. (Schorbus, 2010: 258)

Since the romantic era, literary works in general, including children's literary works, have made human and human elements more central. Then, what is now often referred to as the "liberated era" in children's literature emerged (Hunt, 2004). Humphey Carpenter has previously called this age of freedom the golden age of children's literature (Carpenter, 1985: 68), along with the emergence of major works that critics see as classics of children's

literature. Meanwhile, in children's literature of the postmodern era, the spirit of "liberated" that appears is sometimes not so firm. There is little pessimistic or uncertainty about what is being done. Fantasy forms that are simple or even look ridiculous often appear in children's literary works in this era. However, it was in this era that children found their freedom in literature and enjoyed literature with their own imaginations, not those of adults.

In a postcolonial perspective, dictating one's imagination can be aligned with colonization efforts, so that in this case the efforts of adults, parents, both writers and those who choose literary works for children can be seen as an effort to colonize children's imagination freedom. With this perspective, this study will place adults as colonizers, while children are colonized parties.

This study aims to review the perceptions of the readers that appear in discussion forums and comment columns on the internet, regarding the absence or lack of explicit educational value in post-romantic, or liberated, children's literary works, which tend to free themselves from the elements of dictatorship. This research also examines to what extent those two children's literary works of the "liberated" can be seen as having a contribution to education. This research attempts to look deeper into the

interpretation of the researchers as reader and consumers of both works regarding the educational values contained in the works.

There is definitely a graded range of relationships between the real reader and his role. Even if he is absorbed in the role, his preferences, dispositions and attitudes will still govern his relationship to what the role offers him. Scott's Waverley Novels are a striking example in this respect. The role provided by them has been differently actualized by 19th century readers, children, and 20th century readers. Obviously, the role itself is not only subject to selective realizations, but will also be differently actualized according to prevailing codes. Still, I would maintain that in all instances the basic split between the role assumed and the habitual orientation of the reader is bound to occur. (Iser, 1980: 70)

The new reader models that have emerged in recent years are reviewed and evaluated by Iser. Iser's model seeks to break away from the traditional limitation model that emerged earlier: Riffaterre's "super reader", Fish's "informed reader", Wolff's "intended reader", Holland's and Lesser's "psychological reader". According to Iser, all these models are not suitable and possess weaknesses. In *The Act of Reading*, Iser emphasizes that reading is an act. This act is a creative one, just like when someone writes. Thus, the reader occupies an active role in

creating meaning. Readers will complete the empty spaces available in literary works. These empty spaces can appear due to something intentional or unintentional. If someone reads a literary work, and it mentions the description of "mountains" for example, he will have his own picture of the "mountain" based on his experience. That experience can include empirical, or rational experience obtained from his knowledge of reading other works. It is rare for a writer to give a very detailed description of what he is telling (Iser, 1978). There are also writers who deliberately minimize details, so that their readers do not appear to be ignorant or to be lacking knowledge because they receive too many explanations from the writer. Ernest Hemingway, for example, with his techniques of "iceberg principle" and "omission of the details", would only show a little of what he wanted to convey. Even though the objects that he portrayed and conveyed were something deep and big.

As previously known, works that were born in the post-romantic era and the era of freedom generally did not highlight educational values, were not didactic and were not instructional. It is therefore hoped that an examination of the values of household education that may remain will require a more detailed and more challenging effort.

Some suggested that Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* is not

suitable for children's reading due to the lack of didactic values. Several others stated that the book actually encouraged children to behave badly, for example, being greedy and lazy. However, some others still believe that this work can be a good work for children, even though the values contained are not explicit. Taylor (2004) stated that this book is very interesting and easy for children to enjoy, and at the same time it can teach some bigger lessons than the formal teachings they get in school. Many children worry and are afraid to grow up and become mature, because they see adults as boring, grumpy and less cheerful. This work shows children that growing and developing is an interesting journey that they will experience. They see that in this story the Caterpillar eventually grows into a beautiful butterfly ("Eat Your Heart Out").

Another picturebook, *I am The Dog* by Daniel Pinkwater is a very unique illustrated children's book. The illustrations from the book were created by Jack E Davis, who played a major role in conveying the story ideas, themes and plots as well as the humor that causes this story to come to life and to make more sense. A boy named Jacob and his dog Max are the central characters in this story. The main theme of this story is the child's curiosity and fantasy to swap roles with their pet dog. Jacob as a representation of children in general has wild imagination about how he can escape from his routine, in this

case is school. These ideas may be viewed as ideas that are not good for children to see. But here Jacob seems to represent the voice of children who are bored with their routine at school which is monotonous and full of chores. For parents who are conservative and see formal schooling as everything to their children, this book may not be suitable and they will keep this book away from their children. However, for modern and open-minded parents, this idea should serve as an example of how children can think creatively and not just pursue one type of dream. Jacob wants to try his dog-like experience that looks fun, and wants to prove that fun. In the book it says that Jacob was right. Being a dog is more fun.

Ruys (2008) suggested that didacticism is strongly associated with the instruction of children especially at their homes and schools. Often, the instruction is far from the whole story. Didactic literature was quite frequently written explicitly for adults throughout the medieval and early-modern periods; in such cases, it most commonly conjoined around issues of religious conduct and control, piety and heresy, although matters of classroom instruction and literacy — in both Latin and the vernacular — also surface for adult readers. (Ruys, 2008: 31)

METHOD

This research applied a combination of quantitative and

qualitative methods, also known as "mixed methods". The quantitative part of this research is based on data on perceptions taken from readers' comments in forums and comments and discussion columns on the internet. The researchers applied reader-response approach grounded on Wolfgang Iser's theory. The researchers played as the center of the research who read, observe, and interpret the object. Two picturebooks are selected as the object i.e. *I Am the Dog* and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. Thus, the researchers analyzed the work and also placed himself as child reader to observe the impact of the absence of didacticism. The researchers pay a close attention not only to the text in the books, but also its relation to the picture. Furthermore, the researchers interpret and draw a conclusion. The researchers also analyzed readers comment in forums available on internet toward the selected picturebooks. It serves as supporting data to confirm the interpretation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Quite frequently, it can be seen that children are attracted to things that are forbidden by their parents. They tend to do the opposite to see the reaction from their parents or just to satisfy their curiosity. It is quite common to see situations when parents tell their children to be quiet, yet they will run around and make noise instead.

Conversely, if in the end their parents tell them to run and do what they want they will be quiet.

Daniel Pinkwater seems to be creating a situation like that and he certainly would not expect children to behave badly and leave school. It is just Pinkwater's way of being able to provide entertainment that kids can truly enjoy because it talks frankly and does not make it up. More importantly, Pinkwater takes a curious child's perspective and sees everything just as games.

Pinkwater gives a "punchline" that is expected to open the children's widest smile at the end of the story with a story in which Jacob says "Being a dog is better" at the end of the adventure and journey as a dog. This seems to be the best part of the story that reveals children's most genuine feelings and attitude. It is not to say that they hate to go to school. They just do not want it to be too serious.

The depiction of the Max character supported by the illustration of Jack E. Davis in the book is also hilarious and entertaining, with the form of a dark brown dog character whose size is neither too small nor too big. Max takes over the role of Jacob to go to school, wearing a uniform of course. Before going to school, Max also had to take a shower, brush his teeth and eat breakfast. Another thing that is quite unique here is the depiction given by Pinkwater when Max arrives at school,

with no surprise or excitement from the other students. Max just came and then replaced the role of Jacob. While the rest of the students seemed happy to welcome Max to school, there was no visible element of surprise from the children, or any situation in which they questioned why this happened. Thus, this just happened as normal. This shows that Pinkwater tries to keep the fantasy element in this story. He lets the children enjoy this incident as it is. They see the process of exchanging roles, enjoy the cuteness that arises, and see what will happen in the end. In this book, the role of Jacob and Max changes, which in this case features Jacob who suddenly bites a bone, chews and tore up a sofa, or Max who suddenly can walk upright, dressed like a schoolboy is not questioned by the children as the readers. They, as the readers, do not question how a dog can brush its teeth, or anything like that. They also do not question what magical power is capable of transforming a dog into the role of a boy, or on the contrary, they do not question how Jacob can act like a dog and Jacob's parents then treat him like a dog. There is also no scientific explanation of the change here like science fiction stories. So in this case, the oddity was tolerated by Pinkwater, who seemed to know very well that the children who read this work would also ignore this.

Another case is *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, which had been published

more than four decades earlier. In *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, Eric Carle seems less assertive about didacticism. However, this work is also considered less educational because the hero of this story is a greedy, haphazard caterpillar. The caterpillar is also told of taking a long sleep after eating a lot, which parents may mistake as a description of laziness and greed. Eric Carle here creates the caterpillar character as a happy character, which is highlighted by an illustration depicting the caterpillar's big smile. The depiction is so funny that maybe many people would have behaved differently if they found a real caterpillar in real life. Caterpillars in real life are seen as a frightening creature, because of their shape, or it could be because of the experiences of people who have experienced itching due to being exposed to caterpillars. Of course there are some people who are not afraid or even fond of caterpillars, but most of them would be afraid, or at least be perceived that way.

With the analytical process through the act of reading and interpretation it is found that both works contain these three characteristics: a) supporting freedom and creativity, b) satisfying children's curiosity, c) undoing didacticism. It is further explained as follows:

Supporting Freedom and Creativity

Both works encourage children's freedom and nurture their sense of

creativity. "I Am the Dog" describes the freedom of imagination of a child living with his parents. It is seen that the child's parents show no objection and disapproval of Jacob's wish to swap roles with his dog. They seem to consider this a natural thing and in the book it is illustrated that they even participate in the "role-exchange drama" by still seeing the role exchange in accordance with the situation in Jacob's imagination. Both parents serve the wishes of the child well. They then treat Max as Jacob, and Jacob as Max. It can be seen here that the two parents were very supportive and freed Jacob's imagination. They take part in the painting of Jacob's imagination which adds to the excitement of this role-swap story. So it is quite clear that the description of freedom here is without doing things that are deliberate and destructive. Apart from this, this work also encourages children's creativity along with the development of their imagination. Children are encouraged to think of things that are unusual and different from what they seem in reality.

Satisfying Children's Curiosity

Both *I Am The Dog* and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* portray images of how the characters in these works act out of their curiosity. Jacob is the main character of *I Am The Dog* who has this curiosity. All of the actions depicted in this story are proof of Jacob's curiosity about the experience of being a pet dog

in his house that looks more enjoyable than being a human child. The pet dog always accompanies Jacob to school, and when he gets to school Jacob gets out of the car while his dog, Max, remains in the car and comes home with Jacob's parents. Jacob sees this as fun because Max has no obligation to go to school, and can even go back home with Jacob's parents immediately after taking Jacob to school. This situation is one of the things that arouses Jacob's curiosity. It is because Jacob does not know exactly what Max did after taking him to school, and what it felt like to be Max. In addition, Jacob is curious to see how he can live his life as a pet dog in his own house. It is implied that during this time he saw the kind treatment of his family towards Max, and even positioned Max as something special. Here, in addition to curiosity, Jacob is also jealous of Max. However, because Jacob also loves Max, jealousy does not turn into hatred.

In *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* the caterpillar character's curiosity is also reflected, but not clearly when he tasted and devoured all kinds of food. He seemed to want to prove the taste of all these foods, and whether these foods can make his stomach full or not. He represents children who are curious about what happens next if he eats too much. It is proven later that the caterpillar can have a stomach ache when eating too much. But after that the caterpillar continues its activity of

eating all kinds of food until finally it sags and falls asleep.

Undoing Didacticism

The word didactic is frequently used for literary texts that are overloaded with informative or realistic matter, and are marked by the omission of graceful and pleasing details. Didactic, therefore, becomes a derogatory term referring to the forms of literature that are ostentatiously dull and erudite. However, some literary texts are entertaining as well as didactic. (“Literary Devices Editor”)

It is quite obvious that there is no instructional teaching to children portrayed in *I Am The Dog*. It even depicts something that is irrational and rather disturbing, both the words and the illustrations, for some people. Therefore it does not contain explicit teaching values. However, due to the absence of didactic literary elements, it can be seen as one of the representations of liberated children’s literature. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, on the other hand, portrays a little bit of didacticism, though it is not quite apparent and tends to be negligible. Unlike the characters in didactic literature that tend to be boring, Caterpillar's characters are simple, straightforward, yet entertaining. The story of this character's journey, even though he only eats and sleeps, is deeply attached to the minds of children as readers. This is actually very effective as a medium to convey messages to

children. But it seems Carle chose not to convey any message directly. He emphasizes the entertainment aspect more than learning, although by doing so Carle has also played a significant role in the education of children.

The result shows that there are three major points that both works are a) supporting freedom and creativity, b) satisfying children’s curiosity, c) undoing didacticism. The modern children’s literature tends to emphasize on the pleasure instead the didactic values. It, then, distinguish the recent children’s literature to the romanticism era or even the earlier stage of children’s literature. In the past, children’s literature is used as a tool to promote ideas including religion and social values. A kid is supposed to learn how to do good deed or to be a good citizen (Reynolds, 2011).

The two selected picturebooks shows that the values are not portrayed explicitly. It does not mention directly that a kid has to be brave, diligent, smart, or behave well. Both of the books implement the freedom of imagination. It lets children exercise their creativity and at the same time, it feeds their growing curiosity. Indeed, they learn something by reading but it does not mean they are instructed to do so. Nevertheless, they learn from the logic, the cause and effect and they let themselves sunk in the story. As a reader, the kid follows the same journey as the story becomes a mirror or a

window, which means as their or other representative. Given that, they learn something within a safe zone.

The postmodern picturebooks also utilize fantasy genre, which exercise children's imagination. Furthermore, the current trend shows that the fantasy sometimes tends to be simple or ridiculous as stated in the previous subchapter. If Rosemary Jackson states that the fantasy genre is a subversive genre, then this can also be seen from what is in the portrayal of imagination in Daniel Pinkwater's work. Pinkwater deliberately raises subversiveness and out-of-the-box ideas, so that it will make children more accustomed to thinking different things. In didacticism, the child will not be allowed to think like that. They will discourage them from doing and even imagine things that are unusual and things that are not approved by adults. Like *I Am The Dog*, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* also portrays a lot of freedom and curiosity, although the method it uses is more subtle and implicit. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* depicts freedom with the character of a caterpillar that can eat almost anything it encounters. The caterpillar ate voraciously, as if without restrictions. Then he is also depicted as indifferent, because what is told here is the caterpillar as a single character whose work is only to eat and sleep, without any social contact with other characters. The creative forms of the caterpillars are

depicted but not so obviously in the illustration when the caterpillars taste and devour all types of food. He makes unique bite marks. This situation is somewhat akin to a child breaking up toys he has arranged, or a child playing with their spilled drinking water.

For parents who think their children will learn identically by the things they see and read, this book will not be suitable. They will tend to choose works that directly provide examples of behavior that morally and socially norms are considered good things. But do children learn by looking at the things they watch identically? Generally, the function of didacticism in literature is to offer additional values to its readers, rather than merely offering pleasure and entertainment. Some critics (e.g Bixler, 1981) argued that didacticism may reduce literature to a tool for boring instructions, nevertheless it definitely gives readers a chance to improve their conduct, and comprehend evils which may lead him astray. (Bixler, 1981: 20). In brief, parents also play significant role in choosing the book and also in delivering the implicit values of the book. The book is only a medium and the parents/educators should be able to accompany the children not only in developing children's creativity but also learning values. The absence of didacticism open layers of interpretations. As the readers said in comments of forum, the postmodern picture book allow children

to be creative and support freedom and satisfy their creativity.

Although children's story books that do not contain educational values allow children as readers to think critically, a good literary work certainly contains positive values. This is in accordance with Persson's (2016) recommendation that children's literary works should be used for educational purposes, to reveal and discuss aspects of social power through ideology, human values, and human rights, in accordance with the language syllabus and curriculum objectives for develop students' ability to "reflect living conditions, social and cultural phenomena in different contexts". Likewise, what was conveyed by Fauziah, Nuryatin, and Doyin (2019) that didactic values in literary works will be very useful to be taught to students because they are in accordance with the learning principles of the 2013 Curriculum which emphasizes character building.

Therefore, the majority of children's story books contain educational values because their function is to instill good character in children. As the findings of Turan and Ulutas (2016) and Qizi and Khasanovn, (2021) that character education is important for students, teachers can use picture story books that support character education. Therefore, it is recommended to increase the number of books that support character education

in literature aimed at character education in the preschool teaching department. Such books can foster children's critical and creative thinking and facilitate the creation of their own voices (Kim & Yang, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Most of the postmodern literary works try to break the so-called "colonization of children by adults" by bringing up the peculiar imagination of children who are ridiculous, absurd, simple but full of imagination. In Daniel Pinkwater's *I am the Dog*, or Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, the character of didacticism does not appear immediately. These works emphasize elements of fantasy that can arouse the imagination of the child as a reader or connoisseur, when the work is read by the parents, so that the children can really be carried away and entertained while enjoying the works.

The child in *I Am The Dog* being the main character imagines while observing the behavior and cuteness of his pet dog, and finally he wants him to be able to swap roles with the dog. In the story, the child's wish comes true, without mentioning what caused it, for example, magical powers, spells, or things related to scientific experiments in the laboratory. Even when he became a dog, his physical form was still complete as before, and so was the dog. Changes only occur in his role as a dog and his dog as him. However, here the

imagination of children is very much formed thanks to fantasies that can be said to be ridiculous and childish. So here Pinkwater's skills are quite noticeable as he thinks and imagines as a kid and really put himself in the shoes of a kid. Meanwhile, Eric Carle in *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, tells the journey of a very hungry caterpillar eating fruits, chocolate, sausages, candy and almost all kinds of food. In this case alone, it can already be seen how "wild" this description is. This wild and ridiculous nature actually strengthens children's imaginations, frees fantasies and is very entertaining. Then it was told afterwards, the caterpillar became very full and fat. He began to weave fine threads to form a cocoon in which he would sleep. After sleeping for 2 weeks, the caterpillar wakes up again but is already in a different form, namely a butterfly with beautiful, wide, colorful wings.

Therefore, only by reading or listening to this kind of story line can people see how "child-like" the way the writers build the story, notably in their way to omit didactic elements. However, this is what children's thoughts might look like. Thus when they read things that are very much in line with the flow of their thoughts they will feel comfortable, not "offended" when building a logical flow. It is even more effective, coupled with, of course, the role of illustrating the image of the caterpillar which is so cute with a big

smile. Thus, the children became convinced that the hungry caterpillar was their friend, so they felt at home to finish the story from beginning to the end. Besides being funny, the caterpillar character can also be interpreted as a "stubborn" character typical of children in general.

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