

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN DITERLIZZI'S *KENNY AND THE DRAGON*

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Abstract

This present study aims to examine whether or not DiTerlizzi's novel entitled *Kenny and the Dragon* can be categorized as a children's literature. The story speaks about an adventurous experience of a young rabbit called Kenny to discover the truth about his monstrous-looking friend, Grahame.

This study applies formalism approach since it is the most suitable approach to study the intrinsic elements of the novel, which are the plot, character and characterization, and point of view. To support the analysis, library research was conducted alongside the novel itself and supporting articles from reliable websites.

The result of the analysis shows that DiTerlizzi's *Kenny and the Dragon* meets the requirements for children's literature since the characteristics of children's literature suggested by Nodelman are found in the novel.

Keywords: Children's Literature – Characteristics – Formalism

Intisari

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk meneliti apakah novel berjudul *Kenny and the Dragon* karya Tony Di Terlizzi dapat dikategorikan sebagai sastra anak. Novel tersebut menceritakan tentang petualangan sosok Kenny—yang digambarkan sebagai anak kecil berwujud kelinci—dalam mengungkap kebenaran akan temannya yang berwujud naga yang menyeramkan bernama Grahame.

Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan formalisme karena pendekatan ini paling tepat untuk mempelajari elemen intrinsik sebuah novel yang melibatkan plot, tokoh dan penokohan, serta sudut pandangcerita. Riset kepustakaan dilakukan untuk mendukung keseluruhan analisis bersamaan dengan novel *Kenny and the Dragon* itu sendiri dan artikel-artikel pendukung dari situs web yang dapat dipertanggungjawabkan.

Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa novel berjudul *Kenny and the Dragon* karya Di Terlizzi memenuhi syarat untuk dikategorisasikan sebagai sastra anak karena karakteristik sastra anak, sebagaimana disarankan oleh Nodelman, terdapat dalam novel.

Kata Kunci: Sastra Anak – Karakteristik – Formalisme

INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant current discussions in literature is the existence of children's literature since it has been a means of character and moral teaching to children. A considerable amount of literature has been published on children's literature. Tyra, in her article entitled *Teaching Character Education through Children's Literature* says,

Children's literature can also be used to teach character education because it is an effective method for teaching young children. Character education is a vital aspect of children's learning because it teaches them different social and moral lessons. Thus, it is possible that children's literature can be used to effectively teach character education to young children (Tyra 1).

She also states,

Children's literature is used to teach a variety of lessons, morals, and ideas. Thus, it seems that children's literature may be an influential method to teach character education (Tyra 1).

Moreover, Prestwich in her article entitled *Character Education in America's Schools* states,

Children's literature is a great resource because it can be used to teach a variety of topics. A popular method of inculcating character education into the curriculum is through the literature-based approach. Literature lends itself to the teaching of specific moral dilemmas and the examining of specific character traits. The assertion is that literature discussions can help children identify desirable traits in the characters and help the students build empathy with the characters (Prestwich 142-143).

One of the examples of adorable children's literature is DiTerlizzi's *Kenny and the Dragon*. As a book written by a *New York Times* bestselling author who has been authoring books for over a decade, the story of *Kenny and the Dragon* is imbued with fanciful rich imagination.

In his review of DiTerlizzi's *Kenny and the Dragon*, Anderson says,

Kenny and the Dragon is a story that works well because of its illustrations. DiTerlizzi's visual creations make you want to read the story. They inspire interest in Kenny, and Grahame and all the other folks you meet along the way (Anderson 2-3).

As a work of children's literature, DiTerlizzi's *Kenny and the Dragon* emphasizes the benefits of reading and creative thinking, the dangers of jumping to conclusions, while stressing the importance of a support network of family and friends (Richards 1). What this book accomplishes is taking all the elements and plot from the old, good story, and retelling it in more modern verse for today's children that is easily read by the children, or read aloud to younger children (Christine 1-2). The intriguing story, which is full of messages about friendships, led it to reach *New York Times* Bestseller in 2008. That is why the story of *Kenny and the Dragon* is worth of sharing. Regarding to it, the present writer would like to know how DiTerlizzi's *Kenny and the Dragon* can be said as a children's literature.

Based on a look at the front cover of the book, which was published by Simon & Schuster Books for young Readers in 2008, the picture attached on it shows that *Kenny and the Dragon* is a children's literature. Moreover, many of *Kenny and the Dragon* reviewers on a website of book review put their opinions and statements telling that *Kenny and the Dragon* is a recommended book for children. Regarding to it, the present writer would like to identify how DiTerlizzi's *Kenny and the Dragon* can be said as a children's literature. To obtain the objective, the present writer begins from the research question of whether or not DiTerlizzi's *Kenny and the Dragon* is actually a children's literature.

In line with the objective of this study, the focus of examination would be the characteristics of children's literature in the story as suggested by Nodelman . The present writer would emphasize examining the characteristics of children's literature which are seen in the plot, characters, characterization, and point of view of DiTerlizzi's *Kenny and the Dragon*.

The method used in this study is library research and close reading of the novel. The sources are taken from the written materials in the library. The main data of the research are taken from the literary work itself. The secondary data which support the analysis

are taken from reviews about DiTerlizzi's *Kenny and the Dragon*, those of written by Becky Scott, Carl V. Anderson, and Christine M.M. Prestwich's *Character Education in America's Schools*, Tyra's *Teaching Character Education through Children's Literature*, Abrams' *Mirror and the lamp* and *A Glossary of Literary Terms 9th ed.*, to give information of the theory of children's literature, formalism approach, and intrinsic/formal elements. The data collected are then analyzed and descriptively presented by analyzing them based on whether the characteristics of children's literature adopted from Nodelman's *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* are found in DiTerlizzi's *Kenny and the Dragon*.

In this study, the plot of the story and description of the characters are written to see whether they meet Nodelman's suggestion. The present writer also identifies how the story is told to see the point of view of the story. Moreover, the present writer provides some pictures taken from DiTerlizzi's *Kenny and the Dragon*, which also become data of this research. The present writer also examines whether or not the story is didactic by mainly seeing the characterization. As mentioned earlier in the scope of the study, the present writer narrows down the thirteen characteristics to six characteristics from Nodelman's *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*, because two of them belong to linguistics study, and some of them represent a same idea related to children's literature characteristics.

To the best of the writer's knowledge, there has not been any previous paper discussing characteristics of children's literature in DiTerlizzi's *Kenny and the Dragon*. However, there are some reviews about *Kenny and the Dragon*.

The review written by Christine is entitled *A Modern Telling of the Old St. George and the Dragon Tale; Promotes Peace*. In her review, Christine emphasizes several issues which are developed in the book of *Kenny and the Dragon* such as; peace-making and avoidance of murder and violence, not judging a person by their appearance, being open or closed minded, friendships, stereotypes, the power of persuasion and "group think". She also states that *Kenny and the Dragon* is a perfect book which promotes peace and non-violence (Christine 2). In short, Christine here states that *Kenny and the Dragon* is didactic.

Anderson, in his review, emphasizes his opinion on the important role of the illustrations in *Kenny and the Dragon* to make it attractive for children. Then,

he also states that the story shies away from any real danger and plays it safe, moreover, is told in a simple way which will not confuse children to understand the story (Anderson 2). In addition, Anderson also attaches pictures taken from the book in his review. However, there are still many other pictures seen in the book that he does not provide in his review.

Another review is written by Scott. In her review, Scott states her opinion that *Kenny and the Dragon* is better to be read by children aged nine years old and above rather than by children aged seven years old and above because of some of vocabularies such as; 'impudent', 'smorgasbord', and 'uncultivated', which might be unfamiliar for children's aged 7 years old. Nevertheless, he does not inform further of other unfamiliar vocabularies for children found in the book. Apart from that, she also states that *Kenny and the Dragon* is charming due to its enchanting and adorable. The beautifully drawn characters and their personalities are great ways to discuss friendship with children (Scott 2).

DISCUSSION

1. The Characteristics of Children's Literature Suggested by Nodelman

These are the thirteen characteristics of children's literature suggested by Nodelman. However, for some of the thirteen characteristics mentioned represent a same idea and the pragmatics and ambiguity belong to linguistics study, the present writer narrows those thirteen characteristics down to six characteristics. First, the protagonists of the texts should be children or childlike animals or adults. Second, the texts are not first-person narratives, but are told in third-person's point of view. Third, there are pictures which accompany the texts and provide visual and emotional information of the texts. Fourth, the texts of children's literature are didactic, which means they exemplify good things or intend to teach children moral lessons. Fifth, the plot follows a basic pattern of movements, which is *home-away-home*. Sixth, a children's literature should have a happy ending (Nodelman 77-81).

2. The Plot of *Kenny and the Dragon*

As mentioned earlier, the plot of the novel is needed to be written to figure out if the novel has a happy ending. Moreover, the plot is also used to

observe whether the plot pattern follows Nodelman's suggestion, which is *home-away-home*. In this part, the present writer adopts the elements of plot suggested by Freytag. Alongside the plot of the story, the present writer also provides Freytag's pyramid applied to its plot (see Fig.1).

The story begins when Kenny's father encounters a dragon over the Shepard's Hill near their family farm in Roundbrook town. Then, he tells Kenny and Kenny's mother about the dragon, which makes Kenny very curious and want to see the dragon. At first, Kenny's parents do not allow Kenny to do so because they are afraid that the dragon will injure him. The dragon, who is eventually known as Grahame, becomes Kenny's best friend instead. This marks the introduction of the story.

The rising action of the story appears when the townsfolk and the kingdom panic to hear that there is a dragon lives nearby. They get a wrong idea about Grahame, leading them and the king to hire George, a former knight and dragon slayer, to exterminate Grahame. Another problem is that both Grahame and George are Kenny's best friends. This difficult situation forces Kenny to find a way to keep his two best friends from fighting each other.

Eventually, Kenny, Grahame, and George secretly decide to arrange a play or act of battle that will be presented to the villagers. The problem in this situation is not only that Kenny has to find a way to make the townsfolk understand Grahame, but also 'presents' an expected battle between Grahame and George without losing either of them in the battle. This part still marks the rising action of the story.

The story reaches its climax when the play of battle ends and the townsfolk later know that Grahame is not dangerous and harmful at all. Then, the returning or falling action of the story is presented when the townsfolk finally understand the truth and can accept Grahame.

The story ends when their incredible act is finally celebrated by the townsfolk. By this time, the legend of their act spreads all across the land. After that, Kenny and Grahame enjoy and live their friendship together by spending the day at Kenny's home. This marks the resolution of the story.

In short, it can be seen that the story starts from Kenny's home, which is depicted as the place where Kenny is brought up, protected, away from danger, and live happily with his parents. Then, Kenny tries to be 'away' from home to discover the truth about the

dragon, whom he later finds to be a very good friend. The process of revealing the truth makes him undergo a 'journey' outside his house. Then, the end of the story shows that after Kenny succeeded in presenting the act of battle, he eventually comes back to live happily with his family and Grahame in his home.

3. The Characters and Characterization

As mentioned earlier, the character and characterization of the novel are needed to show if the protagonists are children or childlike animals or adults. The description of the characters is also important to know whether or not the characters have good personalities. Here are the characters and characterization of the novel:

Kenny: Depicted as a male young rabbit in his primary school, and is implicitly described as an obedient and a smart, avid reader who is full of curiosity. In his actions, he never disobeys his parents.

Grahame: Depicted as a huge male dragon, he becomes Kenny's best friend and never kills a single creature in his lifetime. Instead of burning castles and killing animal for food, he would rather read books, recite a poem, and eat cr me brulee.

George: Depicted as an old male badger. He is Kenny's best friend who is a former dragon slayer and owns a bookshop. Despite the long gap of age between Kenny and him, he never sees it as an obstacle to share his knowledge and wisdom to Kenny. In addition, he never underestimates Kenny.

Kenny's father: Depicted as a wise farmer who never attends school like Kenny, but always supports what Kenny believes based on science books that Kenny reads.

Kenny's Mother: Depicted as a calm, wise, and attentive woman who always supports her family, shown by her calming words and caring when suspense happens. Moreover, she is also described as a good cook.

Charlotte: Depicted as a young female squirrel who works as an assistant in George's bookshop. She has been Kenny's friend for a long time as well. As she hears Kenny's plan, she supports him to save his best friends.

4. The Point of View

As mention earlier, the point of view of the novel is needed to understand to how the story is told by the author. In children's literature, it is needed to know

and to make sure if the author uses the third-person narratives/ third-person's point of view in telling the story. Here are some excerpts taken from the novel, emphasizing the use of third-person narratives:

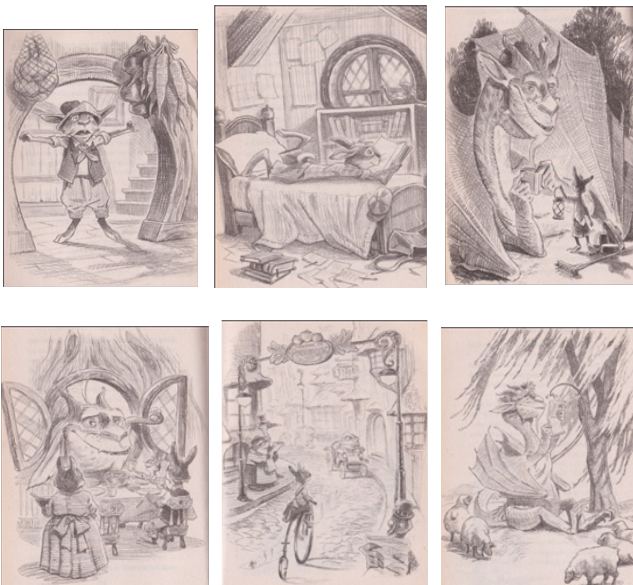
Kenny's father burst into the kitchen, panting heavily. **His** ears twitched. It was suppertime, and **Kenny's mom** was making **her family's** favorite, corn chowder. The soup heavy aroma swirled about as **the farmer** moved through the room (DiTerlizzi 1).

Every afternoon **Kenny** went up to visit **the Dragon** on the hill. On the weekend, **Kenny's mom** invited **Grahame** to have dinner at **their** house. But since **he** was far too large to come inside, **they** decided it was best that **he** simply put **his** massive head through **their** kitchen window, where a place was set for **him** at their table (DiTerlizzi 37).

From the excerpts, it can be seen that the author uses pronouns and points out proper nouns such as "he", "his", "Kenny", "the Dragon", "Grahame", "Kenny's mom", "Kenny's father", "her family", "him", "they", "their", and "the farmer" all of which refer to third-person's point of view.

5. The Pictures as Illustrations

In the novel, pictures are shown to provide visual and emotional information of the texts. Moreover, they are also used to make the story attractive and easier to understand for children. In this paper, some pictures of



the novel—all of which are created by DiTerlizzi—are provided in order to show that there is not any picture that shows bad things children might imitate.

6. Didactic Aspects

As mentioned earlier, didactic aspects found are important to see if the novel meets the characteristics of children's literature suggested by Nodelman. The didactic aspects here are mainly exposed through the characters.

Kenny's character exemplifies that in order to have a good result in anything, it's better to obey parents' advice. Moreover, Kenny teaches the reader the lesson not to jump into a conclusion in seeing persons they do not really know.

Grahame's character exemplifies that if one is doing things following the right path, they do not need be afraid of the future.

George's character exemplifies that in doing anything, it's better to stay open-minded and listen to good advice from the people around us to avoid regrets in the end.

Kenny's parents' characters exemplify that supporting family members leads to good things ahead. Furthermore, they show sincere hearts and open minds in the stage of knowing and accepting a new person.

Charlotte's character exemplifies that supporting our friends in doing a good thing will not lead to any harms. Thus, do not be afraid of doing something good.

The townfolk's characters exemplify that we should seek for further information and think twice before executing what we plan to do so that the decision we take do not impact badly to the others.

In addition, the main characters along with their actions to protect Grahame teach the reader not to judge a person just from his/her appearance.

CONCLUSION

As a means of teaching character or moral lesson to children, children's literature requires particular conditions to be categorized as a children's literature. Therefore, it is important to have a look at the intrinsic elements of the work involved to make sure there is no bad thing that children might imitate from its content.

From the plot of *Kenny and the Dragon*, it is found that the story has a happy ending. It is marked by the resolution in which Kenny and Grahame cherish the

time together without any fear of being threatened by townsfolk's plan to eradicate Grahame. Moreover, the plot follows the basic pattern of movement from *home-away-home* for it is started from Kenny's home, then followed by his 'journey' and his coming back to home. Furthermore, through the characters and characterization, it can be seen that as the characters in the novel, Kenny, Grahame, George, Kenny's father, Kenny's mom, and Charlotte, are all childlike and adult animals who act like humans. It is clearly shown in the novel that the characters attend school, read books, live in houses like those of humans, and dress up like humans. Then, through the excerpts of the novel, it is found that the author uses pronouns such as 'he', 'his', 'him', 'her', 'they', 'their', 'them', 'Kenny', 'Kenny's mom', and 'Kenny's father' all of which refer to third-person's point of view. Furthermore, there are pictures accompanying the texts attached in the novel all of which ease the reader to understand the story. Lastly, good things exemplified through the characterization show that the novel can be said as a didactic literature. All of these findings show that DiTerlizzi's *Kenny and the Dragon* meets the characteristics of children's literature as suggested by Nodelman. Therefore, regarding to the research question of whether DiTerlizzi's *Kenny and the Dragon* is a children's literature, it is clearly found from the analysis that Diterlizzi's *Kenny and the Dragon* is a children's literature.

However, for nothing is perfect, two other interesting things in the novel besides all of those findings mentioned were also found. Firstly, the author of the novel does not provide any caption of each picture, which is quite important to make the picture clear what scene it refers to.

Secondly, one of the pictures provided is ambiguous (see Fig.2), for it is not clear enough whether the character shown in the picture is Kenny or his father (which turns out that it is his father). As a book meant to be read by children, it is important to make all of the contents as clear as possible in order not to confuse children. To get to know deeper about these two findings, a further research is needed.

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