



DEPICTION OF VIOLENCE IN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

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Violence has played a role in children’s literature, but in recent years there have been questions asked about the need for depiction of violence in children’s literature. This is seen in the decision of modern storytellers to modify the dreadful parts of classic fairy tales to make them more appealing to modern readers. The question that one may ask however is would modifying or removing violence from children’s literature make it higher quality literature? Many scholars differ and state that violence, if used appropriately, has its place in some children’s books. They are of the opinion that violent literature is often not to blame for violent behaviour in children; rather, the inclusion of violence in quality literature can create positive influences in children’s lives. Children are often naturally drawn to stories with violence in them. Many can relate to violent situations portrayed in children’s stories, and, when used effectively, these situations can be used to teach children how to avoid violent resolutions in their own lives.

Violence in children’s stories is not an offshoot of modern violent society. It stretches back to the very first children’s stories, when violence was used as a didactic element. Violence has played a part in children’s literature throughout the ages, but as Maureen Nimon (1993) points out in her essay about violence in children’s literature, “It is only in recent decades that the place of violence in children’s books has been so vigorously questioned” (p. 31). Nimon (1993) explains violence has appeared for centuries in didactic stories in which the wicked are punished, often with physical violence, and the virtuous are rewarded (p. 29). Dianne Koehnecke (2001), who reviewed two recent children’s books, Eve Bunting’s *Smoky Night* and *The House That Crack Built* by Clark Taylor, discussed the books’ controversial themes of violence and drugs respectively, as well as their didactic format. She points out, “the didactic nature of these two books is clearly not a revolutionary concept in children’s literature.” Victorian books, Koehnecke (2001) mentions, were especially “preachy” and often contained dark, violent subject matter, which many adults would find inappropriate for children today (p. 19).



However, children are often captivated by the violence and fear adults try hard to shield them from, and this comes through in children's creations, regardless of whether or not they have been exposed to violent literature. In an analysis of violence in fairy tales and children's reaction to such violence, Christina Moustakis (1982) cites studies by L.B. Ames and E.G. Pitchers, which found that when children create stories, themes of aggression are predominant (p12). Moustakis (1982) believes this is because aggression is a fundamental piece of human nature and children cope with it by creating stories with violent elements (p 13). Since aggression is a naturally occurring feeling in all humans, it seems ridiculous to expect that barring violence from children's books would cease this urge.

Moustakis (1982) suggests that sheltering children from violence for the sake of keeping them from being frightened is a poor tactic. She writes, "Those who trust that the elimination of tales of ogres and monsters will make bedtime easier ... will be dismayed when, in the absence of a literary culprit, [the monsters] nevertheless take shape in their children's fervid imaginations" (p 9). While some maintain frightening and often violent elements will traumatize children, these unpleasant elements appear time and again because they are the sorts of things children dream up on their own. Bronwyn T. Williams (2004) mentions the power of a child's imagination to create violent situations, even when parents and teachers try hard to steer children from any material that would inspire such behaviour. She uses an example to illustrate her point, saying, "There is the story of the boys whose parents scrupulously avoided buying them toy guns only to look out the kitchen window and see the boys pointing sticks at each other while making appropriately explosive sounds" (Williams, 2004, p. 511). It is clear that books are not the culprit in the case of children displaying violent preferences when playing or creating stories.

This trend in children appreciating violent stories is especially prevalent in boys, and there are worries that with the general condemnation of literature containing violence by teachers, young males with the potential to become great readers and writers may lose interest. Williams (2004) pinpoints why teachers and parents have become so squeamish about violent children's literature in recent years: "Violent reading and writing brings with it the fear that such violence might



erupt beyond the page into the classroom” (p. 512). Williams (2004) goes on to state such fears have intensified since recent school shootings, and that this fear and panic rests on the assumption that boys cannot tell the difference between violence in a story and the violence in real life (p. 512). However, this assumption is primarily false; most boys can differentiate between violence in stories and real life. Using the example of her young son, Williams portrays a boy who writes vividly violent stories but is a perfectly mild-mannered and peaceful boy in real life. Many boys enjoy the kinds of violent stories that are often considered inappropriate for school, but when teachers bar these stories from the classrooms, it can do more harm than good. Williams (2004) worries about her son, “who is being told, explicitly and implicitly, that the reading and writing he is drawn to not only has no value but is also potentially dangerous” (p. 513). When teachers do not allow young boys to read or create the kinds of fiction that most interest them, they could be crushing potential literary lovers’ interests in fiction of any kind, thus failing to reach the primary goal in teaching children about literature.

In a world wrought with violence, many argue violence should be included in children’s stories, since children’s books should accurately portray the world to a certain extent. Kenneth B. Kidd (2005) discusses a shift in recent years, which has moved away from the idea that young people should be sheltered against violence and evil in literature. Kidd contrasts the slow process of weaving Holocaust stories into children’s literature with the nearly immediate publication of children’s books about the September 11, 2001 tragedy. He cites over twenty books for children on 9/11, most of them published in 2002 (Kidd, 2005, p 8). “Presumably the exposure model became necessary because we no longer have the luxury of denying the existence of or postponing the child’s confrontation of evil,” Kidd (2005) says (p 1). While violence has always been a component in children’s literature in some way, it is only in recent years that hard topics like violence as globally affecting and widespread as the Holocaust have been seen for their value in teaching young people about the dark side of human nature and the important history of such abominable phenomena. Even Whitehead, a woman committed to non-violent literature for children, is quoted in Nimon’s (1993) article as saying, “There is a need for books which help



young people face reality, however distasteful that reality may be” (p. 31). Whitehead’s assertion shows violence does have its place in children’s literature because it truthfully reflects aspects of the world that children should be aware of, no matter how much adults wish to protect children from it.

Violence is an important, though unpleasant, aspect of the world that has endured for centuries and continues today. Therefore, it is a relevant and worthwhile topic to focus on in children’s literature, since children should be aware of the realities of the world, both good and bad. When used in an effective and careful manner, violence can serve important purposes in literature. It does not seem to correlate with violent tendencies in children, it sparks interest in reading, and it can enhance a child’s understanding of ways to cope when conflict or violence arises in their own lives

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