

Unveiling the Implicit Meanings in “The Selfish Giant” by Oscar Wilde

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ABSTRACT

This analytical research article presents the ideas against the conventional ways of teaching and claims that literary texts should be taught deeply by going beyond the text. Teaching only the literal aspects of the text violates its connection to the multiple meanings of the text. In fact, literature is the reflection of the human society and it is not just the source of learning language. A literary writer uses figures of speech to carry out his/her intended meaning in the text. So, the main message of the writer is the core aspect in a piece of literature that the readers should obtain. In this sense, the main aspect of this article is that the learners should be able to cope up with the figures of speech mentioned in the text to trace the intended meaning. Teaching and learning only the literal meaning do not provide justice to the writer and the text. The teachers and learners should even go beyond the text to trace the real meaning of the text. In this article I have taken the folktale "The Selfish Giant" by Oscar Wilde to justify my ideas regarding teaching and learning a literary text. It is a qualitative research article. The events, setting, character, title, etc. in the story were taken as the primary sources of the study. Similarly, the textbook, journals, articles and criticism regarding the research text were taken as the secondary sources for the study. As a qualitative research article, analysis, explanation, interpretation and description were taken as the major tools for the interpretation and analysis of the data. By analyzing and interpreting the data, it was found that the text literally presents story of a giant and children. But analyzing the story in connection of figure of speech, symbols, and characters and so on, it was found that the intended meaning of the text is about humane instincts, morality, spiritualism, cooperation and the other aspects of human life.

Keywords: *Figure of speech, intended meaning, literal meaning, literary texts*

Introduction

The Story in Literal Sense

The main point of this study is to present the ideas that literary text should be taught deeply by focusing on the images and figure of speeches that help the writers to present their deep ideas in the text. In this research article I have taken the story “The Selfish Giant” by Oscar Wilde as the sample of the literary text. This is a short fairy tale centered on themes of humanitarian love, selfishness, redemption, and spiritual transformation. The story begins with children happily playing in a beautiful garden owned by a Giant. After returning from a seven-year stay with Cornish ogre, the Giant becomes angry at the children for entering his property and drives them away. He builds a high wall around the garden and places a sign reading, “Trespassers will be Prosecuted.” As a consequence of his selfishness, spring refuses to enter the garden, leaving it trapped in perpetual winter filled with snow, frost, hail, and cold winds. The frozen garden symbolically reflects the Giant’s emotional isolation and spiritual emptiness. One day, the children secretly return to the garden, and their presence immediately transforms the environment. The trees blossom, flowers bloom, and winter disappears from most parts of the garden. The Giant realizes that his selfishness was responsible for the endless winter. However, in one corner of the garden, a small boy is unable to climb a tree, and winter still remains there. Moved by compassion, the Giant gently lifts the boy into the tree, and the child lovingly embraces him. This moment marks the beginning of the Giant's moral and emotional transformation. Realizing the importance of love and kindness, the Giant tears down the wall and declares that the garden belongs to the children. **The destruction of the wall symbolizes openness, forgiveness, collective joy, and the rejection of selfish isolation.**

Years later, the mysterious boy returns to the garden with wounds on his hands and feet, symbolizing the figure of Christ and the idea of divine love. The boy tells the Giant that these are "the wounds of Love" and invites him to Paradise. Shortly afterward, the children find the Giant lying peacefully dead

beneath a tree covered in white blossoms, suggesting spiritual salvation through compassion and selflessness.

Essence of Literature

Literature is a picture, more or less true and inspiring, of actual life (Tilak, 1999). Therefore, literature presents the picture of human life, culture, traditions, values, problems, and experiences. Poetry, drama, essay, and fiction are the major types of literature through which writers express the social, political, economic, and moral issues of their time. Literature reflects both the positive and negative aspects of society. Poverty, discrimination, injustice, and corruption are also the major issues covered in literature.

It is not easy to express the positive and negative aspects of society in a piece of literature. To express the social aspects effectively, writers use figures of speech, which help them present ideas more precisely and artistically. Readers need to be familiar with these figures of speech to understand the deeper meaning of literary texts. Regarding the language of literature, the famous philosopher Frederic Nietzsche in his book, “On Reading and Writing” writes, “Of all that is written I love only that which one writes with his blood. Write with the blood and you will experience that **blood is spirit.**”

The story “*The Selfish Giant*” by Oscar Wilde is the major concern of this research study. This story literally seems to be simply a moral story, but if we analyze it deeply, we can understand the deeper symbolic meanings hidden within the text. The main aspect of this research article is that the deeper symbolic meaning of a literary text is more important for readers to understand the real message of the text. But the point is that the readers should experience the spirit of the writer as mentioned by Frederic Nietzsche. To trace the deeper meaning of the text, the readers need to understand the figures of speech used in the text by the writers. The major figures of speech that writers use in literary text are mentioned here.

The main focus of the study is to explore the implicit meanings in the text. In this context, Reader- Response Theory is applicable to the study. Wolfgang Iser, Louise Rosenblatt, Stanley Fish are the major practitioners of

this theory. This theory argues that meaning is created through the interaction between the reader and the text and reader infer the unstated meanings.

Allegory

Allegory is a notable figure of speech especially used in narrative forms. Abrams (1995) defines allegory as a narrative in which the agents, actions, and sometimes the setting as well are designed not only to make sense in themselves, but also to signify a second, correlated order of persons, things, concepts, or events.

Thus, allegory is a strategy employed in literary works to convey hidden meanings effectively. It is a narration of a coherent set of circumstances that signifies a second order of meanings.

Symbolism

A symbol is anything that signifies something else. In this sense, all words are symbols. Abrams (1995) defines symbolism as “a word or expression which suggests a range of reference beyond itself” (p.168).

Symbols are considered the silent language of literature. By using symbols, literary writers express deeper meanings indirectly in literary texts. Writers use ordinary objects, characters, settings, places, and events symbolically to present deeper meanings.

Therefore, the use of literary symbols enriches a text by expressing complex emotions and ideas indirectly. The use of symbolism makes a piece of literature more artistic, imaginative, and universal.

Simile

The word *simile* comes from the Latin word *similis*, which means “likeness” (Tilak, 1999). In a general sense, a simile is an expression of likeness between different objects or events. It is a comparison of two different things by using words such as “like” or “as.”

Metaphor

The term "metaphor" comes from the Greek terms 'meta' meaning over and 'phero' meaning carry (Tilak, 1999). So, the term metaphor refers to the

use one kind of thing, quality or action to carry out the meaning of another one. It is a literary device to compare two different things, persons and actions to create deeper meaning without using the words 'like' or 'as'. In literary texts, metaphor enhances symbolic expression and creates a way for the readers to interpret the text beyond the literal sense.

Objectives of the study:

The major objectives of the research article are:

- (i) To explore the deeper thematic dimensions of the story.
- (ii) To attempt provide an insight to the readers that literature is not just a source of language learning but a medium for improving by the society by making the readers aware about the societal evils.
- (iii) To argue the readers those literary texts should be taught and learnt in depth.

Statement of the problem

Literary texts are generally taken as the means for learning language. So, they are taught superficially focusing on theme, literary forms only in the classroom and getting of the literary text. They don't enter into the symbolic and philosophical dimensions of the text. This conventional way of teaching a literary text violates the inherent quality, multiple ideology of that literary text possess. When a literary text is just reduced to its characters, plot and vocabulary, students miss the opportunity to be familiar with the rich meaning of the written text. Literature offers a valuable for social improvement.

So, the major problem of this research article is to present how teaching beyond the surface meaning of the text, meaning uncover deeper meaning of the text through philosophical approach, cultural ideology, and interpretation based in another philosophical research article.

Methodology

This research study is qualitative in design. The objective of the study is to explore the deep meaning of the story “The Selfish Giant” by Oscar Wilde. So, the study is analysis and interpretation in nature. The key element of the

story including events, setting and the theme had been taken as the data. These elements of the story were examined and interpreted through symbolic and thematic perspectives. In the gone way, the secondary sources of data included textbooks, peer-reviewed journals, scholarly articles and unpublished thesis. The primary analysis, interpretation is based on the major tools used for uncovering the latent meaning beyond the literal text. In the same way, archetypal analysis was used in identifying the human fragility that need to be escaped by inner, spiritual spirit of human beings.

Analysis and Interpretation of the Text

This story "The Selfish Giant" can be interpreted and analyzed from different perspectives. In this short research aspect, I have tried to interpret the story in terms of its symbolic allegory, characters, symbols, events and other figures of speech found in it. They all are interpreted as follows:

The Selfish Giant: The giant is a title character in the story. A giant physically consists of the both features of an animal and human being. The giant in the story also possesses these qualities. In the very beginning of the story, the giant had only animalistic behaviour. His monstrous nature is also reflected as he says, "my own garden is my own garden." His cruel monstrous feelings represent a psychological barrier that cuts him off from human qualities. His choice to build the wall around his garden to stop the entry of the innocent children into the garden and also setting the noticeboard reflected his inhuman feelings and behaviour. As a result of his inhuman, the giant A gets hits by his own act. A cold frost and snow in his winter seems in his garden. He needs to face cold, frost and snow in his life. This situation can be taken as the direct result of his inhuman and self-absorbed behaviour.

The turning point of the story occurs only when the giant's latent human features get awakened. The crucial catalyst for his transformation is a tiny boy weeping in a corner of his garden. Hearing the linnet bird is being heard the winter silence. Then, the giant removes the notice board and breaks down the wall. He allows the children to play in his spring-filled garden.

In the first phase of the story, in the first phase of the giant in human kind elements of the giant is wounded. The tiny boy reveals himself a divine figure and took the giant to heaven after his death. So, the main point of the story that the garden can be interpreted as the theory of inhuman and monstrous behaviour leads us towards a successful and heavenly life.

The Small Boy

The small boy is the most positive and sophisticated character in the story. The small boy appears as a weeping child in the story. He cries as he is not able to climb up a tree. The boy has wounds on his palms and feet. These wounds are symbolically the nailed wounds of Christ himself.

In fact, the boy's arrival changes the whole story into positive moves and positive scenarios. The giant avoids his monstrous behaviour. His arrival also brings the spring season into the garden. The boy reappears after a long gap in the story in the giant's old age and asks the giant to go to paradise with him. So, the giant gets salvation due to his help and positive behaviour with the small boy and other children. The major point of the story is that positive work, behaviour, and feelings are the key to success, happiness, and to make our life beautiful.

The Wall and the Notice in the Story

The giant builds a wall around his garden and puts up a notice which reads as "Trespassers will be prosecuted." In fact, the wall and the notice reflect the psychological state, reflecting the monstrous nature of the giant and his spirit.

The wall and the notice represent the boundaries of a rigid and defensive ego. The wall and the notice block the giant rather than the children, which is quite ironical in the story. He builds a wall to protect his beautiful garden, but it becomes a prison for him.

The destruction of the wall is the exact moment that can be taken as the shift of the giant from an inhumane monster to a compassionate human being.

Use of Irony in the Story

Irony is the figure of speech in which the real meaning is just the opposite of the literal meaning. Regarding irony, Abrams (1995) writes, “verbal irony is the statement in which the implicit meaning intended by the speaker differs from that which he ostensibly asserts. Oscar Wilde also uses irony in the story. The giant builds the wall to protect his garden but in fact the world traps the giant himself his selfishness brings not peace but Barones and sufferings Irony is seen in the character of baseball boy who appears as a small and weak boy but in fact he is stronger than the Zions whom he ultimately takes to the paradise

Conclusion and Findings

Executive Summary

This qualitative research article challenges the conventional, surface-level methods of teaching literature in classrooms, where texts are often reduced merely to vocabulary, plot summaries, and language-learning tools. Using Oscar Wilde’s classic fairy tale, *"The Selfish Giant"* (a prescribed text for Grade XI in Nepal), the study argues that literature must be taught "beyond the text". By deeply analyzing figures of speech, symbols, and allegories, educators and readers can uncover the hidden philosophical, cultural, and spiritual dimensions that mirror human society and instincts. Here, the unstated meanings of the text are inferred through the images, characters, events, figure of speech and so on. So, the meanings of the text are inferred as the reader-response theory argues.

Key Findings of the Study

Based on the interpretation of the text, the article establishes the following findings:

- **Failure of Literal Pedagogy:** Teaching only the literal or surface meaning of a text fails to do justice to the author's intent and strips the text of its multi-layered ideologies.
- **Literature as a Social Mirror and Tool:** Literature is a direct reflection of society that pinpoints both good and evil. Rather than just a tool for

learning grammar or language, it is a vehicle for social and moral improvement.

- **The Necessity of Figurative Literacy:** To grasp the real message of a writer, readers must actively learn to decode literary devices such as **allegory, symbolism, similes, and metaphors.**
- **Spiritual Transformation Over Materialism:** Through the trajectory of the Giant, the text proves that isolation and monstrous behaviors lead to failure/emptiness, whereas compassion, cooperation, and positive human behaviors are the true keys to happiness, spiritual transformation, and salvation.
- **Pedagogical Recommendation**

The article concludes that educators must pivot away from conventional, superficial teaching practices. Classrooms should embrace deep reading strategies that allow students to enter the symbolic, cultural, and philosophical dimensions of texts, prompting them to experience the true "spirit" of the literature.

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