

Environmental Concern in Shel Silverstein's "The Giving Tree"

Rafida Rabah Ahmad

Assist prof. Shaymaa Zuhair Al- Wattar

College of Arts - University of Mosul

Keywords: Children's literature, Environment, Shel Silverstein

Summary:

Children's literature has a crucial role in shaping the future generation's understanding concerning many issues, especially environmental one. Shel Silverstein an outstanding poet in this genre, has a vital role in affecting children's minds through his works. This paper examines Silverstein's impact and environmental concerns on children's literature, through his narrative poem "The Giving Tree".

The first section of the paper explores the significance of children's literature in addressing important issues in life. The second section explores children's literature in raising environmental awareness in children. The third section discusses Silverstein's contributions, focusing on his crafts and impacts on children's minds. An environmental critique of his poem "The Giving Tree" is presented in the final section. Through the analysis of the poem, the paper shows how Silverstein's writings raises awareness about human exploitation, sustainability and environmental responsibility.

Introduction

Children's literature has a fundamental role in shaping young perspectives, providing values and moral lessons which affect their behaviors. Environmental awareness, among the many topics that children's literature tackles through its narratives. It becomes increasingly important, with the increasing concerns with ecological responsibility and substantiality. Poets use their poetry to introduce children to such issues in an easy and accessible way, among them, the outstanding poet Shel Silverstein who is known for his simple poetry yet profound messages. His

narrative poem “*The Giving Tree*” introduces a powerful narrative concerning the environmental issues. Embodied through the exploitation of the boy and, the unconditional giving of the tree. A commentary on the relationship between human beings with the ecosystem.

Children’s Literature and its Significance

Children’s literature is a crucial medium for providing children with values and awareness of the world around them. It is important as it helps in shaping their attitudes, behavior and personalities. As Carrie Hintz and Eric L. Tribunella in their 2013 book *Reading Children’s Literature, a Critical Introduction* note:

Children’s literature is a key site for transmitting values and educating children. This fact makes it especially important—it has a profound impact on socialization and society. By better understanding the texts produced and given to children, we gain a stronger understanding of the broader culture in which we live. (Hintz & Tribunella, no. p)

One of the characteristics of children’s literature is its obvious messages directed to its audience. Children’s books are featured by straightforward topics, values and morals, that children can capture its messages easily. This helps them in promoting better understanding of the world and the society they live in. Additionally give them a map-like guiding them to good deeds, positive manners and values. Through tackling clear topics children’s literature plays a key role in their lives and acts as an educational tool. Mitzi Myers, who is considered as the founding mother of children’s literature in the 18th century, explains that:

Because children’s tales perform a variety of cultural functions, they are crammed with clues to changes in attitudes, values, and behavior. Above all, these key agents of socialization diagram what cultures want of their young and expect of those who tend them. (Myers, 1986, P. 33)

Children's literature acts as a significant tool for building and shaping societal values and norms across generations. The texts it produces are not only to entertain, but they are also rich with clues that serve as a powerful device of socialization, establishing concepts concerning what adults expect from children as the coming generation. It gives insights to what societies want for their young and adults who are responsible about them. For that reason, children's literature has become an important mean to provide awareness concerning environmental issues. As Dr. Junu Singh asserts that "children's literature could indeed be a very helpful tool for raising the eco-consciousness". (Singh, 2102, P.1829)

The Role of Children's Literature in Environmental Awareness

Literature has many roles to play since ancient times, one of it is art for an art sake, another important role is to reflect honestly the society. In recent years, writers use their writings for children to tackle new themes of great importance like environmental awareness, sustainability and conservation. Through certain texts, children learn about the damaging impact of human deeds on nature and the ecosystem. Children's literature has a significant role in shaping the future generation to be more conscious of the responsibilities toward the world and the significance of ethical decision-making, whether through allegories about protecting nature, fables on human relationships with the earth, or poems that highlight environmental awareness. As Dr. Junu Singh in *Role of Literature to Promote Environmental Awareness* states "[o]ne way that literature raises environmental awareness is through nature writing. Nature writing is a genre of literature that celebrates the natural world and encourages readers to appreciate and protect it" (Singh , 2017, P.1829) He also adds :

In addition to raising environmental awareness, literature can also inspire activism. Environmental activism is the work of advocating for environmental protection and conservation. Literature can inspire environmental activism by highlighting the

beauty and value of the natural world and by exposing the devastating impact of human activity on the environment. Authors and poets can use their work to advocate for environmental protection and inspire others to take action. In addition, literature can serve as a powerful tool for organizing and mobilizing environmental movements. (Singh, 2017, P.1830)

literature assists children indirectly in fostering convictions about the ecosystem and how to interact with it through its narratives, poetry and other types which are full of direct and indirect messages. Narratives that are used in a proper perspectives, acts as a significant instructional tools for children. Including green literature alongside parents' and teachers' support, it provides an understanding of nature. When adults improve eco-friendly deeds and engage with literature on certain topics concerning the environment, children may improve a sense of accountability for the nature from an early age. This kind of literature has an important affect on the present and the future generations' perspectives concerning environmental issues which will lead to protect the Earth and all creatures live on. Andi Febriana Tamrin in *Children's Literature: As a Way of Raising Environmental Consciousness – A Study asserts:*

Therefore, as one of the ways to raise the environmental consciousness, children's literature could be very effective. Many kinds of children's literature with the theme of ecology or green literature could be a helpful tool to promote the eco-consciousness among our future generation. Moreover, the teachers and the parent encouragements could become the first effort. In the end, children's literature tied together the environmental issues could be a strong ally and provide the most valuable service and amazing effort toward humanity. (Tamrin, no. p)

Technology and science can not handle or address the rising threats that the world faces concerning the environmental and ecological distress, but literature can. Through literary texts that clarify the importance of the natural elements and provide a sense of responsibility towards sustainability. Michael Pollack and

Margaret MacNabb note in *Hearts & Minds: Creative Australians and the Environment* (2000). that “authors are now willing to show kids the world and its problems, instead of a purely sunny untainted one (Pollack & MacNabb, 2000, P.327)

In the last decades, there has been a growing eco-consciousness in children’s literature, before literary texts addressed children were tackling moral topics and personal ethics. As the global issues and the environmental deterioration grows more and more, so children’s literature serves not only to guide children about ethics and values, but also on the matters and issues necessary to save nature. Pollack and MacNabb argue that:

Whereas moralizing in children’s books used to be aimed at saving the souls of the young, it is now aimed at saving their lives and the life of the whole planet—so its impassioned message is deeply urgent. (Pollack & MacNabb, 2000, P. 354)

In recent years, environmental issues have posed critical threats on modern communities and earth. Humans heavily exploited natural resources for their benefits without any considerations of the coming generations. Leading to the struggle of everyone with the huge decrease in fossil fuel, rainforests cut down, high temperature and disruptions in seasonal cycles. In response, researchers and educators have tried to find ways for raising awareness about the significance of nature and the various ecological issues. Scientific discoveries failed to achieve this goal and combat the immersive challenges successfully while literature did effectively from an ecological perspective. Readers and writers alike have turned to literature as a significant means for exploring nature's significance and highlighting ecological crises (Ismail, 2023, P. 139).

The environmental crisis is one of the major crises in this century. Humans need to begin to conceive environmental issues as they are one of the creatures who live on the earth, and especially children must be educated well to raise their attention to

the environment because they are the next generation who will be responsible for maintaining and keeping the earth safe. (Singh, 2017, P. 1829) Poets utilize their poetry as a means to convey their eco-friendly messages, among the most famous poets is the outstanding American poet Shel Silverstein.

Shel Silverstein's Impact on Children's Literature

Shel Silverstein is one of the influential figures of children's literature with his lasting impact through his unconventional narratives and the power to tackle philosophical topics that help in raising appreciation for human relationships and the natural world. His contributions to children's literature extend to more than entertainment, it acts as an educational tool to promote an early awareness and help in shaping the perspectives of the coming generations about the world around them and its crisis. This makes his children's poetry both enjoyable and educational. Born in Chicago in 1930 a writer, poet and illustrator, he is a creative genius in children's literature. He is Known for his unique and thought-provoking book's style, which left an indelible print on children, and continued to influence readers of all ages. His works spanned numerous types including poetry, signwriting and cartooning. His unfamiliar style features with sharp wit and a special drawing style which mixes simplicity with deep emotion. The use of rhythm, rhyme and a playful employment of language often accompanied with his drawings, his illustrations are as much a part of his storytelling as his words, simple and evocative images that enrich and empower the emotional influence of his poems.

Although he had a love-hate relationship with writing and illustrating for children, but his children's works what defined his career, gave him recognition and credibility. His reputation as an outstanding poet for children rests mostly on his books *The Giving Tree* 1964 and *Where the Sidewalk Ends* 1974.

Silverstein is deeply engaged in shaping a child's perspective of the world, his works mix words with drawings resulting in a special interplay between text and image

which enrich the reader's experience. This mixture is so fundamental to his artistic vision that is why he does not permit other illustrators to depict his poems (Styles,1998, P. 118) by doing so, Silverstein crafts a very distinctive literary experience that capture both the mind and heart.

Moreover, Silverstein's work is characterized by its deep respect for children's mind, he firmly rejected to belittle their minds. His works admits young reader's power to capture complex ideas and emotions infused with simple and imaginative narratives. Encouraging them to think critically and discover new ideas making his literature timeless. Different from many children's writers, he does not believe in sugar-coating reality. His poems, illustrations and even songs expose human's reality, including the ugly ones. An opportunity for self-examination and critique he offers through his works for his readers (Cousin, 2014, P. 767). As Dagmar Rosenbergova - Zemkova in *Contemporary Issues in Modern Children's Poetry* states in that Silverstein is notably recognized for his realism (Zemkova, 2011, P.12). Which can be found in his notable work like *The Giving Tree*, shows his exploration of life's complexities. Ertharin Cousin notes in "*The Giving Tree: A Modern-Day Parable Of Mutual Responsibility*" that Silverstein opposed the happy endings, mythic heroes and the magical solution in which they provide unrealistic expectations, as he thought they alienate his readers, this is evident in *The Giving Tree*. Cousin argues that:

The unconventional author stated his conviction that happy endings, magical solutions, and mythic heroes serve to alienate children by establishing impossible burdens and expectations that can never be met. The candid, even cruel, simplicity of *The Giving Tree* exemplifies Silverstein's parental logic. (Cousin, 2014, P.768)

Environmental Critique

The poem "*The Giving Tree*" (1964) written and illustrated by Silverstein, is his most significant work he released that year, yet some consider it the most controversial. He does not mean it to carry any message, a truth he always insists on. He describes

it saying “[i]t’s about a boy and a tree,” and “[i]t has a pretty sad ending.” It is “... just a relationship between two people; one gives and the other takes,” he added:

I didn’t start out to prove a message. It started out to be a good book for a kid. I imagine it reflects my ideas, but it is for children. I would like adults to buy it and read it, and I hope they can find enough in it.”. (Rogak, 2007, P.73)

Its simple language and illustrations fused with a philosophical message such as environmental issues, selflessness, sacrifice, and unconditional love, makes it a subject of many studies.

A narrative poem with only two characters, the setting is in the forest. It serves as an allegory to the relationship between humans symbolized by “the boy” and nature symbolized by “the tree”. The tree loves the boy so much, and the boy is continuously asking the tree for more and more to satisfy his demands. In the poem: The tree and the boy have a strong relationship in the beginning of the story. The tree always becomes the provider for the boy. While the boy just enjoys every time the tree give him anything. (Tamrin, no.p)

The tree selflessly gives the boy everything he wants, her apples, branches and trunk until all that is left is a stump. A relationship based on material profits. The boy only turns to the tree when he needs something, until the tree’s depletion. It is a fact that: Once human got something from nature, he will take it again and again until the nature exhausted and could give no more. The boy has this trait. He just comes if he needs something, otherwise, he will not come back. (Tamrin, no.p)

The boy, at the end returned to the tree when he was old and tired demanding a place to rest.

One of the important concerns in the world is the environmental, and the poem serves as an allegory for the relationship between human beings and nature, showing the exploitation of the environment by humans. The environment symbolized by the tree continuously gives everything it has to fulfil human needs. At

the beginning, the boy's needs are modest and harmless. As the boy becomes older, his needs increase, just as human's exploitation of the environment. The boy's actions through the poem reflect human's inclination to prioritize desires over the health of the ecosystem. He always takes anything he wants from the tree, without any considerations of the consequences. Which mirror how humans take out resources without any regard of nature. From the very beginning of the poem Silverstein's concern with the environment is obvious as the poem starts with the line "*Once there was a tree*" (Silverstein). Hence the poem deliberately:

introduces the character of the tree before the boy, by doing so, he foregrounds the importance of it in the poem and the nature in general. Although the poem about a classic story of a relationship of nature and human, it shows the readers what they could not catch in their daily lives. The life of the boy embodies the life of all humanity (Tamrin, no.p).

At the end, the boy returns to the tree in require only for a place to rest, saying:

"I don't need very much now," said the boy.

"just a quiet place to sit and rest.

I am very tired." (Silverstein, 1964, no. p)

This mirrors how after depleting the environment, human beings may realize the significance of what has been lost. The tree still there to give what it has, though it reduced to a stump. This embodies nature's power to give constantly, as in the lines:

"Well," said the tree, straightening

herself up as much as she could,

"well, an old stump is good for sitting and resting

Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down and rest." (Silverstein, 1964, no. p)

The poem reflects the unsustainable kind of the exploitation made by humans, showing the results of human's deeds over nature. It contains several environmental issues through its narrative one of them is resource depletion.

The tree constantly provides the boy what he requests her “leaves” “apples” “branches” and finally her “trunk”. Those represent what humans exploit, which are the natural resources, as in the poet writes:

"I want to buy things and have fun.

I want some money?"

"I'm sorry," said the tree, "but I

have no money.

I have only leaves and apples.

Take my apples, Boy, and sell them in
the city. Then you will have money and

you will be happy." (Silverstein, 1964, no. p)

This act symbolizes how human beings exploit resources of the nature such as fruit and wood for their economic earnings, without thinking of the long-term effects on the ecosystem. Andi Febriana Tamrin in “*Children’s Literature: As a Way of Raising Environmental Consciousness – A Study*”, states:

Once human got something from nature, he will take it again and again until the nature exhausted and could give no more....This behavior will lead to depletion of the environment. The impact is not only to nature but to human as well. The global warming, the natural disaster such flood and landslide are two examples of the natural disaster that happened quite often to us”. (Tamrin, no. p)

Another issue is deforestation, a process in which trees are cut for human profits and use, such as building or any other use. Deforestation, as Hasan Volkan Oral explains, is “a subset of the bigger land use change problem and is also known as forest degradation or forest clearance and which can be defined as the conversion of forestland to non forest land”. (Oral, 2020, P.2)

When the boy needs a house, this reflects a growing desire for more material gains. The tree, a symbol of natural resources provides its branches to be cut off. This

embodies deforestation and mirrors how forests are cleared to get benefit for humanity's development. Like housing, urban expansion, and agriculture, as the conversation between the boy and the tree reflects:

"I want a house to keep me warm," he said.

"I want a wife and I want children,
and so I need a house.

Can you give me a house?"

"I have no house," said the tree.

"The forest is my house,
but you may cut off
my branches and build a
house. Then you will be happy."

And so the boy cut off her branches
and carried them away
to build his house.

And the tree was happy. (Silverstein, 1964, no.p)

The act of cutting off the tree's branches is a metaphor for the deforestation's broader environmental influence. Like the tree loses its ability to grow. Deforestation leads to the loss of biodiversity, disturbance of the ecosystem, and finally to the climate change. The boy's continuous demands and the tree's eventual depletion can be seen as a caution about the consequence of excessive exploiting the natural sources without regards to regeneration or conservation. So the relationship between earth and humans is another central idea the poet focuses on.

Environmental sacrifice another issue that is tackled in the poem. The tree offers her trunk for the boy when he wanted to make a boat. This embodies the ultimate sacrifice of the ecosystem for humanity's ends. As is shown in the lines:

"I want a boat that will

take me far away from here.

Can you give me a boat?"

"Cut down my trunk

and make a boat," said the tree.

"Then you can sail away...

and be happy."

And so the boy cut down her trunk

and made a boat and sailed away.

And the tree was happy

... but not really (Silverstein, 1964, no.p).

Through the acts of the boy, the one-sided relationship humanity has with nature is embodied here. He constantly takes from the tree without giving in return. At the end with the passing of time, the tree gave everything to the boy without restoration, showing the results of unsustainable acts:

And after a long time

the boy came back again.

"I am sorry, Boy,"

said the tree," but I have nothing

left to give you (Silverstein, 1964,no.p)

This serves as a metaphor for the desolation and emptiness that is caused because of the exploitation of human beings to the natural sources. Which in turn mirrors another environmental issue that is the lack of consideration for sustainability. This serves as a caution to focus on concerns about sustainability and long-term effect of consuming natural resources. So, children's literature "can be a simpler lens through which children can view and explore their own feelings about the natural world around them and interpret several issues, through the eyes of other characters" (Russo, 2008, P.12)

To sum it up, Silverstein's poem serves as a caution for humans and especially the coming generation, children, to reconsider how to interact with anything belong to nature. Moreover, encouraging empathy and connection with nature through poems that present plants, animals and natural landscapes, help children to build a sense of empathy and connection towards nature. Via personifying plants and animals and make an interaction with humans, such poems assist children to comprehend that all living beings have a value and deserve care and protection. This leads them to act in a responsible way towards the environment.

References

- Basavapattan, R. (2021). Causes, effects and solutions for depletion of natural resources: Theoretical perspective. *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*.
- Cousin, E. (2015). *The Giving Tree: A modern-day parable of mutual responsibility*.
- Hintz, C., & Tribunella, E. L. (2019). *Reading children's literature: A critical introduction*. Broadview Press.
- Ismail, H. M. (2024). Ecocriticism and children's literature: Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* as an example. *World Journal of English Language*.
- Kumar, A. (2018). Brief introduction of environment, ecology and environmental pollution. *Inspira-Journal of Modern Management & Entrepreneurship (JMME)*.
- Myers, M. (1986). Impeccable governesses, rational dames, and moral mothers: Mary Wollstonecraft and the female tradition in Georgian children's books. *Children's Literature*.
- Oral, H. V. (2020). Deforestation. In *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Global Security Studies*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- Pollak, M., & MacNabb, M. (2000). *Hearts and minds: Creative Australians and the environment*. Hale & Iremonger.
- Rogak, L. (2007). *A Boy Named Shel: The life and times of Shel Silverstein*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Rosenbergová-Zemková, D. (2011). *Contemporary issues in modern children's poetry* (Doctoral dissertation, Pedagogická Fakulta, Masarykova Univerzita, Brno, Czechia).
- Russo, I. J. (2008). The impact of children's literature on the environmental awareness of a population of second grade students.
- Silverstein, S. (1964). *The Giving Tree*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Singh, J. (2018). Role of literature to promote environmental awareness. *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development*.
- Styles, M. (1998). *From the garden to the street: An introduction to 300 years of poetry for children*.
- Tamrin, A. F. (2018). *Children's literature: As a way of raising environmental consciousness—A study*. English Literature Department, Fajar University.

الاهتمام بالبيئة في قصيدة شيل سلفرستين "الشجرة المعطاءة"

أ.م. شيماء نزهة الوتائر

الباحثة: مرافدة مراح احمد

كلية الآداب - جامعة الموصل



shaymaa_zuhair@uomsouledu.iq



rafida.23arp117@student.uomosul.edu.iq

الكلمات المفتاحية: ادب الأطفال، البيئة، شيل سلفرستين

الملخص:

لأدب الأطفال دور حيوي في تشكيل فهم الجيل القادم للعديد من القضايا، لا سيما القضايا البيئية. يعتبر شيل سيلفرستين شاعراً بارزاً في هذا النوع الأدبي، حيث يلعب دوراً مهماً في التأثير على عقول الأطفال من خلال أعماله. تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية تأثير سيلفرستين واهتماماته البيئية في أدب الأطفال، من خلال قصيدته السردية "الشجرة المعطاءة". يستكشف القسم الأول من الورقة أهمية أدب الأطفال في معالجة القضايا الهامة في الحياة. أما القسم الثاني فيتناول أدب الأطفال في إثارة الوعي البيئي لديهم. يناقش القسم الثالث مساهمات سيلفرستين، مع التركيز على حرفيته وتأثيراته على عقول الأطفال. ويعرض القسم الأخير نقداً بيئياً لقصيدته "الشجرة المعطاءة". من خلال تحليل القصيدة، تظهر هذه الورقة البحثية كيف يساهم كتاب سيلفرستين في رفع الوعي حول استغلال الإنسان للطبيعة، والاستدامة، والمسؤولية البيئية.