

Analysis of E. B. White's Children's Books

Liu Jing

1. Introduction

The main career of the famous American author E. B. White (1899-1985), starting from 1927, was writing and editing for *The New Yorker* magazine. He wrote poems, cartoon captions, essays, and brief sketches for the magazine, "more than eighteen hundred pieces ... in his lifetime" (Neumeyer Annotated xxi).

Despite all his work for *The New Yorker*, today White is best known for his three children's books, *Stuart Little* (1945), *Charlotte's Web* (1952), and *The Trumpet of the Swan* (1970). These books, for which he won the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal in 1970, are now considered classics.

In my presentation I will compare White's three children's books for the following features: first, the endings and themes of the stories; second, the female supporting characters; third, the style of White's writing.

2. Endings and Themes

The important differences between White's three novels lie in their endings and themes. At the end of *Stuart Little*, White writes an open ending, as the romantic adventurer and searcher Stuart continues his probably unachievable quest to find Margalo, the bird he loves. It is the only one of his children's books with an open ending: "The conclusion to *Stuart Little* may make the reader think of the end to Milton's *Paradise Lost*--the challenge of the brave new world to Adam and Eve as they venture out on their own responsibility--a parallel that White acknowledges" (Neumeyer "White" 338).

White overcame his physical challenges, living to be eighty-six as a popular and successful author. In his children's books, just like White, the main characters never give up, and through their efforts they continue to overcome all kinds of difficulties until the ends of their stories, where they are brave, strong, and full of expectations for the future. Showing these characters overcome physical challenges shows readers that there are different ways they can overcome their own physical difficulties and live a wonderful life. On the other hand, White also tells readers through his novels to live out their own lives in their own wonderful and special ways, as no one is born perfect.

3. Female Characters

The protagonists of White's three novels are all male, and although some strong female characters in his books impress readers, sometimes they are less admirable and less important than the male main characters. Nonetheless, about *Charlotte's Web* Ursula Nordstrom wrote a letter to White saying, "You have written one of the 'Recommended Non-Sexist Books about Girls for Young Readers'" (Dunphy *Dear Genius* 319). If we apply what Nordstrom says about *Charlotte's Web* to all three of White's children's books, we may both disagree and agree with her that White's novels are non-sexist.

By analyzing the supporting female characters in the three books, we can see that some of them seem superficial or unimportant or weak, or disappear or die, while some of them are positive, powerful, and impressive.

4. Style

After discussing the plots, themes, and characters of the three novels, it's vital to explore their styles, because White's style remains consistent and attractive in his three children's books, having vivid descriptions, rich alliteration, mostly simple vocabulary, characters who like making speeches, and lists of things. As James Thurber said, "no one can write a sentence like White's or successfully imitate it" (Neumeyer Dictionary 336). And as Peter F. Neumeyer said, "White is an artist of the word and of syntax" (Dictionary 346). I agree: White's three children's books show that he is indeed a word genius, as he writes such a flexible and varied style, ranging from exaggerated comedy to serious and beautiful nature.

By comparing the styles of White's three books, we can see that in each one he uses similarly humorous and vivid writing styles to describe the characters, events, and settings of the stories in detail.

5. Conclusion

By comparing White's three children's books for their endings and themes, female supporting characters, and styles, I find that the novels have a lot in common. First, the endings and themes of the stories show that even if things are not satisfactory, you should be positive and optimistic and look to the unknown direction. Second, White also balances the female supporting characters well in the stories. Each book has at least one inferior female character, but he also writes great female characters, who may leave at least as deep an impression on the reader as the male protagonists. Third, because of the magic of White's style, reading his books satisfies people, and thus his works are still widely known today, and each book has been made into a beloved film.

Works Cited

Dunphy, Jack. *Dear Genius*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000.

White, E. B. *Stuart Little*. New York: Harper, 1945.

---. *Charlotte's Web*. New York: Harper, 1952.

---. *The Trumpet of the Swan*. New York: HarperCollins, 1970.

Zipes, Jack. *Children's Literature*. Oxford: Oxford, 2006