
THE USE OF ANIMAL CHARACTERS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: A STUDY OF THEIR SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPACT ON READERS

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of Study: This study explored the symbolic meaning behind the use of animal characters in children's literature and the ways in which they can shape children's perceptions of themselves, others, and the world around them. Examining how visual rhetoric enhances understanding of children's literature, especially in an African context like Ghana as such, this study sought to further explore how children interpret images by applying Sonja Foss's concept theory on Who Told the Most Incredible Story.

Methodology: Through a close and content analysis of selected texts, this study aims to shed light on the power of animal characters to convey complex ideas and emotions in a way that is accessible and relatable to young readers. By examining the relationship between animal

characters and their human counterparts, this study explored how animal characters can serve as powerful metaphors for human experience, illuminating the struggles, triumphs, and contradictions that define our lives. Ultimately, this study sought to deepen our understanding of animal characters' role in shaping young readers' imaginations and worldviews and to highlight the enduring appeal of these beloved literary figures.

Keywords: *Symbolic, Animal, Character, Perception, Children, Literature*

INTRODUCTION

“Language has been utilized as the most prevalent means of communicating and establishing meaning without considering additional resources like visuals, face-to-face connection with an accompanying gesture, look, and body posture that also produce meaning. "To date, most linguistics research projects have tended to concentrate only on language while neglecting or at least downplaying the contributions of other meaning-making resources," O'Halloran (2004) writes on a page There is an indication by Gee (2003) that literacy is no longer just the ability to construct and understand but regard different possibilities of meanings made available by various textual forms. Richard and Gripe (2000) also pointed out that literate students do not simply read and write but rather demonstrate competence in all forms of communication, such as print, technology and the arts so it is likely that everyone constructs and conveys meaning in a different way.

Generally, Literature is explained as the artistic study of life, therefore it is believed that literature is anything that is written but in a stylistic way. Children's storybooks are the foundational ladder in the education of young children and learning to read can be a fun and natural process. Books created especially for readers between the ages of three and thirteen are referred to as children's literature. According to Livingston and Brown (2017), children's literature is "a concept of literature that is exclusively about children or aimed at children." It refers to literature with concepts, relationships, and language frequently perceived as straightforward and can impart moral lessons to young readers. Through an analysis of select children's books, the study reveals the various ways in which animal characters can be used to represent human qualities and emotions. For instance, a wolf may be used to represent danger or aggression, while a rabbit may be used to symbolize innocence or vulnerability.

The research also highlights how the use of animal characters in literature can help young readers develop empathy and understanding towards animals and nature. Additionally, the

study examines the potential negative impact of animal characters that perpetuate harmful stereotypes or reinforce biased beliefs about certain animal species. For example, portraying certain animals as evil or aggressive may perpetuate negative attitudes towards those species in real life.

Overall, this study emphasizes the importance of thoughtful and responsible use of animal characters in children's literature. By promoting empathy and understanding towards animals, well-crafted animal characters can inspire young readers to become more compassionate and caring individuals.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

There have been several academic studies on either the text or the graphics in children's reading, there have been many studies on children's literature but the analysis of visual rhetoric has been downplayed so I wish to explore further in children's literature using visual rhetoric as a tool.

The use of animal characters in children's literature is a common practice, but the deeper symbolic significance and potential impact on young readers have not been fully explored. While some studies have focused on the use of animal characters in specific children's books, there is a need for a broader analysis that examines the prevalence and variety of animal characters in children's literature. Additionally, there is a need to investigate how animal characters in literature can influence young readers' attitudes and behaviors towards animals and nature. The problem statement for this study is, therefore, to explore the symbolic significance of animal characters in children's literature and their impact on young readers' attitudes and behaviors towards animals, as well as to examine the potential negative impact of harmful stereotypes perpetuated through the use of animal characters.

In other words, there are few studies that examine how visual rhetoric enhances understanding of children's literature, especially in an African context like Ghana as such, this study seeks to further explore how children interpret images by applying Sonja Foss's concept theory on *Who Told the Most Incredible Story*.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study is aimed to identify and discuss the symbolic significance and its impact on readers in children's story books. Since the basic element of children's stories is based on images and

illustrations, the study deems it fit to investigate and discuss the visual images used in Jane Naana Opoku-Agyemang's *Who Told the Most Incredible Story*.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Foss (2005) defines visual rhetoric as “a term used to describe the study of visual imagery within the discipline of rhetoric”. Tracing the history of rhetoric, one could note that rhetoric has usually been associated with speech and text which involves signs and symbols used for communication. The introduction of design materials into the scope of rhetoric introduced scholarship to another dimension people use to communicate effectively. The linkages created between designs and rhetoric gave birth to visual rhetoric, which concerns the study of how text is used in combination with visuals or designs for effective communication of meaning. “Language and visual communication can both be used to realize the ‘same’ fundamental systems of meaning that constitute our culture, but each does so by its own specific forms, do so differently, and independently” (Gunther and van Leeuwen, 2006). The inception of critical studies on visual rhetoric can be traced to Leo Groarke's “Logic, art and argument” which was published in 1996 and gave critical perspectives on the concept of visual rhetoric. During this period, other prominent scholars in the persons of Sonja Foss, David Birdsell, Anthony Blair and many others published critical essays and papers on visual rhetoric. However, it must be noted that before this period, some scholars like Michael Gilbert, Sol Worth and many others had published works on the presence of visuals in text. The period of 1996 is usually earmarked as the inception of robust scholarship on visual rhetoric due to the sort of exploration that happened with respect to the production of papers and essays on visual rhetoric.

At this point, it is important to note that the acceptance of visual studies into the sphere of rhetorical studies has not been an easy feat to achieve. Although many scholars acknowledged the presence and link between rhetoric and designs or visuals, accepting them as another way of studying rhetoric was a problem. In 1970, Waldo Braden is noted to have made the statement that “rhetoricians are not trained to deal with visual images”. “Other scholars of rhetoric suggested that imagery as rhetorical form is tainted when compared to discourse in terms of its impact on public communication. Although these rhetoricians did not oppose the study of visual imagery, they privileged the study of discourse over the visual because of what they saw as the superior properties of discourse” (Foss, 2005). Again, Thams (2016) also cites another reason for what might have accounted for the resistance to accepting the study of rhetoric as encompassing visual studies to be that rhetoricians have “their desire to accumulate theoretical

insights into rhetoric”. This idea is based on what is expressed by Hart (1976). Hart (1976) notes that:

To the extent that scholars deviate from traditional, commonly shared understandings of what rhetoric is by including non-social, mechanically mediated, and nonverbal phenomena in the rhetorical mix they are, to that extent, necessarily forsaking the immediate implementation of the theoretical threads derived in previous studies of human, non - mediated, problematic, verbal interchanges.

In contemporary times, the pervasive nature of visual images in discourse has proven the legitimacy in the studies of visual rhetoric which has even led to the development of the theory of visual rhetoric which provides a theoretical lens with respect to the studies of visual rhetoric. The study of visual images from the perspectives of rhetoric has also proven that “the visuals provide access to a range of human experiences which are not always available through the study of verbal discourse” (Foss, 2005). Foss contributes to the importance of studying visuals from the rhetorical perspectives as follows:

Discursive language has definite limits to its usefulness. Because it employs conventional meaningful units according to rules of grammar and syntax, because each word has a relatively fixed meaning and the total meaning of this type of discourse is built up along a linear and logical pattern, it can only refer to the neutral aspects of our world of observation and thought. But there is another side of existence which escapes the control of discursive language.

Visual rhetoric then can be seen as providing explanations and an understanding of human experiences that is beyond what can be expressed using discursive language. In this sense, Foss (2005) explains that visual rhetoric can be used to refer to the “visual object or artifact” and perspective on the study of visual data. This presupposes that to engage in visual rhetoric is to look at how visuals are created by people with the purpose of communication – a painting, an advertisement, or a chart that constitutes the data of study. There seem to be a thin line or differences between a design studies and studies that involve visual rhetoric. On this note, Foss (2005) argues that the differences lie in their communicative function. Therefore, Foss (2005) proposes three key elements that transform a visual artifact (design) into a communicative artefact (visual rhetoric). These are, it must be symbolic, must involve human intervention, “and be presented to an audience in order to communicate with them” (Foss, 2005).

Visual rhetoric from the perspective of Foss (2005)

As noted earlier, the continuous efforts made by scholars to explore the phenomenon of visual rhetoric have led to the application of the term in two varied forms as it is applied in the study of rhetoric. Visual rhetoric is used to mean “both visual object or artefact and a perspective on the study of visual data. With respect to the first application of the term as a visual object or artefact, Foss means that “visual rhetoric is a product which individuals create as they use visual symbols for the purpose of communicating”. The application of the term in its second sense means “it is also a perspective which scholars apply that focuses on the symbolic processes by which images perform communication”. Over the period, the idea of rhetoric has gradually moved from the field of discourse to encapsulate the use of visuals to communicate meaning. Foss’ believes that to center rhetoric basically on the use of text or discourse without considering the use of visuals means ignoring a very important component of meaning-making in communication.

Visual artifacts constitute a major part of the rhetorical environment, and to ignore them to focus only on verbal discourse means we understand only a miniscule portion of the symbols that affect us daily. The study of visual symbols from a rhetorical perspective also has grown with the emerging recognition that such symbols provide access to a range of human experience not always available through the study of discourse (Foss, 1994).

Foss in the above abstract expands the processes and ways of making meaning above the discourse level to capture the use of symbols and visuals. Visuals communicate certain deep meaning which when understood in conjunction with text, provides another dimensional meaning to what is communicated and what it means. He has continuously argued for the need to develop a rhetorical schema for evaluating images. Foss (1992) is concerned with how visual imagery “evokes a response” and influences viewers. By focusing on the rhetorical “effects” of images, Foss creates a communicative channel model which simply replaces the sender – message – receiver model of language with a creator – image – viewer model of visual imagery.

In view of this, what Foss sets out to do with his idea of visual rhetoric, specifically two-way description theory is to provide a view of rhetorical theory that goes beyond the reliance on text or discourse to the inclusion of visuals. Again, by providing detailed perspectives on visual rhetoric, scholars and readers are exposed to the importance of visuals in making meaning during communication.

For me, the most important reason for studying visual rhetoric is to develop rhetorical theory that is more comprehensive and inclusive. Throughout rhetoric's long tradition, discursive constructs and theories have enjoyed ideological hegemony, delimiting the territory of study to linguistic artifacts, suggesting that visual symbols are insignificant or inferior, and largely ignoring the impacts of the visual in our world. Because rhetorical theory has been created almost exclusively from the study of discourse, rhetoricians largely lack sophisticated understanding of the conventions through which meaning is created in visual artefacts and the processes by which they influence viewers (Foss, 1982).

For a design or an image to be considered a communicative artefact, Foss (2005) proposes three key elements that transform a visual artefact (design) into a communicative artefact (visual rhetoric). These are, it must be symbolic, must involve human intervention, “and be presented to an audience in order to communicate with them” (Foss, 2005). Below is a detailed explanation of what Foss means when he proposes these characteristics or elements.

METHODOLOGY

Wyse (2011) stated that qualitative research is primarily exploratory research. It is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. It provides insights into the problem or helps to develop ideas or hypotheses for potential quantitative research. This research employs a qualitative approach to analyze the selected texts. This was to explore the various ways that visual rhetoric can impact the understanding of children’s literature in Naana J.E.S Opoku-Agyemang’s *Who told the most incredible story?* This is to say that the entire work was based on these selected texts and other relevant secondary materials for the analysis and how children interpret images by applying Sonja Foss’ visual rhetoric theory on *Who Told the Most Incredible Story* dwelling on the three main features of visual rhetoric as a communicative artefact which is first, the picture must appear symbolic, second, it involves human intervention, and the last must be shown to the audience to communicate with that audience. The features of visual rhetoric as an artefact assist the children in reading the story to express themselves and interpret the images in the story to communicate their understanding.

In this study, the researchers employed Sonja Foss’ theory rooted in visual rhetoric for the analysis of the selected stories. Rhetoric is the social function that influences and manages meanings (Brummet, 1991, p. xiv). Visual rhetoric is the term used to describe the study of visual imagery within the discipline of rhetoric. The study draws much from the first sense that is visual rhetoric as a communicative artefact which involves three characteristics that must be

evident for a visual image to qualify as visual rhetoric because not every visual object is visual rhetoric. The first marker is symbolic action which requires the arbitrary image to go beyond serving as a sign. It must be symbolic to indirectly connect to its referent. The second marker states that rhetoric must have human intervention that is humans must be engaged in the process of image creation or the process of interpretation and may assume the form of transforming non-rhetorical images into visual rhetoric. The third marker is the presence of an audience which implies communication with an audience either internal or external. Since pictures and illustrations form the foundation of the selected children's stories, the study thought it appropriate to look into and analyze the pictures used in Jane Naana Opoku-Who Agyemang's *Told the Most Incredible Story* by linking symbols with the messages that need to be communicated to the audience. Analyzing the study by using visual rhetoric effectively gives children who are reading a tale a message that is both more meaningful and clearer.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS



Figure 1: The leopard and its building

The image in Figure 1 shows the leopard making final touches on its building. It is on its ladder making the final touches. The setting depicts a small compound with a single room of a leopard. The symbolic action helps the readers in the above image to interpret the kind of activity going on. Readers can communicate from the image through symbolic action.

The color of the character in the image helps readers to identify the exact character in the image without difficulty. This process involves a selection process to make something work, such as selecting colors, shapes, media, and even measurements. This human intervention also converts non-rhetorical visual images to visual rhetoric. Visual rhetoric requires human action in the

process of creation and the process of interpretation (Foss, 2005). The second visual is also related to the analysis of the study since the images in the stories are colorful with different shapes and measurements that will help children distinguish between characters and events in the story depending solely on the images by applying the second feature in the theory.

The audience involvement helps them to interpret the image, hence the audience is able to contextualize and make meaning to the activities in the image. Through this, the subject of visual rhetoric becomes effective in use to the readers. The first-person narrative is employed in this narrative as the character taught is alone and speaks to himself alone in the narrative. The narrative presented elements and functions of the image in order to develop an explanation of how visual symbols operate.



Figure 2: *The leopard and her friend*

The image in Figure 2 shows two characters, the leopard and the other animal. Both animals are holding loads in a sack in their bag. Their posture shows that loads of the characters are very heavy. The setting is in front of Leopard's house in a small compound. Visual rhetoric can simply give or implicit meaning to a particular visual image. It also describes the culture reflected in the visual. Visual rhetoric is the application of knowledge that focuses on the process of translating symbols into pictures to convey a message or communicate. Foss (2005).

Through human intervention, readers are able to distinguish between characters by using color to measure. The two main characters in the image are easily differentiated by readers. According to Atkin (2010), the message should be clear about what is to be conveyed, inform the target group, and state the process of each action that needs to be taken. The message that is tried to be conveyed will exactly meet the purpose of delivering.

Audience presence is also seen in the above image as the audience is able to clearly state that there is a dialogue going on between two major characters after an expedition with their luggage. Symbols from images as well as text carry a specific message to the target audience. Cheung (2011) explains all types of images are about meaning.

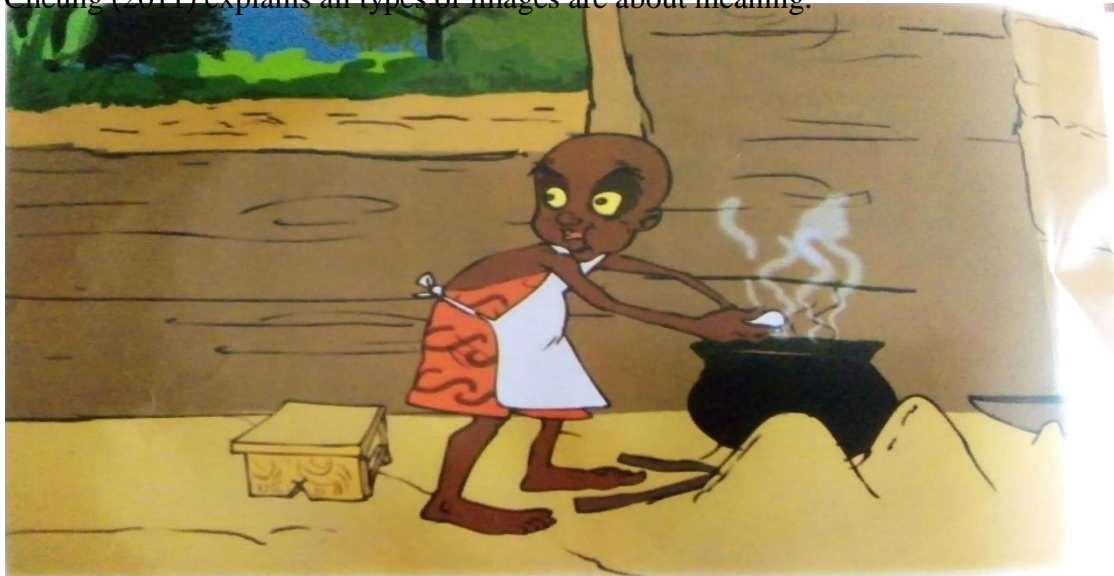


Figure 3: A young woman at her kitchen

Symbolically the above image shows a setting of a kitchen. The setting exposes us to properties like a kitchen stool, a pot on the fire boiling with a young woman in an apron staring at the pot and looking behind as if she is expecting someone. The picture descriptively gives interpretation to the text hence it affirms that visual rhetoric is the application of knowledge that focuses on the process of translating symbols into pictures to convey a message or communicate.

Human action is included in the visual rhetoric. People are exposed to visual rhetoric when they participate in creative pursuits such as painting, drawing, or photography. The method requires a deliberate decision to transmit as well as deliberate decisions on the techniques to use in the place, such as shadow, shape, medium, and size. The image above paints a clear picture of a woman in the kitchen expecting someone; as she looks she stares seriously behind as she dips a substance into the pot.

The presence of the audience is much more significant in the visual rhetoric analysis of children's literature. The audience is able to interpret the image through the available properties and designs hence pupils are able to communicate the activities of the characters in the image to others.



Figure 4: *Leopard in a tough speed behind the lion with his cutlass*

According to Foss, in order to analyze a picture rhetorically, two key components must be present: parts that have been shown, and elements that have been suggested. The above image shows a conflict existing between two characters as one is chasing the other with a machete. Symbolic action sets in as the image portrays its own interpretation with the activities presented in the image. Children are able to interpret the visual image rhetorically by engaging the concept of Foss concept of symbolic action.

The path to discovering the ideas, thoughts, subjects, and implications that a viewer is likely to derive from the displayed components is through recognition of the visual's presented components, which includes naming the visual's major physical highlights, such as appearance, shape, space, medium, and shading, whereas distinguishing proof of the suggested components is through discovering the id (interpersonal). The deliberate creation or connotations of colors, frames, and other elements in order to communicate with a group of people are referred to as visual rhetoric as an artefact. The above image shows the leopard in a tough speed behind the lion with his cutlass. The above image presumes that the lion might be accused of the stolen meat in the pot as he was seen engrossed in an argument with the old man in the kitchen. Through human intervention, this descriptive is drawn.

The presence of the audience is registered in the above image as the audience can relate well with the scenario in the image and communicate it to others as a replica interpretation of the text as visual rhetoric gives a discretionary relation between image and referent as the symbolic activity. It also comprises human action or something similar in the sense that the production of the image (painting) includes the intentional decision to communicate as well as conscious decisions in areas such as colors, structures, medium, and size. This an image that develops its meanings and implications via ways other than words or texts.

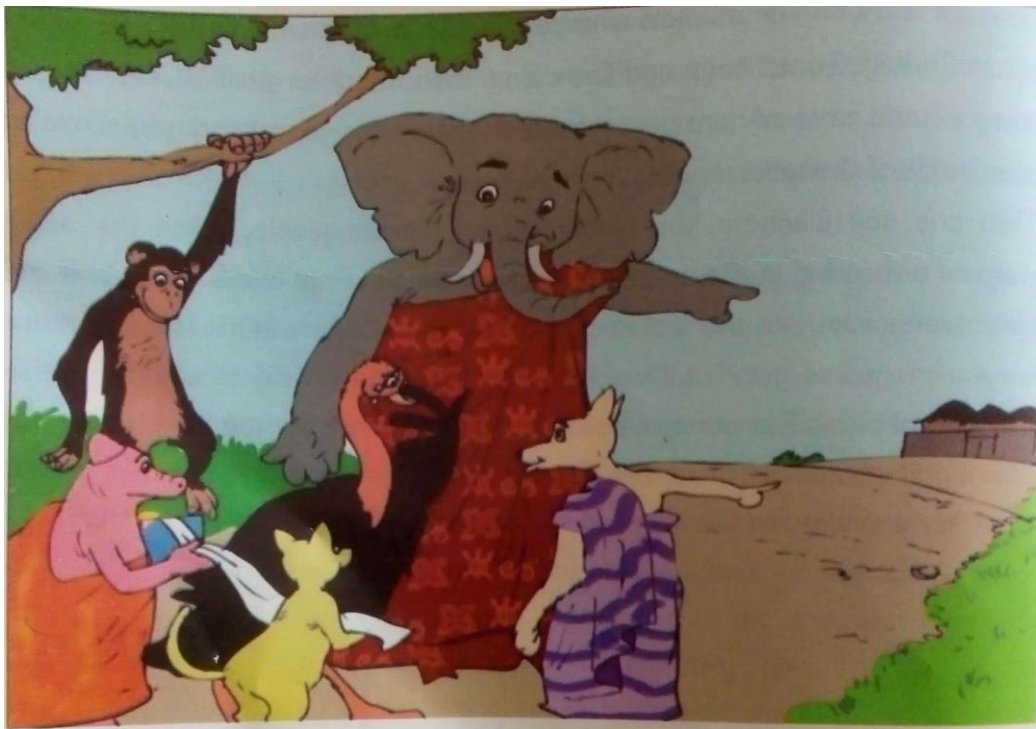


Figure 5: *Conflict ensued among the animals*

The above figure portrays a crowd of animal characters fusing in conflict and directing a culprit on a way to a particular destination. The image shows that there is a problem and a culprit is involved and must be sent to the appropriate quarters for arbitration. The image brings out the interpretation from the actions exhibited hence it makes it easy for children to bring out the meaning without much difficulty.

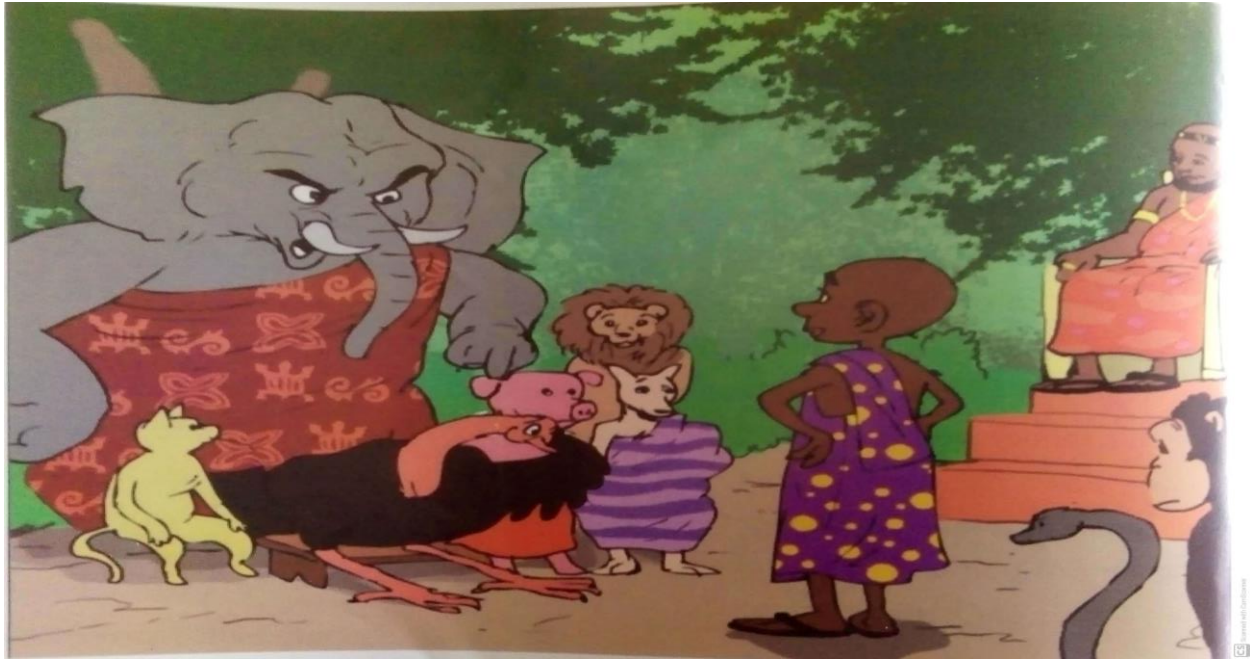


Figure 6: proceedings at the chief palace

The image in Figure 6 shows the sequence of events from the previous image as the culprit has been dragged to the chief palace to face judgment. The setting exposes us to the chief palace with the chief, the linguist, and his elders. The crowd with the culprits has also arrived at the chief palace in readiness to present their case. The image portrays how proceedings at the chief palace go on and the linguist in readiness to listen to the crowd and present their case to the chief.



Figure 7: Arbitration at the chief's palace

The image still portrays the setting of the palace, where the linguist is in dialogue with the sneak on the matter brought to the chief. The other characters are quietly listening to the conversation between the sneak and the linguist. Audience presence is also seen in the above image as the audience are able to clearly state that there is a dialogue going on between two major characters after and expedition with their luggage. Symbols from images as well as text carry a specific message to the target audience. Cheung (2011) explains all types of images are about meaning.



Figure 8: *An old woman a meeting with animals like a tortoise, monkey, bird, and horse*

The image in Figure 8 depicts an old woman with animals like a tortoise, monkey, bird, and horse. The setting portrays a compound of a house under a tree where the woman tells her story to the animals as they quietly listen to her. The woman's facial expression depicts that the woman's story is tragic. The other animals' facial expressions also depict their surprise at the narrative of the lonely woman. Through a symbolic action, the readers can interpret and relate to the setting in the image. A female narrative in a small village of various animal characters and an elderly woman. Children through visual rhetoric can interpret the action that unfolds in the narrative and point out the various character names. Foss (2005) wrote that to qualify as visual rhetoric rather than as discourse, the image has to involve three things. The image has to be a symbol that conveys some meaning, it must involve human intervention in the form of image creation, and it has to be presented in some way with an audience in mind. Foss looks to examples to drive her point home. She considers the image of a stop sign to show an arbitrary image that has taken on symbolic meaning and, through the use of that symbolic meaning, causes a car to stop.

To show the human intervention of an image, Foss gave the example of a tree that is not, in and of itself, rhetoric; however, when a human brings that tree into the home to symbolize Christmas, then that tree, through human intervention, becomes a part of visual rhetoric. For her third principle, Foss (2005) wrote that the manipulator of an image is not only manipulating

the image for the sole purpose of self-expression but also to convey some message to some audience outside herself. According to Foss, these three things – meaning, human intervention, and the audience must be present to call discussion of an image visual rhetoric rather than visual discourse. Humans engage in visual rhetoric when it relates to the process of creating a picture as pupils learn children’s literature. The image above it requires the intervention of the reader to create meaning. Children viewing the image can point out the various colors of the animals and the costume of the elderly woman. The process of human intervention involves a selection process to make something work such as the selection of colors, shapes, media, and even measurements. This human intervention also converts non-rhetorical visual images to visual rhetoric. Foss (2005).

First, Hocks (2003) wrote that the audience stance is important to this study of visual rhetoric about the ethos that encourages or discourages interactivity by the audience (p. 632). From the image above images are familiar to the audience and are within their context hence they will be able to interpret and relate to them. Hocks (2003) second addition to Foss’ schema is audience transparency; that is, the more an image is tied to other conventions familiar to a particular audience, such as graphics the more transparent the image will be (p. 632).

The narrative techniques in the above image portray the first person as the elderly woman takes the center stage to narrate her situation to the other characters in the narrative. The readers can interpret the voice from the organization of the characters in the image.



Figure 9: *The bird is sitting on the branch of a tree viewing other animals*

Image 9 depicts a setting of a forest with a small river. The bird is sitting on the branch of a tree viewing other animals performing their activities. The bird-eye is focused on the sneak trying to prey on the rat. The tortoise is also swimming in the river as it is enjoying nature.



Figure 10: *A lonely bird viewing from a branch of a tree*

Figure 10 shows a lonely bird viewing from a branch of a tree. Trying to figure out what is going on the ground when it flies high. Its eyes show the amazing things it sees while it flies high. The setting of the bird portrays a typical forest with a huge tree. Visual rhetoric requires human action in the process of creation and the process of interpretation (Foss, 2005). The second visual is also related to the analysis of the study since the images in the stories are colorful with different shapes and measurements that will help children distinguish between characters and events in the story depending solely on the images by applying the second feature in the theory.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Through the adoption of Foss's theory, the study used to help pupils examine images based on context and meaning by applying the three elements: symbolic action, human intervention and the presence of an audience. The study found that pupils were able to identify and interpret the setting and characters in the stories through the actions of the images by relating to the colors, shape and size to create the relationship between and among events and characters. In visual rhetoric, a picture should go beyond its function as a sign, symbolic, and the picture is indirectly connected to the thing being referred to (Foss, 2005). The study found that pupils used signs, pictures, and symbolic images in interpreting the content of the stories.

The study also found that pupils also got engaged with the stories through human intervention. Pupils engage in visual rhetoric to relate to the process of interpreting a picture. Pupils were able to select and identify characters and themes based on colors, shapes, media, and even measurements. This human intervention is also the conversion of non-rhetorical visual images to visual rhetoric.

The study also found that pupils reading the story express themselves and interpret the images in the story to communicate their understanding. This is a result of Foss's third element which states the importance of the presence of the audience who is the reader "the children's", and if the pupils are able to engage and create meaning from the images then visual rhetoric has a big influence in enhancing reading and children literature.

RECOMMENDATION

This study identified the characteristics of teachers' attitude towards Children's Literature, which is linked to their knowledge of and interest in literature about children. Such results are similar to those from previous research. The main strengths of this research are based on the conceptual framework, theoretical framework and the emphasis on literature for children. Based on the outcomes of the current study, a study can be undertaken to assess that visual rhetoric play a crucial role in the mental development of the mind, since image create a mental picture in the mind so as the images in the selected stories created a mental picture in the minds of the pupils for critical literary thing and interpretation.

The results of the study seem to call for national research into the problems of reading in the basic school. The following recommendations are made to further improve pupils reading. Firstly, teachers need to vary their methods of teaching children's literature. They should adopt methods like illustrated storytelling to make reading interesting and enjoyable. Also, head teachers should organize school based in-service training courses for teachers on the use of new approaches to teaching reading. Heads of schools should also ensure that their schools are provided with requisite reading materials to enable every class teacher to create a reading corner in the classroom where short stories, pictures, charts and short sentences are displayed for pupils to read. Lastly, the Ghana Education Service should see to it that schools are stocked with adequate and relevant reading books and teaching and learning materials.

CONCLUSION

The present study confirms previous findings and provides additional evidence suggesting that children's responses to and interpretations of picture books with meta-fictive devices and the

impact of visual rhetoric on children's conceptual understanding, and learning abilities in reading children's literature and reading attitude and knowledge of children's literature.

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