

The Deep Meanings in The Little Prince by Antoine Saint-Exupéry

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Abstract :

This study examines *The Little Prince* as a deeply symbolic and philosophical text through an interpretative and analytical approach grounded in hermeneutic and semantic methodologies. The study focuses on analyzing the title as a semantic gateway to the text, as well as deconstructing the central symbols that shape the novel's deep structure. It also addresses the narrative events as carriers of human and intellectual meanings that transcend the surface of the story. The study seeks to reveal the existential and human values articulated in the text, such as innocence, friendship, responsibility, and the meaning of life. It highlights the importance of symbolism in constructing the narrative discourse and in guiding the reader toward a reflective reading of the text. The study relies on semantic analysis to explore the relationship between language and meaning, and between the explicit and the implicit. Ultimately, it aims to emphasize the philosophical dimension of the text and its contribution to world humanistic literature.

Keywords: The Little Prince – Hermeneutics – Symbolism – Semantics – Human Values

1. Introduction

The Little Prince is one of the most influential novels in literary history because it raises numerous human issues and continues to receive extensive critical attention. Although the title suggests it is a children's book, the novel carries philosophical and existential depth that appeals to readers of all ages. It is a richly symbolic novel that addresses timeless human concerns across time. Among these issues it raises are childhood, psychological maturity, love, human relationships, and perspectives on life. It also offers a satirical critique of forms of human thought.

Structuralism approaches remain confined to textual analysis and often neglect the reader's interpretative engagement, it overlooks the interpretive richness and the layers of meaning that the text can offer.

Given the novel's symbolic and philosophical complexity, this study adopts a semiotic and reader-response approach. This paper aims to present an analytical interpretive reading from the perspective of a reader who admires this novel. This inquiry raises several key questions, such as:

Why did the author choose this title specifically, "The Little Prince," and what does he aim to convey through it?

Is the little prince in the novel the author himself, conversing with the child within him?

Is his journey a journey into the world of childhood?

Can children be wiser than adults?

2 . Novel summary

This novel was written in 1943 by the French author Antoine Saint-Exupéry. Notably, Saint-Exupéry was also an aviator, a detail that significantly shapes the narrative, as the central character is a pilot, and the story is told from his perspective in the first person. The novel is divided into 27 parts. The novel opens with a deeply meaningful dedication, as the author dedicates his work to an elderly person named Leon Werth. He justified his choice of this person for three reasons: the first is that this person is his best friend. The second is that this elderly person can understand children's books. The third is that this person suffers from hunger and cold, and therefore needs consolation. The author then says that if these reasons are not sufficient, he dedicates the novel to this elderly person when he was a young child. All adults were once children, but few of them remember...¹

The novel begins with a first-person narrative, in which the aviator recounts an incident from his childhood at the age of six. He drew a huge snake swallowing an elephant and showed his

drawing to adults, who described it as a hat. This frustrated him, and he realized that adults always need explanations. He then abandoned drawing on the advice of adults and focused on arithmetic, grammar, history, and especially geography. He became an aviator, traveling the world until his plane broke down in the middle of the desert, where he only had enough water to last eight days. During his first night in the desert, he is awakened by a small blond boy who unexpectedly asks him to draw a sheep. The two later became friends, and the narrator learned that the little prince came from an asteroid called B612. He maintains his asteroid by uprooting baobabs and tending to a unique rose he deeply cherishes on its surface. However, one time, a misunderstanding occurred between him and the rose, so he decided to leave and explore other planets. Before arriving on Earth, the little prince visited six asteroids, where he met a king, a vain man, a drunkard, a businessman, a lamplighter, and a geographer; all of these were grown-up people who lived alone on these asteroids. The little prince was amazed by them and could not understand them. Following the geographer's advice, he visited planet Earth, where he met the first creature: a poisonous snake. It offered to touch him and return him to its asteroid. However, he ignored its offer and continued on his way, where he met a fox, who taught him that the important things in life are visible only to the heart, and the time he spent caring for his rose is what makes it important and unique, and love makes a person more responsible. Then the little prince meets a train switchboard, where he learns that only children know what they are looking for and are lucky. He then meets

¹ Antoine Saint-Exupéry, *The little prince*, trans. by : RICHARD HOWARD, HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT, Boston New York ,p 03

merchant selling thirst-quenching tablets, but the little prince is surprised by his point of view. On the pilot's eighth day in the desert, he had drunk the last drop of water he had left, so the little prince suggested that they look for a well. They both set off in search of the well, despite the pilot's difficulty finding one in the middle of the desert. The surprise came at dawn when, by chance, the pilot found a well with a pulley, a bucket, and a rope. They both drank until they were satisfied. One of the most important things the little prince told the pilot was that many people don't know what they are looking for because they can't see with their hearts. In the end, the pilot can repair his plane, but he is unable to prevent the sad moment of parting when the snake bites the little prince after he tells the pilot that he is returning to his asteroid and that the stars will remind him of him whenever he looks at them.²

3.The title analysis

The title is the first step in any book, as it forms the reader's first impression of the book and its subject. Therefore, the title is an important element in the literary process because it is the first thing the reader sees and because it is a factor of attraction for him. It also guides the reader in the process of interpretation and understanding of the literary text because of its ability to contain and summarize the content of the text as a whole.

The title has received the attention of many critics, perhaps the most prominent of whom is Gerard Genette. According to him, the title “raises problems of definition and requires careful analysis.”³ , This is confirmation by Gerard Genette that the title is an important and necessary element, and therefore the reader must stop and analyze it, John Fisher argues that interpretation is the purpose of the title, in which, according to him, the titles are names whose function is to guide the reader to interpretation⁴. According to Gerard Genette, there are four functions of the title:

Designative, descriptive, connotative, tempting⁵.

Returning to the novel under study, we find that the author has chosen a distinctive title, "The Little Prince," which makes us wonder why he chose this title.

The phrase “The Little Prince” recurs throughout the narrative, reinforcing its centrality to the story’s meaning, as the narrator uses it to describe the child he met in the desert. This is a defining function of the title. However, this leads us to further question the author's motives for choosing this particular title and why he described the little child as the "Little Prince." This brings us to the connotative function.

The title consists of three words: "The", "Little", and "Prince."

² Ibid

³ Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. By JANE E. LEWIN, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1997, p. 55

⁴ John Fisher, "Entitling." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 11, no. 2, University of Chicago Press, USA, 1984, pp. 287-288

⁵ Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. By JANE E. LEWIN, p. 76

The

Definite article

Little

Adjective

Prince

Noun

To begin, it is useful to consider the term's denotative definition. The word "prince" in the Cambridge Dictionary means: "an important male member of a royal family, especially a son or grandson of the king or queen"⁶

In the Oxford dictionary, it means "male member of a royal family, esp the son of a king or queen"⁷, so the word prince means a member of the royal family and is often the son of the king.

The word "prince" carries a special value, and that is why the author chose it to name the little boy in the novel. It carries connotations of nobility, innocence, and distinction. Let's not forget that the little prince is alone on his planet, and he is the one who takes care of him. The term also carries connotations of innocence and quiet wisdom, qualities that define the character's perspective on life. He is a prince not because he has authority and control over people, but because of his simplicity and innocent spirit, and his insight and wisdom in life. Likewise, the little prince came from another planet. In other words, he came from another world carrying a message with valuable and wise dimensions. Before we conclude this section, I would like to point out a very important point related to the

biography of the writer Exupéry, who lost his brother," Around June 1917, Antoine's little brother Francois died from rheumatic fever, which he contracted while in Switzerland. The two brothers were incredibly close, and Antoine sat beside Francois until he passed away. He would later write that his brother "remained motionless for an instant. He did not cry out. He fell as gently as a young tree falls."⁸, The little prince also looks like Exupéry as a young child and also like his younger brother François, as both are blond and have tousled hair.⁹

This painful loss deeply affected the writer's psyche because of his brother's important position in his life. Perhaps he chose this powerful characteristic of the Little Prince to emphasize his brother's value to him, because of the importance of this particular point, I will return in the next section to this painful memory and its influence on the writing of *The Little Prince*.

4. The Little Prince's Travels: A Dialogue Between the World of Childhood and the World of adulthood

On his asteroid, named B612, the little prince lives alone, caring for his tiny asteroid. His

⁶ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/prince>

⁷ Oxford Dictionary, Oxford University, UK, ed 04,p 349

⁸ <https://disciplesofflight.com/antoine-de-saint-exupery>

⁹ Michelle Morin, *The Little Prince of Saint Exupery: A Mourning Work*, American Journal of Psychiatry and Neuroscience, Vol. 12, No. 4, USA,2024,p68

solitude is comforted by a rose, which he nurtures and communicates with.

Let us consider the secret behind choosing the number 612 to name the asteroid on which the little prince lives. Why did the author choose this specific number? Might the number B612 symbolically reference children in the middle childhood stage, roughly between six and twelve years of age?

Psychologists call this stage middle childhood, which is a very important stage in a child's life, as he undergoes psychological and mental changes that prepare him to enter school. Jean Piaget emphasizes the ability of children at this age to think logically, reason, and solve problems¹⁰. While speculative, this interpretation opens space for psychological readings of the text.

The little prince then embarks on a journey of exploration and learning, visiting six asteroids, all of which share one characteristic: their inhabitants are adults. On the first asteroid, 325, he meets a king sitting on a simple throne. He is a tyrannical king who maintains the illusion of power, authority, and ownership over his isolated domain on an asteroid where he lives alone. This is what makes the little prince curious about adults. Then he visits an asteroid inhabited by an arrogant person looking for admirers, which surprises the little prince. Then he moves to another asteroid inhabited by a drunkard, and again the little prince is surprised by the adults. Then he visits an asteroid inhabited by a businessman who thinks he owns the stars, and his only concern is to accumulate wealth, so the little prince is surprised by his way

of thinking. Then he visits a very small asteroid inhabited by one person who works on the task of lighting the lamps and follows strange instructions, which are to turn off and turn on the lamp every minute because his asteroid rotates once every minute. Although the little prince is surprised by this person, he finds him better than the previous ones. Then he moves to an asteroid inhabited by a geographer who has never explored his asteroid. The geographer advises him to visit planet Earth.

It seems from the above that the writer is indirectly mocking the way some people think and see the world, as the king represents the tyrannical authority, the drunkard represents the foolish person, the businessman represents the selfish person who only cares about collecting money, the lamplighter represents the person who applies instructions without logic, and the geographer represents the scientist or the intellectual who lives far from reality.

After landing on Earth, the little prince meets the pilot in the desert, This narrative setting evokes comparisons with Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, where the desert serves as a mystical and symbolic space, and This is what the little prince confirmed when he said: "What makes the desert beautiful is that somewhere it hides a well..."¹¹

This encounter represents a symbolic convergence between the realm of childhood and that of adulthood. However, let us ask who met whom. Was it the prince who found the pilot, or was it the pilot who rediscovered the child within himself? Could the pilot's journey be the narrator's journey to meet the little boy

¹⁰Development During Middle Childhood: The Years From Six to Twelve, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK216770/>

¹¹ Antoine Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, tr: RICHARD HOWARD,p68

within him? The pilot learned many things from the wise little prince, and the latter, in turn, learned from his many journeys. His journey to Earth remains the most beneficial for him, as it allowed him to understand many things about the world, love, loyalty, and the relationships between people, a topic we will address in the coming chapter.

5 .The Little Prince and the Rose: Woman, Love ,and responsibility

The rose holds rich symbolic significance across cultures, frequently associated with themes of love, purity, and vulnerability. It has been used since ancient times in mythological and literary texts. For example, we find it in the Greek myth that tells the story of love between Adonis and Aphrodite. After Adonis died due to an attack by a wild boar, red roses grew from his blood spilled on the ground. This refers to the connection of the rose symbol with love and its continuation after death. It also symbolizes purity and romance¹². The rose symbolizes women and feminine strength. Although women may appear fragile and weak, they have the strength to endure and challenge.¹³

Therefore, we should interpret the rose in this novel as representing a woman who is looking for a man's attention and sympathy. Several passages in the novel suggest these connotations, "if someone loves a flower of which just one example exists among all the millions and millions of stars, that's enough to make him happy when he looks at the stars"¹⁴ , "the flower continued her beauty preparations in the shelter of her green chamber, selecting her colors with

the greatest care and dressing quite deliberately, adjusting her petals one by one. She had no desire to emerge all ruffled, like the poppies. She wished to appear only in the full radiance of her beauty"¹⁵ . After meeting a group of roses on planet Earth, he mentioned what the rose told him, that it was the only one of its kind in the universe. He felt sad about this and then said to himself: "She would be very annoyed, he said to himself, if she saw this . . . She would cough terribly and pretend to be dying to avoid being laughed at. And I'd have to pretend to be nursing her; otherwise, she'd let herself die to humiliate me"¹⁶

The reader notices that the rose was the reason for the little prince to leave his planet, and it is the same reason for his return after he realized what love is and what this rose means to him. He learned from the fox he met on Earth many things that were absent from him as a young, immature child. He learned from the fox the concept of taming, and how bonds and relationships of friendship and love arise and grow, and how the time we spend together and the attention we show to each other is what creates these bonds and establishes these relationships between us and makes us feel happy to be with each other. It is only through his separation from the fox that he fully grasps the depth of their bond and the meaning of love, as the fox expressed deep sadness for this separation. The little prince understood that his rose was truly unique in the world because he tamed it and because he spent time with it, "You'll understand that yours is the only rose in

¹² <https://interestingliterature.com/2021/10/roses-symbolism-in-literature-and-myth/>

¹³ <https://literarysum.com/the-symbolic-beauty-of-w-b-years-the-rose-1893-a-brief-textual-retelling/>

¹⁴ Antoine Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, tran.by: RICHARD HOWARD, p. 21

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 63

all the world”¹⁷,” But my rose, all on her own, is more important than all of you together, since she’s the one I’ve watered. Since she’s the one I put under glass. Since she’s the one I sheltered behind a screen. Since she’s the one for whom I killed the caterpillars (except the two or three for butterflies). Since she’s the one I listened to when she complained, or when she boasted, or even sometimes when she said nothing at all. Since she’s my rose”¹⁸

He comes to understand that emotional bonds are most deeply felt in moments of separation. Then the fox gave him the most important piece of wisdom:” One sees only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes.”¹⁹, which is the wisdom that the little prince gave to the pilot to convince him to search for a well in the middle of the desert. In the end, they found a well and quenched their thirst. The pilot learned from the little prince, and we, as readers, must learn how to feel beauty from around us and to see things with our hearts, emotions, and sensitivity.

Conclusion:

The Little Prince contains a wealth of profound connotations with human, psychological, social, and philosophical dimensions, which give it

such value and impact on readers. It is a novel about love, beauty, loyalty, friendship, and responsibility; the world of children and the world of adults; and the wisdom of the young. The pilot's journey was a journey that led him to the world of childhood, where the meanings of innocence and purity are found. It was a dialogue between the adult and the child within. Therefore, we, as adults, must never forget that we were once children.

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¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 63

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63