Review 1

Roberta Seelinger Trites

*Literary Conceptualizations of Growth: Metaphors and Cognition in Adolescent Literature*


In the seminal *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2001), Roberta Seelinger Trites argued that adolescent literature is more about teaching adolescents to conform to societal pressures than it is about growth. In this follow-up to that project, *Literary Conceptualizations of Growth: Metaphor and Cognition in Adolescent Literature*, Trites asks why growth is such a prevalent concept in adolescent literature.

In her introduction she states that adolescent literature is the only genre written with the specific ideological intent of undermining the reader’s subject position. The purpose of this new book is to ask why that is.

As a field, cognitive linguistics and brain science have been viewed as complex at best and intellectually intimidating at worst. Trites’ introduction to her thesis succeeds in bringing readers up to speed, for want of a better phrase, without overwhelming them, or without overwhelming her argument.

Over the course of the book, Trites posits that our own cognitive structures are responsible for the prevalence of growth as both a metaphor and a narrative pattern in YA literature. She is not seeking to define the young adult novel but rather to examine how growth is conceptualized in literature and in literary criticism. She is specifically interested in the metaphor as a linguistic phenomenon, and how this particular phenomenon affects the ways in which we conceptualize the world around us. She draws on the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) to argue that cognitive structures such as metaphors and their influence on conceptualization should be studied in terms of both language and thought. She returns to her central theme, the concept of growth, to illustrate this point, stating that growth is first defined by categorization, but also in metaphorical terms.

Trites admits that there is more to understanding literature than simply understanding metaphors and patterns of narrative structure. Through a series of research questions, she aims to interrogate the nature of that understanding, asking how do the cognitive processes of memory and repetition figure in the production and reception of narrative? How does our learned use of language limit and enhance narrative understanding?

One of her research questions highlights a possible weakness in the application of cognitive linguistics to this particular genre. Trites asks how the brain recognizes and understands stock characters, narrative formulae, and narrative conventions. One might ask if the neurological science yet exists that can answer that question – and one might also ask whether this kind of critical work, based so fundamentally on textual patterns and narrative structures, should take place in that particular scientific realm.
There is a consistent and accessible structure to Trites’ book; chapters begin with working definitions which are then deconstructed and applied to textual examples. Chapter One investigates the concepts of growth, cognitive linguistics, and embodied metaphors, starting with a comprehensive background and review of current and past literature. The chapter then expands into an examination of embodied metaphors of growth in literary criticism, using Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as an example in fiction of the concepts discussed in the chapter. This opening chapter provides a template which is followed throughout the book – a template which proves to be economical and effective.

Chapter Two continues with an analysis of sequences, scripts, and stereotypical knowledge, explaining each concept before Trites widens its scope to look at the phenomena of memory, perception, and emotion. Chapter Three is concerned with blending and cultural narratives, with blending being defined as a specific cognitive process that creates complex concepts from multiple sources. Chapter Four takes the form of an in-depth case study of the cultural narrative of what Trites calls the “Pixar Maturity Formula”. She looks at maturity and causality in both *Up* (2009) and *Toy Story 3* (2010), expanding the scope of her thesis by applying it to the medium of cinema. Chapter Five constitutes an analysis of epistemology, ontology, and what Trites terms “the philosophy of experientalism”. Here, critical focus is placed on the novels of David Almond, and the expression of embodied reason within his narratives. The chapter goes on to examine the epistemology and ontology of racial construction, using Alexie Sherman’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* as a case study.

The text concludes with Chapter Six’s investigation of the hegemony of growth in adolescent literature. Trites examines growth in terms of its metaphorical power and its historical conceptualizations in order to quantify its implications in literature for young adults.

At the core of Trites’ thesis is the observation that we are surrounded by metaphors of growth, and these metaphors fascinate her. That fascination has produced a critical text that is as enlightened as it is essential for those pursuing and interrogating the phenomena of cognitive linguistics.

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