



Transformation of Story Structure and Shifting Values in Western Early Childhood Literature: A Study of The Works of Beatrix Potter and Eric Carle

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ABSTRAK

Beatrix Potter dan Eric Carle adalah dua penulis sastra anak-anak hebat, yang mewakili dua periode berbeda dan dua negara berbeda (Amerika Serikat dan Inggris) yang dihubungkan oleh bahasa Inggris. Dengan menggunakan sudut pandang strukturalis konvensional, artikel ini mengeksplorasi dua struktur dasar yang digunakan masing-masing penulis dalam buku mereka. Artikel ini juga berupaya menunjukkan dua rangkaian nilai berbeda yang dipromosikan oleh masing-masing penulis, menyoroti pergeseran nilai yang telah membentuk kehidupan masyarakat berbahasa Inggris.

Keywords: *Buku Bergambar, Postmaterialisme, Sastra Anak-Anak, Strukturalisme*

ABSTRACT

Beatrix Potter and Eric Carle are two of the great children's literature writers, representing two different periods and two different nations (The United States and England) related by the English language. Using a conventional structuralist point of view, this article explores two basic structures that each of the author uses in their books. It also seeks to show two different sets of values that each author promotes, shedding light on shifts of values that have been shaping the lives of English-speaking people.

Keywords: *Children's Literature, Picture Books, Postmaterialism, Structuralism*

INTRODUCTION

Children's books and stories have always been synonymous with utility. When children are read to, they typically learn valuable lessons, from the names of the days of the week and the colours to understanding life and how to behave with friends. Many of these lessons will remain in children's minds, especially when presented through engaging stories. The lesson about the evil nature of Malin Kundang's disobedience will not be forgotten by those who identify as Minang. The lesson about good planning in "Three Little Pigs" will forever be imprinted on the minds of English-speaking Western societies such as the United States and the United Kingdom.

Studies of children's literature and storybooks have shown that this genre, aimed at young readers, has a significant educational function. Experts in various fields, such as mathematics and foreign language learning, have noted the usefulness of children's literature in these areas. As part of their lifestyle, parents who diligently read books to their children before bed will experience the power of children's literature to strengthen the parent-child bond in an intellectually stimulating activity.

In relation to the development of children's mentality and personality, children's literature has been linked to the development of empathy in children, as believed by C.S. Huck, S. Heple, J. Hickman and B.Z. Kiefer in their book *Children's Literature in the Elementary School*. As explained by Jui-Fang Yu Chang Huck et al. believe that through children's literature, children see and feel the experiences of characters with different backgrounds, thus broadening children's horizons and honing their empathy for others. In the eighth edition of *Children's Literature in the Elementary School*, Huck et al. added that due to the increasing richness and diversity of children's literature, the current generation of children is richer in knowledge of the complexity of human life experiences than previous generations: "children have become more sophisticated and knowledgeable about certain life experiences than children of any previous generation" (2004:4).

It is no exaggeration to say that children's stories and literature are a determining factor in a child's personal development and, in turn, shape a nation's way of thinking. Recent research, including in the field of child development, suggests that stories and narratives are generally considered crucial to shaping a nation's character and culture. Jessica Wise expressed this in her TED Talk speech:

Researchers in psychology and neuroscience, child development and biology are finally starting to gain quantifiable scientific evidence of what writers and readers have always known ... that stories have a unique ability to change a person's point of view. Scholars are discovering evidence that stories shape culture and that much of what we believe about life comes, not from fact, but from fiction... ("How Fiction can Change Reality")

In English-language children's literature, it's not only oral-tradition stories that have gained status as cultural icons and shaped the nation's mentality, but also stories written by authors of the industrial era. The works of Enid Blyton, Lewis Carroll, Roald Dahl, and J.K. Rowling are renowned not only in their home countries but also in many parts of the world, including Indonesia.

No less popular and interesting are authors and works written for very young readers (two to five years old), the age when children absorb their first lessons about the world around them. In this category, commonly called picture books, the names of Beatrix Potter and Eric Carle are arguably

among the most popular authors. Potter is the author and illustrator of the famous *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902), a story about Peter the rabbit who gets his way when he doesn't listen to his mother's advice not to play far from home. The book *Peter Rabbit* is one of the best-selling children's books in the world, with sales of 9.3 million copies . While Potter is from England and has long since passed away, Carle is an American author and illustrator of children's books who is still active today. His most popular book, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1969), which tells the story of a caterpillar's transformation into a butterfly, has sold a phenomenal 35 million copies. Carle herself received the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award . In 2003, she was honoured for her contributions to the development of American children's literature. Both Potter and Carle's works remain in print and are enjoyed by children and their parents, making them integral parts of their respective cultures.

The challenge for academics working in English literature is to recognise the values behind the works that are part of the lives of children and their parents in their home countries. It is hoped that we can discern what is important in their lives and understand what values they are teaching to the next generation of their nation. The works of Potter and Carle, as works continually consumed and appreciated by readers across generations, can serve as a window into the ideal values that exist in English-speaking societies.

This interest in life values is also accompanied by curiosity about the established and canonised trends and traditions in Western children's literature. Through the works of Potter and Carle, we can study the story patterns of each author, who indeed represent two different eras. This understanding of intrinsic and micro aspects (specific studies of literature) can also form the basis for macro analysis (studies of aspects outside literature), namely, in this research, the moral values contained in the works, at both the level of the work and of culture.

Narratives, especially in the form of children's stories, form the foundation of young readers' moral structure. One way to understand the values that shape a nation's character is to examine the richness of children's literature. An investigation of the works of Eric Carle and Beatrix Potter, as representatives of children's authors from two eras, is necessary to understand the values instilled in children in English-speaking societies. Related to this, it is also important to understand the motifs and narrative patterns that each author frequently uses. Understanding narrative patterns can help us understand the themes and focus of the works and enrich our knowledge of Western children's literature.

The research problem can be described by the following key question: What life values or moral messages are conveyed by the works of Eric Carle and Beatrix Potter? What narrative patterns do they each use to convey their story themes? What are the striking differences? How are

these differences interpreted as changes in trends in early childhood literature and the dominant values of Western society?

Research on early childhood books is rare, as library research shows that most literary criticism of English-language children's literature focuses on works for children aged 5 and up through adolescence. Examples include Joseph L. Zornado's *Inventing the Child: Culture, Ideology, and the Story of Childhood* (2001), Cedric Cullingford's *Children's Literature and Its Effects* (1998), and Karin Lesnik-Oberstein's *Children's Literature: New Approaches* (2004). However, the general statements about children's literature, particularly regarding its moral effects on readers, in these books are strongly relevant to this research.

Recently, many studies have focused on the values of multiculturalism and critiqued negative images of minorities. Rudine Sims Bishop, for example, focuses on Black American children's literature. In "Reflections on the Development of African American Children's Literature" (2012), she examines how Black minority groups were portrayed as inferior in children's books of the 19th century and the first two-thirds of the 20th century. She also notes the development of "culturally conscious" books, which present Black culture and characters more authentically and specifically, while also successfully representing more universal cultural experiences. She, along with similar scholars, argues that children should be exposed to books that present diverse backgrounds and perspectives to develop a greater social awareness and prepare them for life in a pluralistic society.

Recent criticism of children's literature has also shifted toward a greater appreciation of children's literature and its authors. Rather than being seen merely as a tool for moral learning, children's literature is regarded as a timeless art form. An interesting example is Brian Boyd's review of Dr Seuss's "Horton Hears a Who" in his book "Origin of Stories" (2009). Boyd argues that Dr Seuss's work has a specific social theme (the situation in Japan during and after World War II) but also universal themes and values (the human duty to protect the vulnerable), making it still highly relevant today.

Margaret Speaker Yuan's book, *Who Wrote That: Beatrix Potter* (2006), is a useful reference on Beatrix Potter and her works. However, this work focuses more on the relationship between Potter's life and her works and does not explore the narrative patterns and moral values within the works, which are the focus of this study. Eric Carle, as a contemporary author, is more frequently referenced in leading online media in positive reviews and biographical studies. One interesting review is by Sandy Rouleau and Wendy Buchberg on the children's book and teaching website Scholastic.com, which states that Carle's works have strong connections to fields beyond

literature and storytelling. Carle's works are considered useful for teaching children mathematics, art, writing, science, and multicultural living and pluralism (2015: "Eric Carle: Author Study").

METHODOLOGY

The specific literary approaches or theories used in this study are Literary Darwinism, with its emphasis on the work's moral function, and structuralism. The first approach emphasises literature as a means of survival, necessary to bind individuals within society and shape the values society embraces. The second approach allows us to see the similarities and differences in the stories' structure and themes, making it easier to sort and map the themes and moral values they offer.

Jonathan Gottschall, an academic and literary critic with a literary Darwinist school, in *The Storytelling Animal* (2012) argues that stories have a role in every human community, one of which is as a source of knowledge about the world around them and a builder of moral logic which in turn will influence the attitudes and personalities of the people who consume these stories: "Story-- whether delivered through films, book, or video games-- teaches us facts about the world; influences our moral logic; and marks us with fears, hopes, and anxieties that alter our behaviour, perhaps even our personalities" (2012:148). According to Gottschall, stories not only shape human individuals but also culture (2012:147). In the same book, Gottschall argues that the influence of fictional stories on readers is generally positive. He cites research in psychology by Keith Oatley and Raymond Marr, which found that fans of fiction tend to have greater empathy and social skills than those who read only non-fiction (2012:66).

Structuralist theory, specifically narratology (narrative studies), is also used in this research. Studying narrative structure is necessary to examine the story patterns and motifs within a work, thereby providing a basis for determining the general themes and moral values it offers. The theorist referred to here is Tzvetan Todorov in his book *Grammaire du Décaméron* (1969). As Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson discuss, Todorov breaks down a text into "propositions," simple sentences consisting of a subject and a predicate. Todorov further argues that propositions can be grouped into larger units called sequences. Sequences themselves are the basic framework of a story, consisting of at most several units. Here is an example from Selden and Widdowson:

Equilibrium 1 (Peace)
 Force 1 (Enemy invades)
 Disequilibrium (War)
 Force 2 (Enemy is defeated)
 Equilibrium 2 (Peace on new terms) (70)

The structuralist thinking of A.J. Greimas is also relevant here. According to him, every story can be categorised into one of three structures: contractual, performative, and disjunctive. As Lois Tyson explains in *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (2006:226), the first structure concerns the creation and violation of rules and the reconciliation or punishment that accompanies them; the second structure concerns the execution of a task or mission; and the third structure involves the journey to and from the destination.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The works of Eric Carle and Beatrix Potter emerged in different eras. Potter worked in the early decades of the 20th century, while Carle has been a prominent figure in children's literature since the late 20th century and remains so today. These two authors and illustrators are separated not only by a generation, but also by gender and country of origin: Carle is from the United States, while Potter is from England.

It's certainly interesting to see the structural and thematic differences between their works. What narrative patterns are commonly used by Potter? And what about the narrative patterns in Carle's works? What common themes and life values can be summarised as characteristic of Potter and Carle? In this article, the author will compare the structural and thematic differences between these two representative children's authors, interpreting them as shifts in narrative style and values, both within children's literature in particular and in English-speaking Western society as a whole. However, before these questions can be answered, we must examine each work individually.

Sequences and Specific Moral Messages of Each Work

As objects of analysis, four famous works from each author have been selected. The four works by Eric Carle discussed are *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1969), *The Very Busy Spider* (1984), *The Very Lonely Firefly* (1995), and *Friends* (2013). The four works by Beatrix Potter to be discussed below are *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902), *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin* (1903), *The Tale of Jemima Puddleduck* (1908), and *The Tale of Tom Kitten* (1907). The sequence of each work can be seen below for a basic understanding of the story:

Sequence of Beatrix Potter's Works

TABLE 1

The Tale of Peter Rabbit

Equilibrium (1)	Peter Rabbit (X) was asked by his mother (Y) not to go to Mr McGregor's garden (Z).
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Force (1)	Naughty Peter Rabbit did not listen to his mother and went into Mr McGregor's garden and ate the vegetables.
Disequilibrium	Peter Rabbit is chased by Mr McGregor and gets into a series of troubles.
Force (2)	Peter Rabbit tries to run away from Mr McGregor.
Equilibrium (2)	Peter Rabbit survived. But he was punished by falling ill and not getting any delicious food.

TABLE 2

The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin

Disequilibrium	Squirrel Nutkin (X) is always naughty and bothers Old Brown (Z).
Force	Old Brown cut off Nutkin Squirrel's tail.
Equilibrium	Nutkin loses his tail and then becomes a laughing stock.

TABLE 3

The Tale of Jemima Puddleduck

Equilibrium (1)	Jemima (X) wants to incubate her eggs
Force (1)	Jemima was forbidden to incubate her eggs. She left the farm for the forest.
Disequilibrium	Jemima meets the Wolf (Y). The Wolf offers a comfortable place to lay eggs while harbouring the evil intent to eat Jemima and her eggs. The innocent Jemima does not understand this.
Force (2)	The wolf's intentions are known by Kep (Z). Jemima gets help from her dog friends.
Equilibrium (2)	Jemima returned to the farm and only managed to hatch four eggs.

TABLE 4

The Tale of Tom Kitten

Equilibrium	Tabitha Twitchit (Y) prepares the party and her
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	children—Tom (X), Mittens (A) and Moppets (B)—in nice clothes before their friends arrive for the tea party.
Force	Tom and his two brothers misbehaved and lost their clothes.
Disequilibrium	Tabitha Twitchit cannot show her kids to her friends, and the tea party is interrupted by the kids making a fuss.

Sequence of Beatrix Potter's Works

TABLE 5

The Very Hungry Caterpillar

Equilibrium (1)	A small caterpillar (X) is born.
Force (1)	The caterpillar is empty-bellied.
Disequilibrium	The caterpillar is hungry.
Force (2)	Caterpillars seek out and devour food (including the added conflict of an upset stomach).
Equilibrium (2)	The caterpillar is no longer small and is then reborn as a butterfly (Y).

TABLE 6

The Very Busy Spider

Equilibrium (1)	Spider (X) landed on the fence because the wind blew it. He started spinning his web.
Force (1)	The spider received an invitation from his friends (A to I)
Disequilibrium	The implication is that the spider was experiencing interference or trials in completing its web.
Force (2)	The spider was still seriously spinning its web.
Equilibrium (2)	The spider finally finished its web and fell into a deep sleep.

TABLE 7
The Very Lonely Firefly

Equilibrium (1)	The firefly (X) was born.
Force (1)	The firefly did not have a friend.
Disequilibrium	The firefly felt lonely.
Force (2)	The firefly tried to find other fireflies.
Equilibrium (2)	The firefly found other fireflies.

TABLE 8
Friends

Equilibrium (1)	A boy (X) and a girl (Y) were very close to each other
Force (1)	The girl moved out.
Disequilibrium	The boy felt lonely.
Force (2)	The boy went through many obstacles while searching for the girl.
Equilibrium (2)	The boy and girl met again and 'got married'.

Based on the sequence analysis, we can mention here several lessons offered by each work:

Potter's Works	Content / Moral Values	Carle's Works	Content / Moral Values
The Tale of Peter Rabbit	The importance of obeying parents	The Very Hungry Caterpillar	The importance of experimenting and progress.
The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin	A presumptuous attitude will result in problems.	The Very Busy Spider	Work hard and focus on work.
The Tale of Jemima Puddleduck	Disobedience and cunning will be punished.	The Very Lonely Firefly	Persistence in achieving goals
The Tale of Tom Kitten	The effects of children's naughtiness and mothers' ups and downs	Friends	The tenacity and power of friendship

Basic Structure of Potter and Carle's Works

A sequence analysis of eight works by two authors allowed the author to deduce the basic structure used by each author. It can be concluded that Potter's works tend to use what A.J. Griemas calls a 'contractual' pattern, while Carle uses a 'performative' pattern. The 'performative' pattern emphasises the character's efforts to carry out a mission or realise something. In contrast, the 'contractual' pattern concerns punishment for violations of social contracts or the enforcement of rules (1993:211).

Based on the sequence analysis, we can see how rule violations and the resulting punishments characterise each Potter story. The rule breakers are usually naughty children (Peter, Tom Kitten) or characters of lower status (Jemima and Nutkin). Meanwhile, punishment comes not only from parents or authority figures, but also from the characters' own negative experiences. The following three-unit structure reflects the basic structure of Beatrix Potter's works:

Contract (Rules or Prohibition)

The rules in the four Potter works are set by figures of authority and are intended for the good of the child or inferior character:

- a. Mother Rabbit forbade Peter Rabbit from playing in Mr McGregor's garden.
- b. There is an unwritten rule agreed upon by the squirrels that the owl, Old Brown, the resident of the island where they gather food, must be respected.
- c. The Farmer's Wife established a rule that duck eggs must be incubated by a hen.
- d. Tom Kitten's mother expects Tom Kitten and his siblings to behave nicely and dress neatly—simple rules for children, especially when they have guests coming.

Violation

The violations in the four books were committed by children or inferior characters:

- a. Peter did not listen to his mother's prohibition and went to play and eat vegetables in Mr McGregor's garden.
- b. Nutkin the squirrel breaks the rules and norms by being rude to Old Brown.
- c. Jemima the Duck did not want to follow the rules and ran off to incubate her own eggs.
- d. Tom Kitten and his two brothers were playing around, even though they had to be careful because they were dressed neatly.

Punishment

Punishment is given to children or inferior characters as a lesson to stop being naughty or acting up. Only *The Tale of Tom Kitten* ends with ambiguity: is it the children who are punished, or is it the mother who is not good at keeping her children nice?

- a. The punishment in The Tale of Peter Rabbit is the terrifying experience of running after McGregor and then falling ill.
- b. Nutkin the squirrel lost his tail after making Old Brown angry, and then he was always made fun of by his friends.
- c. Jemima the Duck had to experience danger when she was about to be eaten by the wolf. At the end of the story, Jemima also had to realise that ducks cannot incubate eggs as well as chickens.
- d. Tom Kitten and his two brothers were scolded by their mother for losing their clothes. However, their mother, the authority figure in this story, also got into trouble because her children made a fuss in their room when entertaining the guests.

Unlike Potter's works, Carle's tend to be less concerned with constraints imposed by rules. The focus is on a mission the characters create for themselves, which leads to a completely new, happier situation. The stories begin or are driven by some 'lack' (the firefly has no friends, the boy loses his best friend, the caterpillar is hungry, and the spider has no home) and end with the 'filling' of that lack (the firefly finally finds its friend, the boy finds his best friend, the caterpillar is no longer hungry, and the spider completes its home). Each story can be seen as a process or mission to gain or become something. The following are the basic structures that can be gleaned from Carle's four works:

Lack

In each story, each character experiences a deficiency (lack) or problem:

- a. The caterpillar is hungry.
- b. The spider has no place to live.
- c. The firefly felt lonely and wanted friends.
- d. The boy in Friends lost his best friend.

Process of Getting Fulfilment

Much of the story revolves around attempts to fill these gaps. The characters in each work are shown going through a process, undergoing trial and error, and striving persistently to change or achieve something:

- a. The caterpillar ate and tried various foods for seven days.
- b. The spider made a spider web as a place to live and ignored the invitations of other animals because the spider was very concentrated.
- c. The firefly looks for other fireflies at night by approaching every glowing object it sees.

- d. The boy had adventures in various places and weather conditions to find his friend.

Fulfilment

The story ends when the character can fill the gap and get what he wants.:

- a. The caterpillar is no longer hungry and transforms into a butterfly.
- b. The spider finally finished its web and could rest.
- c. The firefly finally found a group of fireflies and was no longer lonely.
- d. The boy found his best friend and could not be separated anymore.

Major Themes and Shifting Life Values Reflected in Potter and Carle's Works.

From these two groups of works, we can see two distinct focuses. Four of Potter's works emphasise the enforcement of social rules, while four of Carle's works emphasise the individual and the process, they undergo to obtain what they desire. These two contrasting focuses indicate two different values: Potter prioritises the conformism and stability typical of the past, while Carle prioritises the positive individualism typical of the present. We can detect a shift from traditional values to more (post)modern ones here.

Broadly speaking, the two groups of works offer two different ways of understanding the individual within their society. Potter emphasises that individuals (in this case, children) are part of a larger unit, namely their family and community. This social unit has rules, and each individual within it must follow them; if they are violated, punishment will follow. Peter Rabbit does not listen to his mother's advice and gets into trouble, as do Tom the Cat and his siblings. Meanwhile, Nutkin the Squirrel and Jemima the Duck do not heed the established rules (squirrels must cooperate and respect the owl; duck eggs must be incubated by a hen), and each of them gets a taste of their own medicine. More mature figures, such as parents or other adult characters, are present in each book. These characters have authority over rules that bind individuals in a more inferior position.



Figure 1-4. Individual, under observation. Adult characters in the four Potter works who impose rules or restrictions on the main characters. Clockwise: Mother Petter Rabbit, Old Brown, Tabitha Twitchit (Mother of Tom the Cat), and the Farmer's Wife.

Meanwhile, Carle has a different perspective. Individuals or children are seen as independent agents who desire, develop, and transform through their own efforts. The focus is on the individual, while the family and community, along with their rules, receive little attention. This is evident in the absence of parental figures or other authoritative figures in each of Carle's works discussed in this study.



Figure 5-6. Individual, alone and free. The main characters in Carle's four works are always adventurous and work alone, as seen above. Clockwise: caterpillar, spider, firefly, and boy.

With the absence of figures who have authority, each character is not burdened by social rules and is free to create a personal mission that they will go through: the caterpillar and firefly characters are born into the world without family and relatives to guide them so they have to go on their own adventures to get what they want; the spider character persistently builds a spider web and ignores the invitations of other animals; and the boy character takes the initiative to go on an adventure to find his friend again..

These differing focuses imply fundamentally different values. With its emphasis on the individual's relationship with society, Potter emphasises life values related to obedience and the importance of social acceptance. Carle, on the other hand, focuses on the individual. These values are independence, change, self-actualisation, and the individual's process of achieving their goals.

Potter's world is one where external rules always bind individuals, while Carle's world is one where individuals must create their own rules.

Another conclusion we can draw is a significant shift in values from "conformism to rules" to "the importance for individuals to create their own rules and life missions." Potter still upholds conventional values, while Carle brings new values synonymous with individualism. This reflects the changing values in Western society itself, which transformed in the 1970s with the emergence of post-materialist thought. In contrast to materialism, which prioritises social order and economic stability, postmaterialism emphasises individual autonomy and self-realisation. According to Inglehart in the online encyclopedia Britannica (2015), postmaterialism itself has a postmodernist orientation and thus rejects traditional and established values that inhibit self-expression. Inglehart further argues that postmaterialist thought is characterised by a "postmodernist shift" in which authority is no longer "central":

Postmodern orientations place less emphasis on traditional cultural norms, especially those that limit individual self-expression. A major component of the postmodern shift is a move away from both religious and bureaucratic authority, bringing declining emphasis on all kinds of authority. (2015)

Whether literary works initiated this change or merely reflected it is, of course, a matter of perspective. In this case, the researcher believes that children's works in general, and Potter and Carle's books in particular, not only captured the characteristics and spirit of their times, but also actively contributed to the dissemination of discourse about how individuals live within their societies.

CONCLUSION

Beatrix Potter, a British author, and Eric Carle, a contemporary American author, are renowned figures in the world of children's literature. They wrote actively across different periods of English-language literature, with Potter representing the pre-World War II era and Carle the more contemporary one. Their works, as examples of English-language children's literature, offer interesting insights into the narrative structures of this genre and the values they reveal upon examination.

In this study, the story structure and moral values of Carle and Potter's works can be seen from two levels: (1) the specific level of the work and (2) the level of the author and his culture. At the second level, the diverse narrative patterns at level one are generalised, so we know the basic

patterns characteristic of each author. Potter uses a 'contractual' pattern or structure that makes rule violations and punishments for violators the story's main elements. Meanwhile, Carle uses a 'performative' pattern that emphasises the implementation of a mission to fill a gap or obtain something; in Carle's work, the mission is personal, such as creating a home for oneself or finding a lost friend.

Often with different basic structures, each writer tends to offer contrasting life values. Potter's works, written in the early 20th century, tend to teach obedience and conformism and prioritise the social world. Meanwhile, Carle's works, which have emerged since the late 1960s, emphasise autonomy in thought and action and prioritise the individual. From these two groups of works, we can detect a shift in values from conventional values that highly value authority to those typical of the postmodern era, where authority is no longer central.

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