

**THE PORTRAYAL OF ACADEMIC LANDSCAPE IN THE SELECT WORKS OF
SHARON CREECH AND ANDREW CLEMENTS**

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Abstract

The Paper endeavours to discuss the academic landscape, the trio combination of teachers, students and academics that are depicted in Sharon Creech's *A Fine, Fine School*, *A Smart, Smart School*, *Hate that Cat: A Novel*, *Love that Dog: A Novel* and Andrew Clements' *Frindle*, *The Report Card*. The paper is an attempt to disclose the positive and detrimental effects that a school ambience can have on the children. The paper proposes to support its argument in the light of postmodern thoughts.

Key words:

school, academics, teacher, learner, skills

Children's literature, a distinct spurt of academic enthusiasm, has come a long from its shallow pursuits and concerns of instruction, leisure principles and didacticism. From its embryonic phase, Children's literature has emerged to be a luxuriant and sovereign body of 'responsible' literature reflecting social implications and inspiring the young minds towards a social change. As the interplay between the learners' understanding of the world and the literature chosen and read by them becomes a mechanism for transmitting socio-cultural values, it is essential chiefly for children's literature to keep up its social responsibility. As the children develop their literary skills through stories, folktales, rhymes etc. at a very young age through children's literature, the undeniable influence it leaves becomes crucial to consider.

Both Sharon Creech and Andrew Clements are teacher-turned fiction writers. It seems that it becomes inevitable for them to escape from their mental locale, which is the school ambience, where they possibly relished best of their lifetime influencing the neophytes. Roughly in all their works, school is the milieu; the teaching-learning dimensions, teacher-student affiliation, the influential role of the teachers, the heterogeneous students, their attitudes, their friendships etc. are the numerous thematic facets of their works. Both Sharon and Andrew stand for the creative, purposeful, interesting ways of imparting education over the 'mere' academics.

Teacher-turned Novelist Sharon Creech is the best-selling American Children's author known for her distinctive knack of storytelling. She is the first American to have received awards in both the U.S. and abroad, including the Newbery Medal, the Newbery Honor and Great Britain's Carnegie Medal. Infused with emotional honesty, Sharon deals with a variety of themes derived mostly from her personal experiences as a school teacher.

The Newbery Medal winner Sharon Creech's *A Fine, Fine School* is a funny picture book with a gentle satire on the present educational system that maroons the learners in the academic island. While the children long to explore the real world around them which is immensely filled with quality life lessons, schools like "Fine school" limit the treasures of life within the boundary of academics.

The ambitious, zealous Principal Mr. Keene, who was an able leader, felt much pleased and elated to observe the obliging, participative and passionate spirit of the teachers and students. He often remarked, "Aren't these fine children?" Aren't these fine teachers? Isn't this a fine, fine, school?" (AFF 4). Being overwhelmed with the satisfactory performance of the school, Mr. Keene decided to run the school 24x7x365 - first on Saturdays, then on Sundays, then on holidays, then in the summer. The

exuberant administrator Mr. Keene, without considering the dire aftermaths of this unique practice, assumed that all was fine with the fine school. It was Tillie, a studious, courageous student who geared herself up to enlighten Mr. Keene about the shattering effects of limiting the value of life within the academic landscape, whereas, life outside the school is equally rewarding and invaluable. Tillie expressed the agony of not being able to spend time with her dog Beans, her little brother and that she had not learnt to climb a tree so far, which she felt and found to be 'great living' that a 'fine school' cannot afford.

The effective communication of the young mind, Tillie, the trust and respect that Mr. Keene had already earned (which is evident as nobody groaned or opposed the idea of extending the school hours) eventually led to revelation and reformation towards a constructive change. Mr. Keene without more ado genuinely expressed "You, all of you -children and teachers- you need to learn how to climb a tree and sit in it for an hour" (AFF 31) having realized the thoughtless 'fine' deed that he had been engrossed in all those days.

Deftly crafted *A Fine, Fine School* is indeed a clarion call for the present educational administrators to disengage their claim that flood of academic works and swarm of tests would make the learner-individual successful. The triumphant note of Sharon Creech's *A Fine, Fine School* lies in letting the child voice the essentials of growth that is derived from life experiences and social interactions. Though the world is in need of committed, ardent Principals, educational administrators like Mr. Keene, the purpose of education should not be defeated. Tillie becomes the symbolic representation of the younger generation that tries to demolish the rigid walls of the autocratic educational system.

A Smart, Smart School, which is written as a sequel to the *New York Times* bestselling picture book, *A Fine, Fine School*, is a step forward in conveying a deep message to the knowledge-alone-inclined educational system. The message is quite eloquent that a school can be certainly 'smart' if it encourages creativity over rote learning. Contemplating on the extensive use of the word 'smart' which has become a household term with the advent of technology, one should wake up to the realization that real smartness lies in the balanced blend of knowledge and skills, especially, creativity.

Mr. Keene, the overzealous Principal of the 'fine' school and Tillie, her dog Beans were all back in the Smart school. Mr. Keene, who used to stroll the school hallways, would observe and encourage children's drawing, painting and other skills. He would also promptly acknowledge the teachers' effort in honing the students' skills. The sudden burst of Mr. Keene's appendix followed by treatment and rest, led Mr. Tatters to be the Principal. The children and the teachers badly suffered the intense and 'mere' academic spirit of Mr. Tatters who never gave even an iota of space for creative skills. Soon, the entire school became obsessed with continuous tests and evaluation and consequently, became oblivious of flowers, fun and frolic. However, the reversal of fortune happened when Mr. Keene recovered and returned to make the school truly smart and holistic in its endeavours.

The contemporary digital era has already embraced a plenty of 'smart' schools claiming to impart education that makes the learners dexterous, adept and competent. However, the impending realization is that education which does not involve skills is not holistic and if education is not holistic, it cannot be education in its true sense.

Sharon Creech's *Love that Dog* is a Newbery Award-winning verse novel that evolves from an anti-poetic view given on poetry to immortalizing poetry for its amazing worth. Jack, the child protagonist, despised the idea of poetry considering that as meant for girls.

I don't want to
Because boys
Don't write poetry
Girls do. (LTD 1)

Jack's such cynical opinion and resentment got extremely reversed into adoration and gaining expertise in poetry with the constant impetus given by the highly dedicated teacher Miss Stretchberry. Miss Stretchberry acted as a catalyst entirely bent upon reversing Jack's prejudice on poetry. She consistently persuaded Jack by involving him in a range of activities related to reading poetry, writing poetry on his pet and inviting Jack's inspirational poet Walter Dean Myers to the school. The

passionate and influential teacher Miss Stretchberry's efforts got well paid off when Jack developed an irresistible adoration and zeal for poetry.

Love that Dog as a verse novel in fact sings the glory of the robust, untarnished attitude of a great teacher Miss Stretchberry. The influential effect prompted by Miss Stretchberry continues in *Hate that Cat*, a sequel verse novel of *Love that Dog*. In *Hate that Cat* Jack got another year to study in Miss Stretchberry's class and his poetic journey got further advanced, and Jack's use of poetic devices like onomatopoeia, alliteration etc., testified this. It was Miss Stretchberry who was to be credited for Jack's growing desire for poetry. The academic landscape depicted in these two verse novels is quite optimistic and hopeful. The pivotal role played by the teachers in any academic ambience is unquestionable. The world is in huge need of iconic teachers like Miss Stretchberry whose influence assuredly affects eternity. The cheering role of teachers like Miss Stretchberry could help the learners strike chords with even the so thought unattractive genres.

While *A Fine, Fine School* and *A Smart, Smart School* portray the unconstructive traits of the educational system that practises disseminating dry knowledge and accumulating information as the thumb rule, *Love that Dog* and *Hate that Cat* render an encouraging portrait of ardent teacher who could miraculously transform the learners' attitude even to the extent of gaining expertise in the subjects. The works of Sharon Creech call for an academic landscape that encourages critical reflection, social interaction and skill development towards innovative pursuits and that is governed by the 'real' educational leaders who could audaciously raise the curtain of the 'fictional' educational system.

With more than 80 books published to his credit, Andrew Clements is yet another endearing, entertaining American Children's author. *Frindle*, Clements' debut novel, is the winner of the 2016 Phoenix Award. *Frindle* has also won an incredible twenty-two state award and is also a recipient of the prestigious Christopher Award. Like Sharon Creech, Andrew Clements is also a Teacher-turned Novelist whose teacher traits, nostalgic school experiences, the cherished and devastating moments spent with the students expressed in lucid style make his books a great choice for classrooms.

Frindle, which is set in a school environment, over again emphasizes the crucial role played by the teachers in chiseling students to be creative, ambitious and triumphant. The entire idea of the novel is foreshadowed in the following main conflict expressed by Mrs. Granger, the language arts teacher of the Fifth grade.

"Who says dog means dog? You do, Nicholas. You and me and everyone in this class and this school and this town and this state and this country. We all agree. But if all of us in this room decided to call that creature something else, and if everyone else did too, then that is what it would be called, and one day it would be written in the dictionary that way. WE decide what goes in that book." (Frindle Chapter 5)

Nick Allen, the Protagonist of the novel, who was induced by such thought provoking ideas decided to be creative. Knowing the rigid temperament of Mrs. Granger, he thought that he cannot execute his creative ways in her class. Yet, Nick started being creative and used the new word Frindle for pen. He tried several ways to publicise the word and soon Frindle became a common word. Infuriated by Nick's awful idea, Mrs. Granger punished the class with impositions. But, the excitement of using the new word escalated and became a big news in a news channel of New York and eventually got into the Dictionary. Nick did not realise the subtle inspirational role played by Mrs. Granger until she sent a Dictionary to Nick where the word Frindle was printed with a one line explanation and which Mrs. Granger herself used to teach. "This is a brand new dictionary I recommend that my students use for their homework and now when I teach them how new words are added to the dictionary, I tell each and every one of them to look up the word Frindle." (Frindle Chapter 15)

The novel ended with Mrs. Granger being proud of having inspired the class to be creative and to use the language in a more amusing and fascinating way. The academic landscape in *Frindle* reassures the compelling and decisive role that teachers play in enhancing and enriching students' potentials and skills. The teachers could be directly inspirational like Miss Stretchberry in Sharon Creech's *Love that Dog* and *Hate that Cat* or could be implicitly persuading like Mrs. Granger.

Andrew Clements' another remarkable school story, *The Report Card* is the winner of the William Allen White Children's Book Award in 2005. It's an academic satire that calls into question the way the parents and the teachers perceive Education to be and insist that they should reconsider their narrow perception on education emphasizing unduly on Assessments, Grades and Performance.

The Report Card is a sharp satire on the society that follows an educational system entirely committed to eulogizing academic Grades and the high IQ Performers. Nora Rowley, the protagonist is one such extraordinary student who was always looked up to as being 'different'. That was where the trouble started for Nora as she believed that "They're all based on a bunch of stupid information that anybody with half a brain can memorize. Tests and grades and all of it—it's all...just stupid." (TRC 34) Nora, who not only possessed high IQ but high EQ too, empathized with the low-scoring students who pathetically struggled to run in the Grade race. She witnessed the undue pressure that was laid on students like Stephen Curtis who were underestimated in terms of their grades and were made to feel unworthy and unintelligent. Nora, who wanted to get good riddance of such ridiculous practice, purposely started scoring grades as low as D and on par with Stephen. Nora was absolutely glad in securing D grades as it put her in the 'normal' realm and not as somebody who was gazed at for being great, gifted and extraordinary.

Being shocked by Nora's academic degradation when Nora's parents met the principal and later when her father forced Nora to take up a program for the 'gifted' as her IQ was identified to be approximately 188, Nora furiously questioned, "Who gets to say what my full potential is? An IQ test? Shouldn't I have something to say about what I want to accomplish? What if what I really want is to be normal?" (TRC Chapter 2) After a series of heated arguments, several episodes of conflicts between teachers, Nora, her classmates and parents, Nora revealed her intentional low scoring performances and expressed how the hype of the grade system pollute the academic landscape and hurt the students educationally, emotionally and socially.

Andrew Clements' observation and experience as a teacher has indeed helped him genuinely voice a powerful message that the grading system / 'The Report Card' can be devastating if that alone becomes the yardstick to determine one's success. The plot of *The Report Card* is exactly the scenario of the present 'mark mongers' educational system that restricts the holistic perspective of education within its stringent academic boundaries. Nora's parents are the prototypes of today's greedy parents who could not accept the Report Card with low grades but aspire for 'more' and 'only academics' in their children. The character of Nora is symbolic of the stress and pressure that students endure for the sake of Grades and of the outlook of the society.

Sharon Creech and Andrew Clements, through their stark portrayal of the academic landscape, essentially express their concerns over the stringent, theoretical, narrow, autocratic academic approach that is devoid of skill education. Despite such dark representations, both the authors have portrayed influential teachers like Miss Stretchberry, Mrs. Granger whose passionate teacher traits leave indelible remarks. Having served as teachers, both Sharon Creech and Andrew Clements share a similar viewpoint that education should necessarily include creativity and language competency in its curriculum as both these have 'power' entrenched in them - power to question, communicate and express. John Dewey's theory of experiential, pragmatic learning grounded in practical, real- world experience and meaningful exploration are the sheer educational ideals that Sharon Creech and Andrew Clements also like to instil in the academic landscape.

The advent of Postmodernism has influenced all aspects of life and its impact on the concept of education is no exception. The postmodern stance is that the teachers should help students build self-realities that are formed by society and the environment. It calls students to build their own learning methods based on their skills and experience. The postmodernity theory emphasizes on transformational methodology that caters to the requirements of the learners. The sum and substance of these core ideals of postmodernism are indeed the anxious thoughts of Sharon Creech and Andrew Clements that are expressed in fine creative and hopeful spirit looking forward to behold an insightful, rewarding academic landscape.

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Name of the Books

1. *Frindle*
2. *The Report Card*
3. *A Fine, Fine School*
4. *A Smart, Smart School*
5. *Hate That Cat*
6. *Love That Dog*

Abbreviations

- Frindle*
TRC
AFF
ASS
HTC
LTD