



## The Critical Role of Children in the Work of Le Clezio

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### Abstract

Since childhood is the golden age of human being's life, Le Clezio has tried to introduce children as the main heroes in most of his works. In Le Clezio's works, child is the symbol of freedom, purity and simplicity. Such an attitude towards the child and children's world makes the writer to depict a close connection that exists between the child and the world realities such as society, nature and happiness. He writes about a society full of dirt, a nature that its elements speak to the child and a kind of happiness that the child himself creates in the world.

**Keywords:** Child, Childhood, Society, Happiness, Nature, Freedom, Purity

### 1. Introduction

The seventy-one year old Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clezio is a French author who has been attracted to traditional and simple lives of the people. He was born in the French Riviera city of Nice but his ancestors were originally from Morbihan on the south coast of Brittany. He is the author of over fifty books and literary works in which humanity, magnanimity and simplicity are the main themes. He has published different literary works including short stories, novels, essays, translations regarding Native American mythology, and children's books. He has translated many articles and has written several forewords for the books. He is also the author of famous works such as "The Minutes", "Fever", "The Ecstasy Material", "Terra Amata", "War" and "Desert". The novel "Desert" is considered as his masterpiece and won the French Academy's Grand Prix Paul Morand in 1980. In 2008, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature as an "author of new departures, poetic adventure and sensual ecstasy, explorer of humanity beyond and below the reigning civilization" (see Figure 1) (Nobelprize.org, 2008).

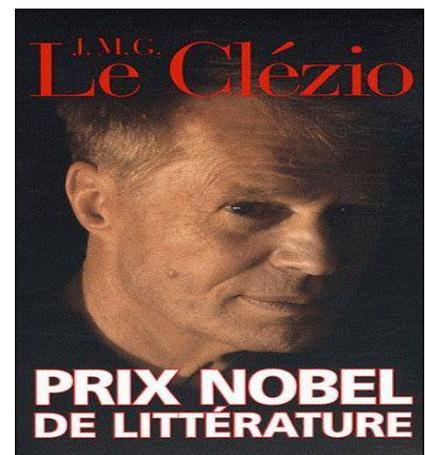
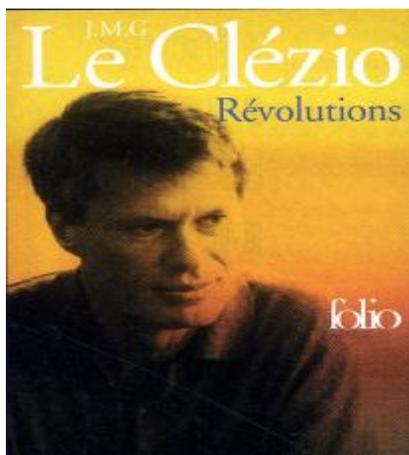


Figure 1: Le Clezio's awards in literature

In most of Le Clezio's works, there are a few children who are regarded as the main characters of the story. The children's destinies are depicted in these works. He deals with the themes such as an orphan, troop of children, an injured child, or a child as a guide and so on. Le Clezio's sensitivity towards children clearly shows his support and attention towards the issues related to the children and childhood period. What is important in Le Clezio's works is the children's perception of the world and the society in which they live. The innocent and pure look of a child, accompanied by smile symbolizes something positive. This is perhaps the symbol of freedom, simplicity and purity.

In criticizing Le Clezio's works, it can be understood that he depicts children wandering in different geographic areas and transitional places. In his literary works, children took some form of myths and they mythologize the settings in which the story has happened. The relationship between the child and others builds the language of the story and finally creates the image of a child that shows a paradox of the imagined child in the mind.

In Le Clezio's opinion, characters -mostly children- are basically close to the origins of the life, and artificial decors (such as streets, cafes and the city) or natural decors (such as the sea and the desert) enable the human being to surrender himself to the simple feeling of life and existence. In his works, Le Clezio has shown that with a total immersion in the moment, the human beings become eternal and universal. For him, the feeling of happiness is the only possible response to the torments of the man of the twentieth century.

## 2. Characters Created by Le Clezio

Le Clezio's characters are lucky and happy children whose joys are simple and clear, and make the readers forget the anxiety and stress for a while. What is common among all Le Clezio's characters is the childish behavior and a special look that turns to the past. Le Clezio depicts his characters in homes that are in provisional conditions. These characters take refuge in their dreams. The heroes in his works travel to different lands to know more things about the world. These trips will push the heroes to nostalgia for the innocence and purity. They have trapped themselves in a state of anxiety which is revealed in his manuscripts. In his works, Le Clezio shows freedom and happiness through the protagonists. These protagonists are looking for these two elements (freedom and happiness) and they finally find them elsewhere or are not absolutely where they live next and among others. In other words, for these heroes the lost paradise of childhood, dreams of love and happiness are rooted in the search for life in another world which is closer to the nature. The quest for purity and truth leads naturally to the world of childhood.

## 3. The Position Of Children In Le Clezio's Works

In response to the question why childhood is interesting for most of the authors, it can be pointed out that it is due to the simplicity, purity, innocence and naturalness of this period. It is previous state of fault and mistake, or in other words, it is the Edenic state. Childhood is a period of age in which dreaming is still possible. It is the only period in which human beings can still be happy and all the beliefs are allowed. The child is the symbol of freedom, simplicity, quietude and purity. The child does not have to endure the limitations of the society. The childhood world is seen separate from the world of adults. The child is not forced to go to school and he is not a liar. He honestly explains what he sees in the society. That is why Le Clezio prefers to remain a child and has a tendency to choose children as protagonists in his literary works.

In "Unknown on the Earth", Le Clezio states that he "loves the innocence and simple gaiety of childhood" (Le Clezio, 1978; p. 12). He likes the things which are "surprising and amazing in the life, and amuse the whole world" (Le Clezio, 1978; p. 12). That is why in the "Desert" novel, as in most of his works, he considers an important position for children and teenagers (Le Clezio, 1980). Le Clezio speaks the childish language in most of his works.

Le Clezio has always had a special affection for children. Indeed, much of his writings deal with children and their world. In his works, he pays too much attention to children's sensitivity and that is why there are less written texts whose characters and protagonists are young people. Alexis, the hero of "The Gold Explorers" is only eight years old and Esther has not yet reached the age of puberty in "Wandering Star". Also Jon in the "Mountains of the Living God" is a small child. Although Le Clezio's tales are simple, they are very well-written and well plotted. They depict the strong but simple children. Le Clezio was forty six years old when he wrote the "Voyage to Rodrigue". Although he is not a child, he keeps the simplicity, purity and amazement of childhood period which can rarely be found in other writers when they enter adulthood.

As was said before, in most of his short stories, the main characters have not yet reached the age of puberty. According to Le Clezio, child is an image in which you can see the mythical world because the child is pure and honest, just like a mirror (Rambures, 1978). The child knows many things that adults do not know; he knows, even better than adults, how to defend against the impure world. However, the child must find his position in the adult's world. These children are trying to escape from this impure world and start another life. They separate themselves from the others in order to find the happiness and freedom. On the one hand, the child tries to communicate with other people and talk with them regarding different issues. On the other hand, he goes into exile in the world of modernization. Indeed, he finally returns to his native land where he can find the happiness and freedom.

### 3.1 *Childhood and Society*

The heroes in most of Le Clezio's works are children who are escaping from the society in which there is no place for them because they feel alone in this society full of paradoxes. For this reason, Lalla, the heroine in the Desert novel, observed the life of slaves in France (Le Clezio, 1978). All the characters in his works suffer from a break which cuts off them from the society and throws in solicitude. In Desert, Lalla wonders whether the others are human beings or they are part of the world. She is fascinated by the animals that see the human being sometimes as an individual or sometimes as an edible thing. Everything we do in life, to Le Clezio, expresses the relationship between man and the world. Le Clezio was released from the anxiety of the modern world by exile from the society. He was exiled from the adult world to capture the spontaneous perception of the child.

There are children or "little princes" who are "absolutely magic" (Le Clezio, 1978). In other words, these children are very aware and know how to behave in the universe. These children teach us how to live in this world. That is why Le Clezio chooses a child as the main character for his novels. From Le Clezio's point of view, childhood world is like a paradise whose door is closed for the adults. The paradox between the children's memories and the current situation is Le Clezio's favorite theme.

In *Desert*, Lalla has escaped from his solitude to achieve the quietude she was always dreaming for; however, at the end, she fled back to the desert. This escape shows that Lalla prefers to return to her native land rather than endure the dangers of the modern life. Children in Le Clezio's works are dreamers and have separated themselves from living in the modern life. Nour and Lalla remind us of the ideas of Jean Jacques Rousseau. According to his ideas, human being loses his innocence and purity in a modern and civilized world. Lalla is the symbol of childhood world against the modern society. While she has the thirst for knowledge and purity, she is innocent.

### 3.2 *Childhood and Nature*

From Le Clezio's point of view, children are regarded as the symbol of simplicity and freedom because they have no desire to establish relations with nature. They find a shelter in the "seashore or near the beach" (Le Clezio, 1978; p. 157). They have a power to establish a relationship with animals and insects. The children are close to other elements such as water, the earth, air and fire. They find "their happiness in the immediate contact with the world" (Le Clezio, 1978; p. 75). The happiness does not mean to disregard this world; rather it means to find the realities of this world. Children seek to escape from terrifying and horrific situations in the modern world. They do not escape from the modern world which will be destroyed and lost. They are in search of happiness or quietude that can be found elsewhere. They try to be far from the materialistic civilization. Children are simple and pure creatures. Their existence in the desert is, however, harmonic, quiet and free.

The heroes in Le Clezio's works are children who search for another world in the nature and look at the beauties. Each of the stories of Le Clezio tells, in its own way, the search and desire for a real freedom. Indeed, Le Clezio intends to talk about the violence and brutality which can be found in the relations of human beings, negative attitudes of some people and hopelessness which is prevalent in the society.

Lalla, the heroine of the *Desert* novel, does not have real friends. She prefers to be isolated from the others. She was a lonely child just like all the children who were the heroes or heroines of Le Clezio's works. She finds her friends in the sun, the sea, beach and seagulls. What matters for Lalla is the nature and the things which are strange for the people who live in today's world.

Le Clezio reports the relationship of the children with society and the nature. He sees that, on the one hand, these children unite with the nature, sea, wind and stones; on the other hand, nature is very cruel with children and hurts them a lot. In Le Clezio's works, child is in harmony with the nature. The child wants to find his identity by separating from the society. The relationships between the child and society are questioned but the nature is always regarded beautiful and friendly.

### 3.3 *Childhood and Happiness*

For Le Clezio, dream is a means by which a child can reach his happiness. For the child as a hero in Le Clezio's work, this happiness is behind the rocks and stones of the desert, near the sea and in the elements of the nature (Le Clezio, 1961). Le Clezio stated that "it seems to me that the most pleasant dream is a useless dream that we dream for nothing. What is good is dreaming, going back to sleep and forgetting it [...]. The ideal aim in writing is succeeding in joining it. Writing without knowledge; we let the things be done without any plan [...]. We write sentences and look at them and then add some more sentences to them. This is what we do to permit everything to be distorted (Le Clezio, 1995; p. 51). In *Desert*, Le Clezio establishes a relationship between happiness and childhood. At first, he shows the happiness of nomadic women that was destroyed by the Europeans. Happiness is also the name of the first character in story B in which Le Clezio precisely reports Lalla's childhood. Lalla is happy because she is free and lives like a nomadic woman. In this chapter of the novel, Le Clezio intends to depict precisely the girl's lifestyle and the necessary conditions for her happiness. The conditions are loneliness, nature, freedom and friendship. Sometimes Lalla needs to be alone and thinks of different things. Therefore, she takes refuge in nature. She goes wherever she likes because she is free in the desert. Le Clezio shows the good relationship of the children and the world in which they live. Lalla "knows all the roads and all the holes in the sandy hills" (Le Clezio, 1980; p. 76). She "loves all the insects which are living there". She loves "fire ants and bronze beetles". She even "loves dung beetles, beetles, ladybugs and crickets" (Le Clezio, 1980; pp. 77-78).

The happiness of little Lalla is a kind of happiness that her ancestors and other nomads of the desert have already experienced. In the story A, Nour is happy to help and support blind warrior. The simple friendly relationship of the child is a glimmer of hope for a man who will be killed in the war. Le Clezio found innocence, purity and happiness in the children who are the symbol of these characteristics.

### 4. *Conclusion*

Lalla and Nour are two children who are representatives of Le Clezio's characters and seek to disclose the mysteries of the world. They even sometimes seek to calm down the world. Le Clezio considers this world as a book full of beautiful signs. These two children are symbols of innocence and purity and try to remind the adults of what they have forgotten. They force the readers to cross the world in which there is no hope to live. Finally, the children of these two stories in the *Desert* novel represent the purity and simplicity of people's nature and restore the readers' calm spirit. They try to act as a mediator between life and death. They suggest that the best solution is returning back to nature, desert and traditional life.

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