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Beyond Innocence: Crime and Redemption in Ida Fynn-Thompson's *Betrayed by the City*

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Abstract

While studies on children's literature often focus on themes like adventure, imagination, friendship, innocence, or morality, there's a significant gap in exploring the complex interplay of crime and redemption. This essay addresses this gap by analysing Ida Fynn-Thompson's *Betrayed by the City* through Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT). SLT posits that individuals, particularly children, acquire behaviours, including criminal ones, by observing and imitating others. This analysis examines how Fynn-Thompson's narrative portrays acts of transgression and the potential for moral transformation, exploring the characters' criminal motivations (both social and personal), their journey toward redemption, and the challenges they face. The study finds that *Betrayed by the City* powerfully illustrates the transformative impact of the environment on a child's development. It also demonstrates how children's literature can serve as a powerful disincentive for young readers who might be unduly influenced by their surroundings, encouraging thoughtful choices. Furthermore, the essay highlights the critical role of adults in providing positive role models to guide youths toward prosocial behaviour and a more promising future.

Keywords: Children's Literature, Crime, Redemption, Social Learning Theory, Environmental Influence, Moral Development, Ghanaian Literature.

Introduction

Historically, children's literature has not shied away from depicting violence and crime, albeit often for didactic purposes. Early works, such as fairy tales from the Grimm Brothers or cautionary stories like those by Mrs. Sherwood, frequently employed harsh punishments and dire consequences to teach moral lessons about right and wrong. Authors used these narratives to directly confront children with the responsibility for their actions and the potential for severe retribution. More recently, scholars have noted a shift in how crime is depicted. Contemporary children's literature, particularly young adult fiction, explores crime with greater complexity, often focusing on the psychological and social motivations behind a character's actions rather than simply a moralistic 'good versus evil' dichotomy.

The inclusion of crime in children's literature can be a powerful tool. It allows for a deeper exploration of real-world issues and can provide a safe space for young readers to grapple with complex social problems. For instance, some studies have noted that children's literature can be vehicles for civic socialisation, helping young readers understand their rights and responsibilities. However, this approach also carries risks, as some critics worry that depicting crime, especially as a "ludic" or playful adventure, might inadvertently normalise or glamorise illegal behaviour. The challenge for authors is to present a realistic portrayal of transgression while simultaneously highlighting its harmful effects and the importance of accountability and justice.

The concept of redemption is a critical counterpoint to the depiction of crime in children's literature. It offers a narrative pathway for characters that have erred, showing that moral transformation is possible. Redemption arcs in literature can illustrate that individuals are not defined by their mistakes and that personal growth and change are achievable. This is particularly important for young readers, as research suggests that children, more so than adults, may view punishment as a vehicle for positive moral change.

Furthermore, children's literature can serve as a powerful medium for moral education. Through the vicarious experiences of characters, children learn to empathise with different perspectives, think critically about ethical dilemmas, and develop a sense of right and wrong. The journey toward redemption in a story can teach valuable lessons about forgiveness, second chances, and the importance of making amends. It demonstrates how a character's environment can shape their actions and, conversely, how an individual's choices can lead them to a better path, thereby reinforcing the core tenets of Social Learning Theory and highlighting the powerful disincentive that literature can provide.

Ghanaian society is undergoing a significant cultural shift, moving away from traditional oral storytelling forms of entertainment and education, such as folktales. This transition is largely driven by rapid urbanisation, as economic challenges compel more people to migrate from rural communities to urban centres in search of employment and essential social amenities (Ben-Daniels 41). This rural-urban migration strains traditional modes of cultural transmission, including the performance of folktales for children. Consequently, contemporary Ghanaian writers are increasingly preserving the storytelling art in written forms for children living in cities. Authors like Aba Brew-Hammond have successfully adapted traditional narratives into works such as *A Boy Called Wiser-Than-You* and *The Rabbit and His Singing Hoes*.

Echoing Melanie Koss's argument that children's literature serves as a crucial vehicle for transmitting cultural messages, societal values, and worldly knowledge (Koss 32), Ghanaian authors are actively writing for the modern child, especially those in urban environments where traditional storytelling is diminishing. Notable works include Lawrence Darmani's *First Term Surprises*, Meshack Asare's *The Cross Drums*, and Ruby Yayra Goka's *The Lost Treasure*. Among these, Ida Fynn-Thompson's gripping novel, *Betrayed by the City*, stands out. Fynn-Thompson, a respected Ghanaian author and educator, presents a poignant exploration of child criminal motivations, both social

and personal, as direct influences from the adult world, and charts a compelling trajectory of redemption. This essay focuses on *Betrayed by the City* to demonstrate its significant impact on the developing child reader.

Synopsis of *Betrayed by the City*

Ida fynn-Thompson's *Betrayed by the City* was written in 2013. It is a moving story about two brothers, Ezan and Kwaw who are driven by the desire to accumulate wealth from the city for their poor parents and younger sister. They get their sister Efiba to keep the plan a secret until they are well far from their village, Half Assini into Accra so that their parents cannot bring them back.

Having the dream of wearing expensive wears, Efiba conceals the plan until her brothers sneak out of the house by mid-night to find their way to Accra. The boys miraculously arrive Accra although narrowly escaping being kidnapped by a random driver and his friend who gives them a free ride. They are faced with the stark reality of a city life with no family and no friends. They do not locate their friend who sold them the idea of coming to Accra solely to make money. The boys eventually run out of money and having no place to sleep, they resort to eating left over foods in a make-shift eatery while they wash dishes in exchange. They are eventually lured into crime by a business man who promises to pay them a large amount of money if they can make money for him. Ezan and Kwaware arrested after a while by the police and prosecuted. However, at the Correctional Centre where they are taken for rehabilitation, they encounter positive role models in the characters of Sergeant Wuni and Reverend Father Edmund. In addition to the opportunity for education and skill development, the young boys are eventually guided towards redemption and life fulfilment.

Perspectives from Other Literatures

Children's literature is a critically important genre (Hunt 1), often functioning as a catalyst for moral growth by exposing young readers to diverse perspectives and the consequences of choices (Hurst 1). While children's literature is often celebrated for its

focus on themes of innocence, imagination, and morality, there is a notable gap in critical analysis concerning the portrayal of criminal acts and the potential for moral transformation within these narratives. This review seeks to bridge that gap by examining how literary works for young readers serve as a social and moral guide, particularly through the lens of SLT.

Ghanaian literature for children is often influenced by the country's social fabric and traditional child-rearing practices. Many stories emphasise the importance of community, respect for elders, and the consequences of deviance. Unlike Western narratives that may focus on an individual's autonomy, Ghanaian stories often portray children as part of a collective, where their actions affect the entire community (Asare 102-4). This is reflected in the literature that critiques the breakdown of traditional values, such as the communal child-raising model, when confronted with the challenges of urbanisation and poverty. The stories often serve as cautionary tales, warning against the allure of city life, which is sometimes depicted as a source of corruption and moral decay (Ben-Daniels 41).

The depiction of crime in Ghanaian children's literature is often tied to a clear moral framework. While some of the literature exposes and critiques social problems like child labour, corruption, and the lure of quick wealth, it typically avoids glorifying criminal acts. Instead, the focus is on the negative consequences of such actions, both for the individual and the community. The punishment for a crime is not always judicial; it can also be a form of natural justice where a character's actions lead to their own downfall. This reflects the traditional belief that societal order is maintained not just by law, but also by a system of moral and spiritual consequences (Goka 74-75).

In a broader sense, some Ghanaian literature for adults, like Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, also explores the themes of crime and corruption. The novel's protagonist, an honest clerk, feels like a criminal because he is one of the few who refuses to partake in the widespread corruption. This is a powerful illustration of a

society where the moral order has been inverted. In the context of children's literature, this thematic exploration of crime and its societal impact is often simplified to be more accessible, yet it carries the same weight of social commentary.

For instance, some Ghanaian narratives, such as Ruby Goka's *The Lost Royal Treasure* and Meshack Asare's *The Cross Drums* explore the theme of child trafficking or forced labour. They portray children as resilient and resourceful agents who are able to escape their predicament through their own ingenuity. These texts subvert the Western trope of the child as a helpless victim, instead highlighting the child's agency and intellect. This focus on resourcefulness and self-reliance is a critical aspect of the moral lessons embedded in the stories.

While specific critical studies on *Betrayed by the City* are scarce, thematic parallels can be drawn with other works. For instance, Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (241) analyse the conflict in Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo's *My Cousin Sammy* where the protagonist struggles with urban adaptation, leading him to fall in with a delinquent gang. This resonates with *Betrayed by the City's* depiction of rural-to-urban migration and its ensuing conflicts. A key distinction, however, lies in the protagonists' motivations: Sammy is displaced by circumstance, while Eze and Kwaw in *Betrayed by the City* willingly abandon their home due to peer pressure and a desire for quick wealth. This latter motivation strongly foregrounds the idea that many childhood actions, particularly criminal ones, are learned through observation and interaction within their immediate environment. This is the contribution which this essay makes to knowledge in the area of portrayal of criminal acts and the potential for moral transformation in children's literature.

In his paper, Dziri (18) examines the role of contemporary realist Young Adult Literature (YAL) in critiquing the abuse faced by youth. He argues that age inequality is a primary cause of youth mistreatment, a topic that demands critical attention. Using A.S. King's *Still Life with Tornado* as his primary text, he proposes solutions to the

abuse experienced by the protagonists. Dziri concludes that to understand youth subordination and parental power, it is essential to view life from the perspective of young people and challenge adult judgment on these matters.

This above study shares a thematic similarity with the present paper by utilising protagonist's first-hand experiences to analyse adultism and youth maltreatment. However, it differs in its specific focus and application. While Dziri's analysis centres on sexism within A.S. King's *Still Life with Tornado*, this paper does not address parental sexism. Instead, it examines the complex interplay of crime and redemption in Ida Fynn-Thompson's *Betrayed by the City* through the lens of Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, a theoretical framework that Dziri does not employ.

In her paper, (Nebeife28) employs the theory of adultism to examine the wrongful oppression of children by adults. She argues that adults, taking advantage of their positions of authority, neglect their responsibility to foster a humane culture of child-raising. As a result, they fail to build human dignity in their young wards, which ultimately leads to a dysfunctional society. Nebeife submits that education and respect for the human self, regardless of age, are essential for sustaining human dignity grounded in Africanness. This research is illuminating and relates to the present essay by highlighting the critical role of adults in a child's development. However, it differs in its theoretical approach. While Nebeife focuses on adultism to explain the trauma of abuse within a cultural context, this essay examines the portrayal of transgression and moral transformation through the lens of Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory. It specifically explores characters' criminal motivations, their journey toward redemption, and the challenges they face, a dimension not addressed in Nebeife's work. This essay, therefore, employs Social Learning Theory (SLT) to examine how characters in *Betrayed by the City* navigate the complex journey from committing wrongdoings to seeking redemption, focusing on their motivations, societal influences, and internal struggles.

Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT) is foundational to this analysis, positing that individuals acquire behaviours, including criminal ones, through observation and imitation of others (Driscoll 8-9). This theory emphasises that the environment is a primary force in shaping development. Within the broader categories of learning theories (Behaviourism, SLT, and Social Cognitive Learning Theory), SLT distinctly focuses on observational learning, imitation, and modelling. In the context of children's literature, characters serve as powerful symbolic models. Young readers observe the actions, choices, and consequences faced by characters in a story. If a character's criminal behaviour is rewarded or goes unpunished, it could serve as a form of vicarious reinforcement, potentially influencing the reader's own understanding of acceptable behaviour. Conversely, if a character's negative actions lead to undesirable outcomes, it can act as a powerful deterrent. This is why the role of adults and positive role models in a narrative is so crucial, as they can guide youths toward a more promising future and prosocial behaviour.

As Nabavi and Bijandi (5) eloquently state, "Separately, by observing the behaviours of others, people develop similar behaviours." Imitation, in turn, involves the actual reproduction of these observed actions (Bandura 20). Crucially, moral behaviour and moral thinking are modelled within an environment and subsequently observed by children. Central to this process is self-regulation, where individuals develop their own internal ideas about appropriate or inappropriate conduct and make choices accordingly (Williams 2010). Bandura himself highlights self-regulation as a vital technique for behavioural control (245).

While children often learn from direct experience, children's literature, like Fynn-Thompson's *Betrayed by the City*, uniquely exposes young readers to the implications and consequences of deviant attitudes, serving as an indirect learning mechanism. Ismail (595) notes that children's books profoundly affect children's behavioural, psychological, cultural, and cognitive growth. This essay demonstrates how Fynn-

Thompson's work leverages children's literature to shed light on the multifaceted impact of crime on young individuals. It also investigates how the novel offers hope through its exploration of redemption and the possibility of overcoming adversity. By understanding Fynn-Thompson's approach to the sensitive topic of crime, we gain valuable insights into the environment's role in shaping young minds and how literature can effectively deter negative trends by encouraging child readers to be circumspect in their choices.

Textual Analysis

The narrative of *Betrayed by the City* vividly illustrates the principles of Social Learning Theory, showcasing how Ezan and Kwaw's journey into crime and their eventual redemption are shaped by the models they observe and the reinforcement they receive.

The lure of negative models and initial transgression provoke crime. The village of Half Assini is depicted as impoverished. This stark reality sets the stage for the influence of negative role models. Young returnees from the city, such as Menya, explicitly entice impressionable minds with displays of illicitly acquired money and material possessions. Menya, by flaunting his wealth and advising boys to run away from home to "make money" (Fynn-Thompson 122), directly models a deviant pathway to success. This observational learning becomes the primary catalyst for Ezan and Kwaw's actions.

The boys' decision to sneak away from home, with their younger sister Efiba covering for them, is driven by a desire for quick wealth, reflecting a lack of contentment instilled by observing perceived affluence and media portrayals of glamour, "beautiful long dresses and high heeled shoes" for Efiba (2-3). The absence of negative reinforcement in the village for individuals like Menya, who visibly profit from dubious means, implicitly validates such behaviour.

Their escape is further facilitated by a truck driver and his friend, who, in a chilling act of child trafficking, offer them a ride to Accra without questioning their truancy. The drivers' internal smiles, as described in the text, signify a subtle positive reinforcement for the boys' negative behaviour of running away (5). This early interaction highlights how the environment, through its actors, can inadvertently encourage negative actions. While Kwaw expresses initial regret, recalling parental advice, Ezan's determination to continue, "The die is cast; there is no turning back" (3) demonstrates the power of their predetermined goal, influenced by observed "success".

Modelling and coercion are veritable tools of integration into criminal networks. Upon reaching Accra, Ezan and Kwaw find themselves homeless, quickly integrating with other street boys. They observe and imitate the survival strategies of this peer group, including sleeping on business premises and engaging in petty activities. Their stated mission to "work and make money" (27) is initially met with laughter by older street boys, a form of disapproval, yet the powerful desire for money, fuelled by early observations, overrides this. The narrative here draws a parallel with Ruby Goka's *The Lost Royal Treasure*, where young boys like Yaw openly brandish money while neglecting education, again without discernible rebuke from authority figures (74-75). This repeated modelling of negative behaviours without negative consequences creates an environment where illicit gains appear normalised

Their most significant descent into crime occurs under the influence of Chief, a central negative model. Chief, a drug peddler and trafficker, explicitly models his criminal enterprise by demonstrating how to package and sell hard drugs, hidden within innocent-looking chewing gum boxes (50). He leverages his own fabricated story of success to entice the boys, "You are going to work for money-real money" (49). Chief also enlists his own daughter, Sraha, in the drug trade, further normalising the criminal activity through familial modelling. Ezan and Kwaw, while initially hesitant, are coerced by their desperate need for food and shelter, and by Chief's persistent threats

and promises of wealth. This demonstrates the powerful influence of the environment and authoritative figures in compelling individuals to engage in behaviours they might otherwise resist.

The devastating consequences of this modelling are evident in the drug use and expulsion of students, and the subsequent emergence of student drug peddlers (52), illustrating the chain reaction of negative observational learning. Chief's violent threats and long-term demands, "10 years of service" (65) trap the boys, demonstrating a brutal form of negative reinforcement that compels their continued participation.

However, there comes a shift towards redemption through negative and positive models. The turning point for Ezan and Kwaw aligns perfectly with the principles of negative reinforcement within SLT. The boys begin to experience the direct consequences of their actions and observe the negative outcomes faced by their peers. Police raids at their selling points, although initially escaped, increase their fear and cause sales to drop (76). The arrest of Sakora, pointed out by a taxi driver, serves as a powerful vicarious punishment, directly demonstrating the risks associated with their criminal activities (101). Ezan and Kwaw also witness the dire effects of the drugs they sell, such as Jojo pointing out a "mad" boy who started smoking "the 'devil's tobacco'" (77). These observations, coupled with their own growing discomfort and Kwaw's persistent yearning for home, begin to erode the perceived benefits of their criminal life.

Their eventual arrest and placement in a Juvenile Court and later a Correctional Centre represent the most direct forms of negative reinforcement. This legal intervention provides the necessary punishment or disapproval that can deter criminal behaviour. This experience forces them to confront the ramifications of their choices, leading to their confessions and expressions of regret.

Crucially, the Correctional Centre transforms into a new, positive learning environment. Here, the boys are protected from harmful influences and exposed to positive role models. Sergeant Wuni, a police officer and trained therapist, provides physical exercise and counselling, actively modelling prosocial behaviour and offering support (127). The structured environment, with its rules and opportunities for education (the boys opt to finish Junior High School), provides a stark contrast to their previous chaotic existence. Their parents' visit, along with Father Ackah and Uncle Elima, provides emotional affirmation and reintegration into a supportive family unit, reinforcing their path to moral rehabilitation. Chief's eventual prosecution and imprisonment further exemplify the ultimate negative reinforcement for his criminal modelling and exploitation of children, aligning with international conventions like Article 16 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

At the Correctional Centre, Sergeant Wuni becomes a pivotal positive role model, using play and admonition to build trust and encourage positive behaviour. His words, "God gave each of you a gift. A gift which you should use for good. God never created anyone to do evil. Sometimes it is the society that makes people turn to evil" (129), directly address the boys' past choices within the framework of environmental influence, a core tenet of SLT. He highlights the negative impact of imitating negative characters and assures them of their inherent talents.

The presence of Reverend Father Edmund further strengthens the influence of positive models. His friendly demeanour and guidance disarm the boys, leading Ezan to realise he is "safer at the centre than staying at the house of that criminal who called himself, Chief" (137). This realisation underscores the shift in perceived safety and the value placed on a supportive, ethical environment. The boys' increasing obedience and remorse for their past behaviour signify developing self-regulation and an embrace of ethical concepts like accountability and forgiveness, actively fostered by the center's

programs and the consistent modelling of prosocial behaviour by figures like Sergeant Wuni and Father Edmund.

Their mother's visit, revealing the emotional toll of their actions, further intensifies their shame and fuels their desire for redemption. Their decision to pursue their education and their desire to stay at the Mission House under Father Edmund's guardianship, rather than return to their village immediately, are direct consequences of observational learning from positive role models. Father Edmund's influence, leading to Ezan's aspiration to become a priest and Kwaw's desire to be a music teacher, exemplifies how exposure to individuals demonstrating prosocial behaviours can culminate in encouraging significant positive life choices.

The narrative culminates in the boys' successful release and integration into the Catholic parish. Here, Reverend Father Hank from Germany becomes another crucial positive model, actively shaping their aspirations. His modelling of a positive lifestyle reinforces their commitment to a dignified future. Ezan's desire to become a Priest and Kwaw's interest to become a music teacher, professions that carry "more dignity in the society than to be on the streets of Accra engaging in crime" (177), illustrate the profound impact of these sustained positive influences. Father Hank's securing of funding for their education further provides the enabling environment and resources crucial for consolidating their positive behavioural change. The story of Ezan and Kwaw, despite the initial secrecy about their time at the Correctional Centre, becomes a testament to the transformative power of a supportive environment and positive modelling, affirming the essential role of children's literature in providing perspectives that empower young readers and affirm their agency (Keenan and Thompson 147).

Conclusion

Ida Fynn-Thompson's *Betrayed by the City* serves as an in depth exploration of the devastating impact of crime on children, offering a contrast to often idealised portrayals of childhood. Through the lens of Social Learning Theory, this essay has demonstrated

how the novel illuminates the psychological, social, and emotional repercussions of criminal activity. It further foregrounds the idea that children's transgressions are often learned behaviours stemming from observational learning of negative models and the absence of appropriate negative reinforcement in their environment.

Crucially, the study argues that the effectiveness of punishment and the nature of the rehabilitative environment are paramount in determining whether a child is transformed or further criminalised. The structured programs at the Correctional Centre including counselling from trained professionals and pastors, skill acquisition, formal education, and physical exercises are presented as essential building blocks for moral development. The consistent presence of positive models like Sergeant Wuni and Reverend Father Edmund, coupled with the opportunity for education and skill development, effectively redirects the boys' initial greed and desire for quick money, which they had acquired through observation of peers.

The journey depicted in the novel, from street crime to aspirations of becoming a Reverend Father and a music teacher, underscores the transformative potential of proportionate punishment and supervised rehabilitation. This finding has significant implications for correctional practices in African countries, particularly concerning the multitude of teenage children in police custody and prison yards. The essay strongly suggests that states should invest in establishing more functional and well-equipped Correctional Centres and supervised rehabilitation programs. Such investment ensures that children caught in the web of crime can be salvaged without risking further exposure to criminal elements, aligning with the rehabilitative goals articulated by Cullen and Gendreau (2012).

While *Betrayed by the City* does not shy away from harsh realities, it offers a compelling exploration of redemption, providing a glimmer of hope amidst darkness. It reinforces the notion that positive change is achievable, regardless of past mistakes, and

highlights how children's books can effectively deliver vital moral instruction, fostering accountability, forgiveness, and the enduring hope for a better path.

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