

**VICTORIAN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE AND
THE CONTEMPORARY CHILDREN’S
LITERATURE: A CRITICAL SURVEY**

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ABSTRACT:

The idea of the child as innocent and natural, influenced by philosopher John Locke’s and Rousseau’s views on childhood, was a vital factor in the nineteenth century approaches to childhood. In the eighteenth century, childhood was not considered a separate stage of development. Children were looked upon as miniature adults without a legal status. Theories of philosophers such as John Locke or Jean-Jacques Rousseau brought new perspectives in the outlook towards children. Thus, from the late eighteenth century onwards, parents slowly began to regard their children as individuals with thoughts, wishes and fears much different from the adult.

Keywords: Victorian, Children, Literature, Contemporary

INTRODUCTION:

In the early part of 19th century, England witnessed a high level of childhood mortality and a falling birth rate which made individual children more precious, and childhood was highly idealized and focused upon. Locke’s belief about the use of literature for amusement as well as instruction had a significant impact on Victorian Children’s Literature. Locke’s emphasis on the importance of education, socialization and experience in forming the character of children contributed extensively to the work of philosopher Jean - Jacques Rousseau. Jean-Jacques. Rousseau challenged the traditional conception that man is born in sin and must be punished into submission: “Man is born free, and yet we see him everywhere in chains.” In *Du Contrat Social* (1762), Rousseau announced it was society which was depraved and not the child: “The first impulses of nature are always right: there is no original sin in the human heart, and the how and why of the entrance of every vice can be traced ”(Social Contrat 5). In the *Emile, or, On Education* (1762; trans. 1763), Rousseau proposed a new theory of education focusing upon the importance of expression rather than

punishment to produce a freethinking child. The first book of Emile opens with the affirmation that everything is good as it comes from the Author of all things, but that everything degenerates in the hands of man. Emile presented childhood as a crucial period of life. In contrast to the seventeenth century belief about children and human beings as innately sinful, Rousseau emphasized on the existence of an innate human goodness which was corrupted by society as human beings grow up. Nineteenth century children's writers were greatly influenced by this new conception of childhood as pure and close to nature and this Edenic Images of childhood were central to Robert Louis Stevenson's collection of poems - *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885), F. H. Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911), and Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) which presented a return to nature as integral to self-development and healing. The image of the innocent childhood also influenced the work of the Romantics especially in Wordsworth *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* (1807). Similarly writers like Maria Edgeworth, Johann Sebastian Wyss and Louisa Alcott inspired by Rousseau's ideas of providing education through experience, exemplified the same in their well known works - *The Purple Jar* (1801), *Swiss Family Robinson*(1812-13) and *Little Women* (1868) respectively.

CRITICAL SURVEY:

Children's Literature produced during Queen Victoria's long and full regime depicted two different kinds of childhood constructions. The advent of Industrialization in the 19th century England resulted in the evolution of Capitalism and divided the society into two distinctly opposite classes -the rich and the bourgeois on one side and the working class on the other side. Writers like Charles Dickens and Charles Kingsley utilized the image of child for political as well as sentimental purpose. Charles Dicken's portrayal of working class poor children in *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *The Old Curiosity Shop*(1841) show child heroes who sustain themselves in poverty and criminality and come out untarnished from the corrupting influence of the society around them. Dicken's portrayal of the child heroine, Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is considered to be the embodiment of the Victorian sentimental child. The novel appeared in serial form in 1840-1841 and it depicted the struggles of little Nell against poverty. Her tragic death at the end of the novel greatly touched the Victorian audience. The focus on working class children and childhood in adult literature resulted in a greater cultural focus on real children and in the formation of The Education Act of 1870. The Education Act advocated the principle of universal schooling for children aged between five and twelve and later the Factory Acts put limitation on the working hours and condition under which children could work. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children founded in 1884 further brought to light the predicament of the poor children. Charles Kingsley's novel *The Water Babies* (1863) depicted the exploitation of the child chimney sweeps which became instrumental in the formation of the Climbing Boys Act of 1875 to curb such

child abuses.

Simultaneously, on the other side, the rich and the bourgeois class of the Victorian period evolved a more self-conscious and idealised myth of childhood characterized by innocence, goodness and purity which reached its height in the Victorian cult of the child most famously exemplified in Carroll's *Alice* and Barrie's *Peter Pan*. This myth was the result of the social practices of the time. Although majority of children of the working class were still working in the factories or fields, rich and upper middle class children lived a disciplined life, educated in the boarding schools and trained and looked after by servants and governesses. It emphasized the naturalness of childhood, confined to the feminine realm of the house and protected from the male, adult world of work, money and sex. The child from being viewed as an economic asset, now became sentimentally and emotionally priceless and from a producer to a consumer. This celebratory attitude of viewing childhood gave way to a sense of difference between the child and adult and the nostalgic feeling that growing up involves the loss of special qualities that may never be recovered.

This new image of childhood in the Victorian age both empowered and sentimentalized the child and led towards a radical expansion of children's writings and publishing in the 1860s. The historians of children's literature have remarked that most of the children's writing till the end of eighteenth century had instruction at the centre. Eminent writers and illustrators as Washington Irving (1783-1859), Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64), Edward Lear (1812-88), Charles Kingsley (1819-75), Louisa May Alcott (1832-88), Lewis Carroll (1832-98), George MacDonald, Samuel Clemens Beckett (1835-1910), Kate Greenaway (1846-1901), R. L. Stevenson (1850-1894), Howard Pyle (1853-1911), and Edith Nesbit created works of high literary and artistic merit which focussed on entertainment and new ideas of childhood and heralded the first 'Golden Age' of Children's Literature.

J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* is another well-known work of fantasy, without which the discussion on Victorian fantasy would remain incomplete. *Peter Pan* (1904) also remains an unavoidable reference point for study of children's literature and culture and the construction of childhood. It is unarguably the most famous and influential of all stage plays for children. Nicola Watson remarks, "Located at the epicentre of the so-called First Golden Age of children's literature, *Peter Pan* recapitulated, exploited, and contained much of the nineteenth century's stock of entertainment for children, whether print or theatre" (Mongomery and Watson, *Classic Texts* 141). The central story - the stealing away of the children by the fairies to Neverland echoes with other Victorian and Edwardian reworkings of the fairy tale - Kingsley's *Water Babies*, Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, or George MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin*. It is a play about a boy, Peter Pan who never grows up. The dream of eternal childhood is not a child-dream. It is an adult's dream of reclaiming the lost childhood. The play like Carroll's *Alice* stories is a psychological projection of the lost childhood and a comment on the paradoxical dialectic of the adult-child relationship.

In the nineteenth century development in printing technology led to the commercialization of publishing industry and towards production of a vast collection of colourful, smartly designed books, periodicals and printed novelties for children at a variety of prices. The commercial publishing for children also led to the rise of gender specific series - books for boys and books for girls promoting different ideals for both in the literature designed for them. Often there were parallel stories - books set in school for girls and those set in school for boys. By the end of the Victorian period, publishing for children comprised of everything from religious books to fantasy, fairy tales, nonsense literature, and many other genres including adventure, animal and school stories as well as innovative picture books and periodicals. This business of children's books publication became commercially so successful and dynamic that Henry James in 1899 in "The Future of the Novel" disapprovingly observes, "The literature, as it may be called for convenience, of children is an industry that occupies by itself a very considerable quarter of the scene. Great fortunes, if not great reputations, are made we learn by writing for school boys... " (Hughes,74).

In strong contrast to the adventurous boys' stories, the girls' stories depicted the world of domestic interiors and idealized a particular form of national femininity through their dynamic and engaging girl characters. This feminine ideal of the girl character was well exemplified in the Victorian novels like Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), Swiss author Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* (1880-1, translated 1884), L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), Kate Douglas Wiggin's *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*(1903), and Eleanor H. Porter's *Pollyanna*(1913) which went on to become the classics of children's literature.

Contemporary Children's Literature:

In the Contemporary Age with the emergence of Juvenile Children's Literature and Crossover fiction, there has been an infinite rise in the readers of Children's books. In the second half of twentieth century Children's Literature began to flourish on a variety of fronts. The old conception of childhood as depicted in the nineteenth century books disappeared and writing for children started focusing on children themselves and the didactic and the instructional tone began to wane in this new child centered environment. Besides in the present age of globalization and Information technology, the pages of children's books, from picture books and fairy tales to young adult fiction, comics and magazines, began to be filled with children and young people of different backgrounds, ethnicities and sexualities.

Critics such as Peter Hunt (2009) have recently speculated as to whether the 1990's ushered in a new golden age of children's literature. Certainly in terms of sales and publicity, children's literature became more visible than ever, and the market has grown exponentially. Philip Pullman's 'Northern Lights'(1995) and J. K. Rowling's 'Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone' (1997) can be seen as spearheading this trend and both, in their own ways, broke new ground. The 'Harry Potter' series

brought children's literature into greater public prominence by becoming highly popular both in children and adults, especially, the young adults. The crossover appeal of Pullman and his intellectual credibility, has appealed to critics and refined the potential of children's literature. In the words of Heather Montgomery and Nicola Watson, these books have, arguably presented a new, epic vision of childhood. Children in these novels do not simply have magical powers or go on adventures, as in previous works of fiction, but set about saving the world from catastrophe. Adults in these books may be morally ambiguous as in Pullman's or sharply divided into good and bad characters, as in Rowling. But they always lack the powers that children have to protect and save the world from the sins of the past. The child hero or heroine of the modern stories is not just an adventurer but also a redeemer (Montgomery 8).

The new trends and modes that seem to be emerging in the modern age, is the resurgence of historical fiction, development of futurist fiction and social realism and the expansion of Young Adult Fiction. Notable and representative works produced in the contemporary period, written and directed and marketed to young adolescent are Melvin Burgess's ground breaking and controversial story of child heroine addiction, 'Junk'(1996), Beverly Naidoo's account of child asylum - seekers in modern Britain in 'The Other side of Truth'(2000) , and the historical fiction 'Coram Boy' by Jamila Gavin. Interest in Futuristic dystopias is illuminated by Philip Reeve's 'Mortal Engines' (2001). These books clearly identify, in different degrees, the long standing dialectic between stern moral purpose and the need to amuse the child reader, and between social realism and escapist worlds. Many of the modern Children's writings deal with issues such as sex, drugs or race politics, eco-catastrophe, war and people trafficking, child abuse, bullying - subjects that have no place in an idealized view of childhood as a protected and privileged space, separated from adults and their concerns.

Another feature of children's literature in the modern period is the emergence of children's books in English that explore multiculturalism and the postcolonial experience of children outside of Britain and the United States. Writers like Buchi Emecheta, Wilson Harris, Ben Okri, V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and others depict the living conditions and practical concerns of minority groups in a society dominated by white mainstream culture like U.K., U.S. or Australia. The novels of Meera Syal, Gautam Malkani, Benjamin Zephaniah, Beverley Naidoo and others examine Asian British or Caribbean British children's relationship with their social and multicultural environment, revealing the various political, social and economic changes that have taken place in recent decades. Talented Black authors like Virginia Hamilton and Brenda Wilkerson, Tom Feelings, Walter Dean Myers, Eloise Greenfield, Sharon Bell Mathies have created significant works portraying the struggle of children for creating their own multicultural identity.

There are also books that draw on postmodernist impulses in order to experiment with narrative form and to break with the conventions of closure (happy ever after) that

have characterised children's literature for a couple of centuries. In other words, the monolithic Anglo-centric view of innocent childhood that had prevailed in children's books written in English in the previous centuries, has recently given way to the notion that childhood is differently shaped by different cultural, sexual, ethnic, and national contexts.

The Victorian Children's books were didactic in tone and held the ambivalent attitude to childhood as both sinful and innocent and they sought to make their central characters better children, while the contemporary writers today advocate writings which would help the adolescents to face the world in which they live. The fictional world created by the Contemporary young writers is complex and difficult and their central focus is to depict the issues and events today's young children may encounter: brutality, racial discrimination, sexism, rejection, alienation, divorce, sex and sexuality, mental or physical disability, adolescent instability, environmental issues, drugs, crime, death and diseases, sexual abuse, poverty, war and migration.

The contemporary literature for children increasingly depicts abandonment, alienation and homelessness.

There was no place like home for Dorothy in the *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and Max returned to his "still warm" dinner in the classic Maurice Sendak tale, *Where the Wild Things Are*. But an analysis of award-winning children's literature has identified a dramatic change in the stories being told to young people today, where there is no yellow brick road to follow, the wild things are in the child's real home and there are no hot meals" (Guardian Friday 6 July 2012).

Modern books depict children who are abandoned, alienated and have no home to return to, than characters who voluntarily set off on adventures.

For these children, childhood is not the happy, carefree time it is 'supposed' to be... children don't leave home on a lark. They are thrust out. These children are not wild things. They are too busy taking care of their troubled parents to have time to follow a rabbit down a hole; too frightened of abuse to trust the Tinman, and too fearful to set out on an adventure for fear that their unreliable parent might not be there when they return. ..These children have been caught in the crossfire of the gender, race, class and culture clashes between adults. (Guardian Friday 6 July 2012).

Contemporary children, like all people in the postmodern world are confronted with multiple conflicting truths and a lack of absolutes. Alice found her Wonderland when she followed the rabbit down the hole. But at the end of her adventures, she wakes up and returns home. Hansel and Gretel, or Snow White even if an evil step-parent temporarily interrupted their balance, they have a home to return and a loving parent or guardian to protect them. But instead of having a home to return to and a loving parent to protect them — children in post modern fiction come from failed homes and have no adult refuge.

In Andy Mulligan's *Trash* - parents are entirely absent, or are vain, unethical or perplexed as in Ali Lewis's *Everybody Jam*. Sometimes adults are loving but troubled

- as in Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* or Annabel Pitcher's *My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece*. The adult role is often taken up by a modern child when she/he returns to her helpless parents and save them by making a new home for them as in Ruta Sepetys's *Between Shades of Grey*. Thus, in postmodern fiction the child's expedition is to construct a new home. Her/His ultimate postmodern goal is to lead the adults to a hopeful ending, a home. The contemporary children's literature reveals a deep anxiety about childhood on the part of authors and parents. "The children in these novels have become the hope that will lead us, the readers and adults, to a better place, the child is the modern figure in the postmodern mess, the scientific, rational and reactionary figure. (Guardian Friday 6 July 2012)".

Another dominant trend in the contemporary times is the emergence of science and dystopian fiction. The futuristic science fiction for young readers has been dominated by authorial fears about the violent, inhumane social and political worlds young people seem likely to inherit. Postapocalyptic, admonitory scenarios are extensive, depicting horrifying visions of hostile societies that are shockingly indifferent to injustice, oppression, persecution and the suffering of the masses. The future is typically represented as a terrifying nightmare that child readers must strive to avoid at all costs. Dystopian fictions disclose and critique totalitarianism.

The classic dystopias, *1984* and *Brave New World* can be considered as the founding model of this fiction. Children's Dystopias like Philip's Reeve's *Mortal Engines* (2001) aim to make severe and intimidating comment on where as a society we are really going and, what it will be like when we reach there. As Ann Hewings notes:

Its primary purpose is to puncture old myths and dreams, by proving, in the form of a literary experiment, what human aspirations and ideals are *really* likely to mean for the future of mankind. Above all, children's dystopias seek to violently explode blind confidence in the myth that science and technology will bring about human 'progress' (Ann Hewings 375).

Patricia McKillip, Anne McCaffrey, Penelope Lively, Susan Cooper, Natalie Babbitt, and John Christopher are other popular writers of science fiction who demonstrate how application of science and technology in worst-case scenarios, can be used to bring about tyrannical, inhuman and unbearable regimes, instead of 'civilized' ones.

Contemporary children encounter stories through diverse media and performances, and children's literature studies encompass all modes of interaction. For example, a young child while watching on television a popular programme like BBC's *CBeebies* is introduced to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the first time. Then he might also access the *CBeebies'* website and read the digital book. And over a passage of time he can also look at it again through Marcia Williams's comic strip version (*Mr William Shakespeare's Plays*, 1998) or may go through a picture book version (*Picture This* series, 2005) or read a prose retelling of the story by Leon Garfield (1985). He may also watch Michael Hoffman's star-studded 1999 film adaptation of it and end by seeing a traditional stage performance and reading the play-text of *A*

Midsummer Night's Dream. Thus today's children have many ways by which they can explore a work of literature, and in doing so they undergo a process of acculturation. Henry Jenkins, the well known media specialist observes, "enacting, reciting and appropriating elements from pre-existing stories is a valuable and organic part of the process by which children develop cultural literacy" (Jenkins 186).

Children's Literature and the Evolution of Modes:

Children's literature in comparison to adults literature, can easily embrace developments in technology and new media. Adults writing regards narratives developed for new media and adaptations of existing texts into different media as supplementary to the study of literary texts. While they are comfortably integrated by children's literature studies. Since the commencement of publishing industry, printers and publishers have tried to evolve new techniques to make books and other print items attractive to the young. Industrial and technological developments often helpful in this enterprise. In the 19th century, printers experimented with cheaper papers, incorporated more images less expensively, found economical ways of printing in colour, tried making inexpensive bindings, and discover affordable ways for inclusion of novelty features such as pop-ups, flaps, volvelles, and other kinds of paper engineering.

During the 20th century, the work of re-presenting texts was extended to new media and information technologies, so stories could be narrated through audio and audio-visual forms. At the turn of the millennium, digital medias have been extensively used to deliver narrative in the form of computer games and online texts such as fan fictions or hypertext narratives. For a time, however, one sector of the digital market resisted the attractions of interactivity, but today more and more readers are getting attracted to e books. *One* reason for this straightforward transfer from print to screen is price: it is comparatively cheaper to digitize existing word-only texts and make them available on internet through varied reading apps on kindle, e readers, personal computers and even cell phones. What is interesting to note is that though new media forms are usually adopted quickly by younger audiences, in this case the first significant audience of e-books were adult readers who couldn't resist the portability and the cheap price of the e-books with the familiar features of the fixed-print book.

Many adult readers might see it as a superficial change but, they are a part of a significant change to the nature of narrative. Currently, this change is most apparent in two areas: new iterations of traditional tales, and crossover fantasy series, which themselves often incorporate and blend elements borrowed from myths, legends, sagas, folk and fairy tales. That the oldest forms of literature are receiving progressive treatments is a reminder that through stories, children are simultaneously initiated into literary tradition and taught the skills that will make them fully literate in terms of their own times.

Transliteracy, Transtexts and Transition:

In the 21st century, it is necessary to think in terms of transliteracy. Transliteracy can be explained as literacy that crosses between media and is no longer exclusively text-based. Encountering traditional texts in multiple - including multimedia - versions is an effective way to encourage both cultural and text-related literacy. Children are adept with transliteracy but many adults may be less comfortable moving between media. However adults who share electronic texts with young children are often improving their own transliteracy as they do so. Interestingly, developing adult literacy is frequently an added- value aspect of children's literature. Movement between media is often encouraged through remediation (also called transmediation) strategies, meaning the way new media tend to blend themselves with audiences by referencing, mimicking, or even incorporating established media. Reading print stories is the oldest form of interaction. This is particularly true with regard to narratives for children, since childhood is the time when most people learn to read. The coalition between print (usually in the form of books) and new media is evident in examples ranging from Disney film versions of classic fairy tales, which begin with a book that is opened to release the story to CD- ROM and e-books that mimic the action of turning the page.

As a general rule, those who are adventurous and ambitious first see the change and make the change. And none can be more adventurous than children in learning and adapting to new skills, tactics and technology. Therefore children's texts can undoubtedly become a springboard for innovation. This has especially proven to be true with the transition to multimedia, where storytelling not only combines several different kinds of media, (audio, film, still image, and print) in a single text, but is also dispersed across several forms (the book, the film, the graphic novel, the comic, the animation, the computer game), often as' part of media franchises. Today, the most advanced multiversion narratives have been produced for children. One of the first of these to reach public notice grew from the Pokemon phenomenon that began in the 1990s.

CONCLUSION:

There is a long history of producing multiple versions of texts for children. Until now, however, each encounter with narrative has tended to be discrete and self-contained; for instance, while films based on books and books based on films were often experienced by the same audiences, each had also to stand alone and work in terms of its own medium. Traditionally, the transfer between media has focused on broadening audiences, usually by appealing to younger and younger markets. A significant change is taking place in the relationship between multiple versions of texts delivered via different media and/or through different formats in a single medium. This change affects both the nature and the audience for multi-version texts.

While children today are born into a multimedia environment, earlier texts and formats have not disappeared, so the opportunity to experience many individual

versions of a story still exists, but there is a new dimension to this process. In contemporary transmedia networks, the same core story is dispersed and delivered across a range of media and a variety of formats; for instance, as a book, film, graphic novel, computer game and/or body of fan fiction. Different story products no longer compete with each other, but are complementary and dynamic due to the sharing of assets. So, for example, across a transmedia network a computer game will incorporate footage from the film, the film will reference game play.

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