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## Mapping out the Literary Lineage of Child Characters in British Children's Literature

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### **Abstract**

Quite naturally, the leading characters of children's stories turn out to be children themselves, although this is not indeed a requisite trait of this genre. This is fairly evident in the renowned stories ranging from *Cinderella*, *Alice in Wonderland* to the latest fantasy series *Harry Potter*, where the children claim their central position by deserving the names in the titles. The reason behind the affinity between the crucial part of children and the fantasy stories rests on the fact that the alluring trait of fantasy in stories is closely connected with the innocence and imagination of childhood. Hence, the writers' predilection falls on child characters to carry over their mission of illuminating the young minds through the entire design of incredible tales. At this juncture, the present paper proposes to trace the literary lineage of child characters in the British literary spectrum.

**Key words:** child characters, fantasy stories, British Children's literature.

The willingness to wonder and to engage in adventure of fantasy stories prevails more in the mind of reading young children and also in the child-like trait of an adult. Since Carl Jung in his *Development of Personality* aptly asserts that, "... we talk about the child, but we should mean the child in the adult. For in every adult, there lurks a child, something that is always becoming, is never completed and calls for unceasing care, attention, and education." (170). In tandem with this standpoint, C.S.Lewis also recalls the childlike trait of a grown-up in his *An Experiment in Criticism* as, "... who in his senses would not keep, if he could, that tireless curiosity, that intensity of imagination, that facility of suspending disbelief that unspoiled appetite, that readiness to wonder, to pity, and to admire?" (72). And he finely classifies the stages of human nature as children, adults, middle-aged and elderly, in which the childlikeness remains a part of an individual in all these phases. Thus, fantasy evokes the childlike attribute of any personality and endures to engulf the minds of children as well.

The fantasy writers, along with their enticing trait of alluring elements, aim to refine the personality of a child which will eventually ensue in the adult behaviour. As Ursula Le Guin remarks:

They believe that maturity is not an outgrowing, but a growing up; that an adult is not a dead child, but a child who survived. They believe that all the best faculties of a mature human being exist in the child, and if these faculties are encouraged in youth they will act well and wisely in the adult, but if they are repressed and denied in the child they will stunt and cripple the adult personality. (91)

Consequently, to encourage 'the best faculties of a mature human being' the fantasy authors seemingly employ the child characters as protagonists to impart those missions among the reading young minds. Meanwhile the expedition of child figure in both British children's literature apparently expounds an assortment of approaches towards the child portrayal, ranging from mere appearance to the embodiment of moral values. This perceptive will be made clear by tracing the evolution of child characters in the mainstream literature along with the children's literary spectrum.

While tracking the literary lineage of child characters and childlike vision in British literature, it is perhaps discernible that the social background of adeptly resounds in the creation of those characters. Various social factors such as the notions of Romanticism, Victorian age and the World Wars in Twentieth century had a decisive influence on the rendering of child characters in the literary masterpieces. Similarly, various political and social forces had led to have a striking conversion in the condition and treatment of child which had finely echoes in the fabrication of fictional offspring.

In British literature, the literary framework of the evolution of child figure clearly explicates the various phases of portraying children with their respective social backdrops with diverse approaches. While tracking the historical roots, Robert Pattison in *The Child Figure in*

*English Literature*, "... the most striking feature of classical literature's attitude toward children is the thunderous silence that envelops the idea of childhood, especially when compared to the outpouring of concern and attention recent centuries have produced on the same subject." (5). Though Homer's Astyanax - Hector's son in *The Iliad* marks the first child in classical literature, who became the hallmark of children depicted after seventeenth century, the classical silence and neglect of childhood prevailed in literature till Reformation. But there are exceptions to the silence surrounding children during the period from Augustine to the Reformation, the least attractive of these is the young martyr of Chaucer's *Prioress's Tales*, which Madam Eglantine tells a story of a child martyr who was killed by Jews. Along with this child figure, Coyotito - an infant in the poem "Pearl" by an anonymous poet in fourteenth century is depicted with the solemnity of Augustinian to render the true child figure in literary work of art.

Despite of the fact that the child character holds diminutive place in the literary stream up to the period of Reformation, they soon emerge as a dominant literary figure around whom the notions of nature and hopes for redemption cluster. The phenomenon of addressing child and childlike aspect has begun to gain currency in the epoch of Romanticism, where the image of child is viewed, as Timmerman firmly states in his *Other Worlds*:

... the child – pure, untainted by demands of science and technology, often possessing a kind of wisdom which sees intuitively the right and wrong of things, and almost always filled with the wonder so cherished by the romantic. The child became a guide to truth and meaning, and the child therefore romps joyfully through many romantic poems. (35)

This remark finely echoes in the poetry of Wordsworth who celebrates the nature of childhood experience in his "Ode on Intimations of Immortality":

Mighty Prophet! Seer blest  
On whom those truths do rest,  
Which we are rolling all our lives to find,  
In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave; (115- 118)

While Wordsworth was spellbound by the mysticism of the innocence of child nature, which was untainted by worldly experience, William Blake in his "Songs of the innocence" recounted his vision of the childlike nature which persists into adulthood and the adulthood incipient in the child. To him, the child represents an antithesis to method and process in his spontaneous ability to intuit what is true or false. Hence the romantic fixation on childhood owed many literary masterpieces, in which the nature of child and childhood days was adored. While the Romantics idolized the nature of child, the Victorian writers sought to liberate the children from the confines of the society, by allowing them to be mischievous and imaginative. Accordingly, the creators had depicted many memorable characters of children who stood in stark contrast to the wrecked settings of industrialized England, the oppressive societal atmosphere, and, as well, the potential for inner darkness that Victorians

feared. The reverence that Victorians held for the child images stemmed from differentiated notions of adult and child, corruption and innocence, and male and female which ran deep throughout then English society.

Among the promising writers, Charles Dickens holds a dominant place in restoring the innocence of children through his vast range of child protagonists. His compelling characters are finely fabricated by his desire to counter the emotional apathy that plagued the Victorian society. And his characters wielded a magnificent influence in the perception of treating children in the vast panorama of literary arena. By pioneering the portrayal of child as heroes, he has paved way for many writers who have wished to save the innocence of child through their literary creations. While Dickens excels in his huge collection of child portraits, incomparably with his contemporaries such as Charlotte Bronte's Jane in *Jane Eyre*, Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* and George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Silas Marner* remains significant by their child portrayals who completes the Victorian picture of children.

In the standpoint of Dickens, the innocence of children seems to be inspirational that the adults would learn and get motivated from them. For instance, in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Little Nell spiritually inspires her morally weak grandfather. And this aspect of depicting children paved way for the emergence of stories in which they teach the adults on how to live. This approach to children was in sharp contrast to religious and rational models that had dominated the development of Children's literature from its inception through the eighteenth century. Stories begun to emerge in which children looked at adults and found them lacking. An early example of subverting notions of adulthood had been introduced in Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.

From Dickens's time onwards, his model of social earnestness, carried by compelling narratives, rose to dominance in books for children. Earnest and didactic children's writers had opened the door for emotional engagement through stories. Nevertheless, they opened the door to the imagination. The romantic impulses found outlet in adoring portraits of children and a penchant for heroic adventures. Authors and illustrators seemed to be driven by the Romantic belief that children were possessed of a magical intuitive spark which could rekindle childlike wonder, joy and goodness in the adult. All these factors had led to have remarkable characters in Children's literature. In the beginning of the twentieth century, children's authors fully developed the idea that the innocent play and pleasure of childhood had value in their own right. In their hands, the child became the model of a certain lifestyle. For instance, Enid Blyton dealt with the codes and symbols of upper middle class British children who were confidently expecting to run an Empire when they grew up. The popular culture reflected in her stories displayed a society with its class groupings firmly in place. Her renowned child portrayals as Ranjana Sengupta spell out in "Reading Habit":

... Julian, Dick, George and Anne in Famous *Five* series belonged to the then socially secure and financially entrenched professional category which could send their children to boarding schools secure in knowledge that all the appropriate codes of their class would be properly inculcated. The children in Blyton's books were well aware of their social position *vis-a-vis* village children, domestic staff and lower ranks of the law and order machinery. (81)

The mood of the epoch was expressed through the quality of Beatrix Potter and E.Nesbit's child characters. New books invited children and adults to escape into small adventures and imaginative play. Children's authors are entranced with childhood as a Romantic way of life which sans responsibility and adult demands. For instance, in *Peter Pan*, James Barrie employs the representations of childhood innocence and imagination to entertain children and juxtaposes everyday life and a fantastical never land to explore the alluring notion of playing endlessly as an alternative to growing up.

Meanwhile, the Edwardian era was preceded and followed by the two World Wars. Among the various upshots of War, the representation of childhood in British literature seemed to be modified, eventually which was reflected in children's literature. Aftermath of atomic bomb dropped on Japan led the humanitarians to have an awareness of the depth of human suffering and the potential for diaster that faced the human race. These aspects had signalled an insight in the literary creations which Pat Pinsent articulates in *The Child in British Literature*:

Coupled with stringent post-war austerity (which led people to feel that the war was not yet properly over) and the increased tension in Europe between Russia and the West, these factors meant that there was also in some quarters nostalgia for more care-free times, a feature also reflected in some children's literature.

With their focus on 'care-free' childhood days, the writers provided social codes that dominate the reading young generations. They sought to advance the society by offering templates of righteous living through child characters. While focussing on moral values, they gave secular worldviews and provided social maps to enhance the purpose of true citizenship.

While the authors of children's literary spectrum spent the early years for amusement, later they had targeted the same with instruction in their character depiction. The initial hopefulness regarding child characters that ensured a light touch gave way to intense earnestness in their portrayals. The writers had strongly driven by the offset of preaching and amusing to engage the minds of young readers. Hence children's stories benefited from the thriving attitude towards imaginative literature.

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