Childhood in English Literature

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Childhood as a Theme in English Literature

In 1960, Philippe Ariès advanced the hypothesis that the idea of childhood was practically inexistent before the early modern period. The controversy about the existence or absence of the idea prior to that time in history gave rise to a host of studies on childhood. But what does the word "childhood" mean? Our awareness that it refers to a distinct period of human life is natural but how do we determine its duration? How long does childhood last? Many psychologists and Children's Studies specialists have emitted an opinion on the subject and they have come to the conclusion that "childhood" is a complex term. All have agreed that it refers to a set of experiences and behaviours, characteristic for the earlier part of our lives, meant to prepare us for adulthood and active life. As to its duration, both individual differences and differences over a historical time span should be taken into account. In this sense, childhood is defined in opposition to maturity and adulthood – one is no longer a child when one becomes an adult. However, this opposition has not sufficed and the multiplication of research and critical writing on the subject is telling. The common denominator of many studies on childhood is the attempt to grasp its essence, to define the experience of being a child and to explain the nature of children. One of the most important conclusions these studies have drawn is that our notions of childhood have changed. They have been adapted to the changes in our society and to our conceptions of what a child should be. Thus, the ideas about childhood during the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries evolved continually. Writing and literature tell us more about this evolution.

Childhood has for long been one of the central themes of English literature. Children were the subject of a great number of Elizabethan lyrics and we can find them in the work of Dryden and Pope. However, as a truly substantial and self-sustainable theme, childhood arose with the novel. Its importance gradually increased through the 18th century. Later on, the theme developed and matured, and we can easily find its numerous ramifications in the

literatures of the 19th as well as the 20th centuries. Today, childhood is seen as essential for the critical understanding of the literary production of the 19th century and the Victorian period. In addition, the 19th and 20th centuries saw the steady emergence of a real literature for children, either for their instruction or entertainment. Thus, the child became either the central subject and/or object of a plethora of writings since the 18th century. These reflected the dichotomy of childhood which was seen as a symbol of growth and development on the one hand and as a symbol of regression and ignorance of the world on the other.

Earlier, authors like Janeway (*A Token for Children*, 1671 – 72) were spreading the doctrine of original sin. During the 17th century, such authors constructed highly moralising, religion-oriented visions of childhood, all of which were based on the theory of the Christian "fallen state" and looked down upon children with great pessimism. Childhood was seen as the most decisive period for the acquisition of the fundamentals of spirituality and for the construction of true faith. However, the thinkers of the 18th century started promoting Reason as one of the highest virtues and offered a new, more optimistic and much brighter view on childhood. The century became a period of transition, of which childhood was the supreme symbol, celebrating the cult of Nature, the purity of mind and soul, and the triumph of innate goodness. Contrary to what was professed in earlier centuries, childhood was perceived in an increasingly positive light. Soon, it became a favourite theme of the sentimental novel and the poverty and misfortunes of guiltless, insightful and virtuous children were an object of considerable import and frequent discussion in the works of many women writers (e.g. Elizabeth Bonhote's *Hortensia; or, Distressed Wife*, 1769). The period saw the emergence of the idea that in childhood, the concepts of imagination, sensibility and nature were joined in one. The influence of Rousseau and his *Emile* (1762) on this representation of childhood in the literature of the times is undeniable. However, the connection between sentimentality and childhood was not exclusively reserved to the 18th century. In her early novels, George Eliot

moulded childhood according to the same principles. Her children were portrayed as carefree and unencumbered with adult sorrow and the awareness of death. An interesting particularity of her work is the attention Eliot pays to baby-talk and children's ways of talking.

For Blake (e.g. *Songs of Innocence*, 1789) and Wordsworth (e.g. *Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, 1807 or *We are Seven*, 1798), the child became a theme of a certain weight. For Blake, childhood signified innocence and for Wordsworth, the child had natural piety and wisdom and his famous “The Child is father of the Man” (1802) became an increasingly popular motif. For him and for many authors, writing of childhood was what later Lewis Carroll believed to be the writing of life. The child and the process of growing up were common metaphors for the regeneration and renewal of society, while childhood was seen as the equivalent for humanity in its infancy. Gradually, children became symbols of hope and childhood was seen as synonymous to new beginnings. Such was the case in Charles Dickens’s *The Great Expectations* (1860 – 61). Naturally, the child in Dickens grew to be the incarnation of spontaneity, love, and innocence on the background of the ugliness, squalor and inhumanity of industrial London. Dickens offered his readers a view through the child’s eyes, creating a palpable experience of childhood. Indeed, many of his novels bear the names of children – *Oliver Twist* (1837 – 39), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838 – 39), *Dombey and Son* (1846 – 48), *David Copperfield* (1849 – 50), *Little Dorrit* (1855 – 57). Charlotte Brontë in her *Jane Eyre* (1847) explored the victimisation, loneliness, and isolation of children within a hostile environment. Virtually deprived of childhood, the girls at the Lowood school for poor and orphaned children are vowed to a life of slavery and an early death. *Jane Eyre* fed on a strong heritage of gothic villainy and persecuted femininity to denounce the rigid education and brutal practices of the schooling system. While Brontë chose to give the reader an account of the negative effects a difficult childhood might have on an adult's life, Henry James focused some of his writings on children exclusively. James was

mostly concerned with the innocence of childhood and of how this innocence can be corrupted if the family circle is disbalanced. The major themes of both *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) are knowledge and ignorance, and they explore a number of problematic Freudian concepts among which children's exposure to sexuality and the early contact with death.

During the second half of the 19th century, Lewis Carroll was one of the authors who wrote extensively of and about children. His *Alice's Adventures in Wonderlan*d (1865), *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) and *Sylvie and Bruno* (1889 – 93) were specifically illustrated for an audience of children and even their cover art was conceived in such a way as to please children. Lewis Carroll's correspondence with his editors is one of the numerous testimonials that a real concern about children and childhood had developed. Moreover, Carroll's writings contain a great deal of information about what it meant to be a British child during the Victorian period. Laden with political implications and comments on the British Empire, Alice's world places a heavy burden on the shoulders of its youngest subjects whose childhood is to prepare them for servitude. Almost at the same time in America, Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* (1876 – 96) and *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) appear as stories of childhood escape, of wilful isolation from society and a continual struggle against conformity. In line with the tradition of Harriet Beecher Stowe's portrayal of children (e.g. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1852), Twain's works discuss freedom and liberty in a reaction against the limits and constraints of society. All of these are themes that echo Blake's natural, joyful, carefree, and enlightened romantic child.

During the 20th century, childhood developed into a favourite theme for an ever-increasing number of genres. The examples vary extensively from C. S. Lewis's indirect portrayals of children at times of war to the poems, diaries and writings by children (e.g. the poignant *The Diary of Anne Frank*, 1944), of children writing of the various experiences of

their own childhood. While in earlier centuries childhood was a preparation and a period of growing up, the early 19th and 20th centuries saw the rise of the idea of holding on to childhood with authors like J. M. Barrie (*Peter Pan*, 1902 – 11) and Ray Bradbury (*Dandelion Wine*, 1957 and *Farewell Summer*, 2006). They represented the magic, wonders and transience of childhood and inspired many contemporary novelists, adults and children alike.

The scope for the study of childhood in literature is wide indeed. Today, researchers are asking more questions. They are discussing problems that had never been looked into before and their work has uncovered a remarkable variety in the portrayal of children and childhood in literature, beyond the fundamental polarities of the good and the bad child. Studies, among which those of J. Banerjee, A. Immel and M. Witmore, have shown that childhood stands at the heart of many works of literature from which it was initially thought absent. Thus, from the 20th century onwards, there has been a global and unprecedented interest in childhood.

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