

Notions of Childhood and Value of Reading Children's Literature

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Abstract This essay focuses on the exploring of the notions of childhood and its influence on the value of reading children's literature through time. It dates back from children's book in 17th century in Europe to picturebooks in 21st century. It shows that the changing notions of childhood has a great impact on the value of children's literature for children. It also shows that reasons behind the development concept on childhood in history and it also explores the values of reading literature to children in relation to their personal fulfillment and academic gains.

Keywords: Childhood; Children's literature

1 Introduction

Children's literature is commonly defined as 'books created to amuse and interest children, material that is written to appeal to their emotional, cognitive, and experiential levels'. (Goldstone, 1986) Children's literature intends to cover 'topics of relevance and interest to children, through prose to poetry, fiction and nonfiction'. (Lynch-Brown, Tomlinson, 1999) Children's books have a long history around the world and they have absorbed various elements into the writing such as oral legends, folk story and fairy tale. In the 17th century in Europe books were written explicitly to teach children behavioural and ethical lessons. However, the starting point of history of children's book can be traced back to the 18th century when John Newbery, a publisher, issued the first edition of *A Little Pretty Pocket Book* in 1744. (Knowles & Malmkjar, 1996) A growing number of books were published provide enjoyment and fun for readers. From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, Britain witnessed the first Golden Age of children's literature. It was the time that a great many famous writers such as Lewis Carroll, and Charles Kingsley flourished. Fantasy became, arguably, the most important feature in writing for children. Critical analysis of children's literature is often concerned with the content described and characters portrayed by adult writers. It is believed that children are physically and psychologically vulnerable and susceptible, so they need to be protected through language without manipulation. Many factors contributing to the development of children's literature in history depended on some major shifts in the perception of children's role in social and cultural contexts. The purpose of this essay is to explore some of the reasons behind the development concept on childhood in history and it also explores the values of reading literature to children in relation to their personal fulfillment and academic gains.

2 Notion of childhood and its influence on children's literature

What is childhood? What does it feel like to be a child? Childhood is a concept that varies geographically and culturally. Mouritsen states (2002) 'Everyone has a childhood in his or her baggage, with the memories, the knowledge, the attitudes, the sensory and cognitive mind-set, this involves some long for childhood, some are stuck in it, some seek to be rid of it. Whatever this case may be, one does not escape the fact that one has had a childhood'. Childhood is an essential stage for everyone. But the notion of has not always been the same. The notions of childhood in western history vary from place to place and time to time. Understanding the development concept of childhood is an essential part of appreciating the writing of children in literature.

According to French historian Phillipe Aries (1962), the notion of childhood was almost nonexistent in the Middle Age and early Renaissance. He argues that children were portrayed no differently to adults and were dramatically ignored or treated like an objects. He suggests for example: 'The fact that children were seen as "miniature adults" is clearly seen in medieval paintings'. (Goldstone, 1986) The lack of a clear conceptualization of childhood means there was no "real" children's literature except some early books for instructional and didactic purposes written by clerics. McMunn and Willam Robert (1972) states that 'There was a lack of any genuine literature aimed specifically at children before the 18th century'. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the emerging concept of children was emphasised by the Puritans. Bette claims that 'It was believed that children were born to be sinful. For children to become the most productive adults, they had to be cleansed of their iniquities'. So during that time, books were written mostly to stress their evilness and to correct their fault.

By the end of seventeenth century, John Locke, an English philosopher, argued eloquently in his 1690 *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that 'let us then suppose the mind to have no ideas in it, to be like *white paper* with nothing written on it'. The idea of "white paper" shows that he believed that humans are born like a blank slate which was against idea of original sin. Locke also

advocated in *Thoughts Concerning Education* that ‘the little and almost insensible impressions on our tender infancies have every important and lasting consequences’. Locke stated that good education at early stage is very important. What’s more, he argued that a child should learn through pleasure and enjoy the learning experience. This was an important driving force to emphasize the importance of children rather than seeing them as “miniature adults”. The Enlightenment was centred on reason and progress, Fiona says ‘it took an optimistic, progressive view of society and regarded children as having a great potential for intellectual development’. Locke’s thoughts shifted the concept of childhood which impacted in turn on the idea of children’s literature. John Newbery started to publish books specifically written for children. *A Pretty Little Pocketbook* was the most success book in that time. With the successful market sale of Children’s books, children’s literature opened its market for many children and juvenile readers. In the eighteenth-century, the concept of childhood supported learning for useful information and learning for fun. During that time, interesting and informative children’s books were published.

The conceptualization of childhood went through another change due to one underlying factor from Rousseau’s text, *Emile or On Education*. Rousseau rejects the idea of original Sin, and argued that children came into the world innately innocent, and were corrupted by their experiences in life. For parents, children’s innocence should be protected. The religious way of thinking of children began to fade and Kimberley(2014) states that ‘childhood came to be associated with a set of positive meanings and attributes, notably innocence, freedom, creativity, emotion, spontaneity’ Rousseau’s idea of the child contributed significantly to Children’s literature and, arguably, to the start of the first Golden Children’s literature when ‘children were considered carefree, devoid of responsibility, enjoying a time to romp with elves and sprite’. (Goldstone, 1986) Magic and fantasy began to play roles in children’s literature. Romantic poets such as William Blake and William Wordsworth inherited and developed Rousseau’s ideas on childhood. Blake wrote in his collection of poems *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, depicting innocent children who suffered the cruelty and an ugly world. Coveney (1967) claims that ‘it is William Blake who believes children having imagination and spirituality.’ Wordsworth also wrote many poems full of images of the innocent Romantic child. In his poem ‘My Heart Leaps Up’, He wrote

My heart leaps up when I behold
 A rainbow in the sky;
 So was it when my life began;
 So it is now I am a man;
 So be it when I shall grow old,
 Or let me die!
 The child is father of the Man;
 And I could wish my days to be
 Bound each to each by natural piety. (Wordsworth)

In his poem, he believed ‘The Child is the father of the man’. This was a great challenge to traditional ideas about the differences between adult and children. In his view, children were the source to inspire the imagination and nature.

In the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution dramatically shifted the role of childhood and how children were perceived in society. McCulloch (2011) believes that ‘Childhood, then, became increasingly regarded as a separate sphere from adulthood, given the freedom to be indulged outside the world of work, and it became a cherished time of nostalgia to be protected, as the Victorians inherited Romantic discourses about childhood innocence’. The time between 1860 and 1900s was regarded as the first Golden Age of Children’s literature. Lewis Carroll’s fantasy, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, marked the feature of fantasy in writing style by using satire to explore what he saw as serious problems in Victorian ideology.

The notion of childhood changed dramatically again after the 1960s. Children were seen increasingly as participants in social functions and as equal to their parents. They were given the right to challenge authority and they could play a role in the family and make their own decisions, to some extent. This shift also brought many changes in the ways in which children’s literature was written. Instead of describing a fantasy world where children can hide from the outside world, children directly face the chaotic and brutal world without much protection from their parents. William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, for example, reflects ‘a tension between the adult world of conservatism, with its pastoral tropes and the child’s world of modernity, corruption’ (McCulloch, 2011), which showed the consequences of the War and pushed children to find ways to find a way ‘to negotiate with modern society and its rapid changed’. (McCulloch, 2011) Many books written for children at this time move away from fantasy to real world where children are seen to be searching for their ways to protect themselves.

3 Values of reading children’s literature

Children’s books are mainly about children’s experience of life. They put children in a different space to the real world to an imagined world or a different time from past, present to the future. They take many different forms such as adventure stories, fairy tales, school stories, fantasies and family stories attracting both young readers and adult readers. Some classic children’s books pass down for every generation and attract academic concerns worldwide. The values embedded in such children’s books must be enormous and significant. Children’s literature carries many cultural values and authors, consciously or unconsciously decided to write these stories in order to teach readers especially children about social and ethical values, behavioral norms and good attitudes towards life. ‘Children’s books are important educationally, socially and commercially’. (Hunt, 1994) ‘It is arguably impossible for a children’s book (especially one being read by a child) not to be educational or influential in some way’. (Hunt, 3) It is acknowledged that ‘literature for children leads to personal fulfillment and academic gains’. (Lych-Brown & Tomlinson, 1999) The most undeniable achievement for children is that reading means enjoyment. Children will remember the stories that were funny: for example the cute image of Winnie-the-pooh who acts and speaks making readers laugh out loud. This enjoyment also comes from the vicarious experience when a story creates a space and time imaged and unreal which can never be happen in a reader’s life. Some earlier

reading experience builds a lifetime of enjoyment for readers. Children fancy the world full of imaged creatures and fantasy. ‘By seeing the world round them in new ways and by considering ways of living other than their own, children increase their ability to think divergently’. (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 1999) The story of Alice, in *Alice in the Wonderland*, who falls down a rabbit hole and meets many imaginary creatures and objects wandering in a strange world that inspires children’s imagination. Children can also benefit from stories depicting children who have suffered great harm from political or economical crisis in history. Young readers can relate them to their own life experience and show their empathy with others. At the same time, some characters are depicted in a setting that requires them to tell right from wrong. For example, the children portrayed in *The Lord of Flies* show the difference between ordered society and human’s savage animal instincts. The War destroyed their home and brought them into a strange place. A group of children are supposed to share knowledge and wisdom to save each other, but on the contrary, they split into two bad and good parts. Some of them are optimist and follow the rule of a civilised society but some of them are lost in desires, which turn them into a monsters killing and bullying other children. The two competing impulses are embedded in human beings and, arguably, exposure to the story educates readers to face the tension between their inner desires and social rules. This type of reading helps young readers to form their own moral judgments in real life experience.

Children’s literature, especially picture books with stories with illustrations, help children to form their own aesthetic tastes and preference for certain types of stories. For academic gain, children’s books used as textbooks in classrooms can help young readers focus on language and reading skills. By reading excellent literature, children are immersed in excellent writing styles which can be absorbed into their own writing. The best children’s books not only provide readers with enjoyment but also offer unforgettable characters and stories and in-depth insights into the human beings. Therefore, it is extremely important to offer children varieties of literature. It is a way to cultivate and enlighten children emotionally and psychologically.

4 Conclusion

A very brief introduction to the development and notion of childhood and its close connection between the writing of children’s books in history is an essential step for further reading and studying of Children’s literature. Much critical analysis of children’s literature ‘frequently embrace[s] an historical context and acknowledge[s] the importance of the changing concerns within the texts over time’. (Thacker & Webb, 2002) Exploring the influence of historical contexts helps readers or critics to better decode the content and language in the text. Images of children depicted in literature draw on the childhood self to reflect who we are. Engel explains that ‘In recalling childhood we look for those experiences or moments that provide us with a sense of identity and sameness across time and situation, while also capturing the unique qualities of childhood’. Children play an important role in this complex modern world. They are on the road to be adults and to be aware of the danger and evil in front of them. Writers share the responsibility for children to read or appreciate the socially or culturally constructed figures of children. As parents or professionals who are responsible for selecting books for children, it is of great importance to identify the notions of childhood and its influence on the ways in which books for children have been or are being written.

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