



CHILDREN'S FICTION: A STUDY OF SELECTED  
WORKS BY 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY BRITISH NOVELISTS

BY

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this thesis is to underscore the literary value of selected children's fiction by 19<sup>th</sup> century British novelists and to promote the idea that far from being Eurocentric, these stories transcend cultural and national boundaries, and celebrate universal and cross-cultural values. This dissertation focuses on children's classics written by five remarkable British novelists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a landmark era when children's fiction in Britain changed from being serious and didactic to take on an entertaining mode, yet not devoid of moral values. 19<sup>th</sup> century children's literature also saw, for the first time, Eastern elements incorporated into the tales. This thesis has applied the qualitative research methods with an emphasis on describing, understanding and explaining complex phenomena in an attempt to explain the dynamic patterns of the subject. It is descriptive in nature, tracing the development of children's fiction in Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century from the literary as well as the social, historical and moral points of view; and delving into notions of childhood, authorship and the ways in which the books reflect the concerns of the respective literary movement or period. Close readings of the selected texts and literary documents were undertaken supported by a heavy reliance on library search, online scans/inputs and views of experts in the field. The authors' narrative approach, their stylistic innovation, their views on the child and childhood and universal moral values, as embedded in the fiction, were among the researcher's areas of attention. It is hoped the findings of this thesis will serve as pointers to parents, especially those in the Muslim world, and those living outside the English or Eurocentric national and cultural boundaries that there are positive elements incorporated into these children's fiction that can benefit children's cognitive and affective growth. It is this thesis' contention that children, especially those in the Muslim world, should not be deprived from reading these great works that can benefit them immensely in terms of language acquisition, the development of their imagination and the enjoyment of entertaining, yet moral, stories.

## ملخص البحث

يهدف هذا البحث لتأكيد القيمة الأدبية في قصص الأطفال الأدبية المختارة من روائيين بريطانيين في القرن التاسع عشر الميلادي، وترويج انفتاحها وعدم تحورها في الجو الأوروبي فحسب، لأنها قد تجاوزت حدودها الثقافية والوطنية، وأصبحت تحتفي بقيم عالمية متنوعة الثقافات. ويركز البحث على الإنتاجات الكلاسيكية في أدب الأطفال لدي خمسة روائيين بريطانيين بارزين من القرن التاسع عشر الميلادي الذي يُعدّ حقبة تاريخية حيث انتقل أدب الأطفال في بريطانيا من كونه صارماً وذا أسلوب توجيهي ليتخذ الطريقة المسلية، ومع ذلك لا يخلو من القيم الأخلاقية. كما يلاحظ لأول مرة أن أدب الأطفال في القرن التاسع عشر بدأ يُدمج فيه العناصر الشرقية في صميم الحكايات والأقاصيص الغربية. وينتهج البحث منهج البحث النوعي حيث يتم التركيز على الوصف والفهم والشرح للظواهر المعقدة لمحاولة تفسير حيوية الموضوع وأتماطها. والوصف بطبيعته يتطلب تتبع التطورات التي مرّت بها قصص الأطفال في بريطانيا في القرن التاسع عشر الميلادي، سواء تطورها الأدبي أو الاجتماعي أو التاريخي ووجهة نظرها الأخلاقية، كما يتطلب الخوض في مفاهيم الطفولة، والتأليفات عنها والأساليب التي اتخذتها الكُتُب لتعكس منعطفات حركاتها أو فتراتها الأدبية. القراءة الوثيقة لتلك الأعمال الأدبية المختارة قد أجريت بالاعتماد الكبير على البحث المكتبي، وعلى معلومات الإنترنت ومدخلاته، وعلى آراء الخبراء في هذا المجال. وقد كانت طريقة سرد المؤلفين، وأسلوبهم المبتكر، وآراؤهم بشأن الطفل والطفولة، والقيم الأخلاقية العالمية المغروسة في تلك القصص تُعدّ من مواضع اهتمام الباحثة في هذا البحث. ومن المؤمل أنّ نتائج هذا البحث ستكون بمثابة مؤشرات تربوية لأولياء الأمور وخاصة في العالم الإسلامي، وأولئك الذين يعيشون خارج حدود اللغة الإنجليزية أو خارج حدود الثقافة الأوروبية. إن هناك عناصر إيجابية أُدمجت في تلك القصص الأدبية تستطيع أن تفيد الأطفال في النمو المعرفي والعاطفي. فهذه الأطروحة تناشد بأن الأطفال خاصة في العالم الإسلامي لا ينبغي حرمانهم من قراءة هذه الإنتاجات الأدبية الرائعة التي ستفيدهم كثيراً من ناحية اكتساب اللغة، وتنمية الخيال، والتمتع بالقصص والأخلاق وبالجمال الأدبي.

## **APPROVAL PAGE**

The dissertation of Farizah Jaafar has been approved by the following:

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Farizah Jaafar

Signature.....

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*I dedicate this dissertation to*

*Nabeel, Sarah, Izyan & Fatin*

*&*

*Ghazi bin Awab*

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In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

There was once, my children, a little girl who loved her grandmother to tell her stories...The little girl is grown up now, and the dear grandmother is gone, but there are still children who love the old fairy stories, so the little girl has written them out for you just as they were told to her.

Constance Wilde

Stories are what adults and children most effectively share: children remember stories they hear or read and re-read, and as adults, in turn, retell them. The tradition of telling children stories (which has scarcely changed over time), thus, continues, and herein too lies the significance of children's fiction in our lives, particularly in our intellectual and affective growth.

This dissertation will focus on children's fiction, written by five remarkable 19<sup>th</sup> century British authors – Charles Dickens, Lewis Carroll, Robert Louis Stevenson, Oscar Wilde and Rudyard Kipling. These authors are still read today, more than a century after they were first published. The intent, in particular, is to underscore the literary value of these books and to promote the idea that, far from being Eurocentric, these stories transcend cultural and national boundaries. Writers of this period, in the context of the historical and social developments of their time, may tend to appear to some critics as imperialistic, racist, Anglo-centric and dominantly “white”. Perhaps, to some extent, this was inevitable by virtue of the fact that they were British, living in an era when the British Empire was at its height of glory. Notwithstanding this fact, this research argues that the selected fiction for this dissertation speaks for issues that deal with universal themes and cross-cultural values

which still apply in this new millennium. Their stories continue to connect us to each other and to the world we live in.

It is hoped that the findings of this thesis will serve as pointers to parents in the Muslim world, outside the English or Eurocentric national and cultural boundaries, that there are positive elements in these children's fiction that can benefit children's cognitive and affective growth. In this vein, this thesis will use as its theoretical framework Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development and demonstrate how the texts selected can be used to spur children's cognitive and affective growth.

The fiction featured in this thesis endorses universal moral values. The writers chosen for this thesis have made it their concern to explore the moral values which guide the lives of their characters. The stories celebrate positive values of human kindness and condemn selfishness and evil ways. Characters experience transformation and journeys of discovery, following which they become better persons.

Nineteenth century children's literature also saw, for the first time, Eastern elements incorporated into the tales. Rudyard Kipling introduced a child hero from the East in the character, Mowgli in his *The Jungle Books* while Charles Dickens, who declared the *Arabian Nights* as among his favourite read, slips in fairy tale elements drawn from the *Nights* in his novels. Kipling, in particular, shows deep respect for the "Other" and makes a serious attempt in his works to bridge East and West.

This thesis features children's fiction drawn from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a turning point in the development of children's literature, when stories for children changed from being stern and serious to being a genre which is filled with fun and laughter. Prior to this, works meant for children spoke in a forbidding tone, always moralizing and sermonizing. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, writers who wrote for or about children moved

them ‘centre-stage’ in the texts, and introduced humor, adventure, fairy tale elements and a blend of East and West. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time when children’s voice began to be distinctly heard in stories that were meant for them. The stories, entertaining and non-didactic, provided, for the first time, reading pleasure to children. This dissertation would like to point out that 19<sup>th</sup> century children’s fiction, although non-didactic and non-instructional, were, at the same time, far from being amoral or immoral. Most of the tales encapsulate lessons to be learnt though these were couched in an entertaining mode. Though the writers themselves hinted that their stories were a clear departure from the earlier didactic and moralistic literature directed at children and *not* meant to *purely* instruct or to educate, this study argues that the stories they wrote offer a fine balance between instruction and delight.

Nineteenth-century fiction for children, written mostly in the fantasy mode and meant strictly to entertain and amuse, is neither degenerative nor corruptive. The difference is that 19<sup>th</sup> century writers bundle in a lot of play elements into their stories (to the delight of most children) and reverse didacticism this time around by giving children the chance to speak, and making it the adults’ turn to listen. Didacticism or the urge to preach is boring, especially to a child; and it can be safely assumed that children do not like to be instructed or directed. They prefer, instead, to be persuaded, coaxed or convinced. It is thus that children perhaps would naturally move away from heavy-handed didactic books. They would rather read books that allow them to blend their own thinking into the story and they would not want everything spelt out for them.

In essence, the manner and tone with which ‘didacticism’ is conveyed counts and it is, perhaps, partly – the fantasy mode and the voice of the child - that have made the selected works of 19<sup>th</sup> century British novelists endure even after more than

100 years. It could also be because these works appeal to a dual audience: children and adults. After all, they were written by writers who themselves were part-adult and part-child, who could easily connect with the world of children and who felt it was time children's voices were heard. The tales they wrote, non-didactic and entertaining, make good read for children even in these very different times. This dissertation also argues that the secret to developing children into readers for life is to expose them to stories that they will enjoy at an early age (though books in this contemporary age of technology face stiff competition from alternative media).

This dissertation also recognizes the importance of the imagination to the development of creativity among children. Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1872), Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) and Wilde's fairy tales in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) can stretch the child's imagination and offer them new dimensions in considering people, experiences and ideas. Good stories enrich children – they allow the child to discover new things and travel to “new” places where they can imagine living new or different lives and becoming “new” people.

Children's fiction, in this study, is seen within historical, cultural and social contexts taking into consideration the influence of literary ‘movements’ and significant historical events in Britain. Thacker and Webb (2002) in *Introducing children's literature from romanticism to postmodernism* suggest:

If one traces the development of literature in the last two centuries and engages with shifts in aesthetic concerns, from Romanticism to Postmodernism, it is possible to see the relevance of children's literature to a map of literature as a whole. Rather than merely tracing a chronological route, the emphasis on a body of concerns defined by these ‘movements’ within literary history demonstrates the ways in which books written for children embrace the aesthetic of any particular age, but often anticipate, and perhaps inspire, innovation (2002: 2).

It is for this reason that this study has chosen to present the selected texts in the context of the influence of 19<sup>th</sup> century literary movements. The dissertation, however, is interpreted and understood from the present. What the researcher would like to draw attention to is the relevance of the selected children's fictions of 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain to the study of mainstream literary history. Children's fiction is seen as important in being a part of literary production as a whole. Works of fiction chosen will be considered within a historical context and books selected for this research are those which have been continually published and republished rather than dwelling on 'popular' fiction. This dissertation makes a particular case for 19<sup>th</sup> century British children's fiction.

Aidan Chambers in "Axes for frozen seas" in *The Woodfield lectures on children's literature 1978-1985*, laments:

...that what we want are books which have an immediate appeal to a great many children, they must be either funny, in the superficially humorous sense, or pertinent in the subject sense, by which is usually meant, the subject must be one that is a prejudice of the adult concerned. Complexity, multi-layering, richness of language, the kind of book which demands that the reader match the author in an act of creation that costs thought and energy: these are unfashionable. Aidan Chambers. (1978-1985: 47).

Chambers makes a case for books that transform the reader:

Books that transform me as I read, and go on working in me afterwards when they have become part of me, often refresh and reinvigorate the language. At the very least they attend to it. Words are what an author uses. In one sense they are all he has to use. Thus, literature is, among many things, about words, about language...you cannot escape language either as author or as reader. And, as I say, the transforming writers always seem to me to pay attention to language; they never try to reduce it or ignore it (1978- 1985: 48).

She stresses that a good children's book needs to be:

"multi-layered, multi-thematic, linguistically conscious, dense" unlike the opposite sort of writing, which is "reductionist", by which I mean a desire and preference for the limitation of what we read to a narrow

range of the familiar, the obvious, the immediately appealing, and the concentration of treatments and subjects confined to the bland and well-tried (1978- 1985: 48).

It is the study's contention that the select 19<sup>th</sup> century texts display an enviable richness of language that is refreshing and invigorating. They are "multi-layered, multi-thematic, linguistically conscious, dense", and they have endured as popular children's classics right to the present times.

This study, however, does not claim any superiority of the texts chosen over "popular" fiction. It would like to underscore, however, that 19<sup>th</sup> century children's fiction is great literature, especially for its language (notwithstanding its Anglo-centricity, gender-bias and racism) and could be introduced to young readers as their early literary experience. If literature can be used to promote the learning of language, this dissertation suggests that the works of the acknowledged great 19<sup>th</sup> century British writers could be recommended as possible texts.

The selected writers and texts for this research are:

1. Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843)
2. Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1872)
3. Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883)
4. Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888)
5. Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Books 1 & 2* (1894) and *Just So Stories* (1902)

These books may not be the most frequently read by children today but they are landmark texts that say much about writing for children. The authors chosen have taken on a different manner and mode of writing for children in these texts, which

demonstrate the shifting of the author/reader relationship. The narratives, for the first time, take the stance of the child hero and the child reader.

This dissertation would like to record its acknowledgement of the importance of children's literature to any national tradition. It is undertaken with the intent of complementing earlier works aimed at promoting an awareness of the implications of writing for children. It is written with the hope that the relevant parties and authorities would begin to appreciate the importance of children's literature as children's books have largely been ignored from mainstream concerns, undermining their importance and their place in literary history.

This dissertation has chosen to focus on children's fiction rather than the other genres of children's literature (poetry, drama) because fiction was a dominant literary form in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is still the most prominent genre published. Children's fiction (myths, fables, folk tales, fairy tales, legends and parables), has today expanded to include a host of other sub-genres such as realistic fiction, historical fiction, modern fantasy and science fiction. It is packed with themes that children can relate to; it appeals to them partly because they can live vicariously through the characters' experiences. The works are never entirely factual but partially imagined, yet are none the worse for being imaginary. A constant exposure to fiction – in particular, to fairy tales and stories of the fantastic – makes an indelible impression on the young child. Stories and the continuity of story-telling in our lives are what adults and children most effectively share. Lesley Handy (1992) in 'The Pearl Princess and the Whale's Stomach: Active Storytelling with Children' in *After Alice: exploring children's literature*, writes:

In the majority of world cultures there is a long history of storytelling. This has not occurred by chance but indicates the unconscious need for a story. Stories provide a rich and valuable means of sharing cultures;

of understanding and exploring the world and creating and experiencing new realities; of using metaphors with awareness; and of viewing our experience from different perspectives. As they are such an important resource, they deserve more than a passive encounter (1992: 108).

Children's fiction is not for any particular age group: it can be enjoyed by children and grown-ups alike. While some children's writers, who write or have written especially for children or a child (such as Lewis Carroll, Robert Louis Stevenson and Rudyard Kipling), have produced children's classics that have appealed to children for generations, some have written stories for no particular age group while others, without intending them to be so, have composed tales that are popular with both children and adults.

The fact that children's books are written and often read by adults further complicates the situation within literary studies. It is, in fact, a very thin line that separates children's literature from mainstream literature. In the beginning, when there was no established children's literature, children used to read books meant for adults and over more than a hundred years, adults, in turn, have learnt to appreciate fiction meant for children or written by writers who are marketed by publishers as children's authors. At first, storytelling was more of an art form for adults and children were able to listen in on to these stories. Children's fiction, a relatively new development since the last 150 years or so has become even more sophisticated and interesting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yet the tales that many 19<sup>th</sup> century children's writers wrote - non-didactic and entertaining - make a good read for children even in these very different times.

Adults who choose to relegate children's literature to the nursery or consider it as inferior to mainstream literature, therefore, should perhaps rethink their stands and give themselves and their children a second chance to appreciate it. It will be such a

shame if adults choose to ignore these literary gems just because children enjoy them. It would be a great loss too if parents in the Muslim world choose to deny their children the pleasure of reading these books on the grounds of the books' "Anglo/Eurocentricity" and different cultural viewpoints.

### **WRITERS FOR CHILDREN: CHILDLIKE AND INTUITIVE**

Most remarkable writers of children's books feel a sense of dismay when they realize that their childhood is gone forever. Most are themselves part-adult and part-child who could easily connect with the world of children and who felt it was time children's voices were heard. Most, in their works, often revert to the halcyon years, ever grateful for the private happiness owed to them. In their adult life, many continue to retain the spirit-world of childhood. Children's writers know intuitively what touches a child's heart; their words have a magical effect on the child. Twentieth century children's writer, Roald Dahl (1916-1990) is loved by children though some adults dislike him for his bathroom humour and his somewhat unsentimental, even slightly sadistic tone. However, Dahl, whose first book *The Gremlins* was published in 1943, loves children and they seem equally drawn to his works. It is unpleasant children who do not escape his sadistic humour and suffer nasty punishment as illustrated in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) in which the greedy Augustus Gloop is squeezed into the chocolates, the gum-chewing Violet Beauregarde is blown up into a giant blueberry and television addict Mike Teavee is miniaturized while spoilt Veruca Salt is dropped down a garbage chute. Hunt (1994) in *An introduction to children's literature* sees the book as "a robust moral tale, a direct descendant of a genre well established in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the fat and the greedy and the stupid being dealt with summarily"(1994: 21).

Thacker and Webb (2002) claim that many writers admit that they do not write expressly for children, but find that what they want to say results in a children's book.

They add:

George MacDonald famously declared that 'I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five' (1905). In so doing, he suggested a definition of children's literature in terms of a way of reading. To be childlike, according to MacDonald, is to be open and receptive, and it is this quality which his fiction demands of his readers. C.S. Lewis made similar claims that, at fifty, he could read fairy tales without a fear of childishness (Lewis, 1973), implying that books written for children must be considered in relation not just to a young readership, but with regard to all readers (2002: 7).

The situation is made worse, according to them by the vagaries of the publishing industry:

Neither the works of Maurice Sendak, nor Richard Adams's *Watership Down* (1973), for example, were originally written expressly for children, although children's publishing houses published them. However, they have become children's classics, due to the fact that their subject matter – children, animals – and their themes, about the search for independence, or the finding of 'home', were attractive to publishers of children's books and not to publishers of adult books. The tendency to define audience in such a restrictive way contributes to the marginalization of the texts themselves, and the area of literary production as a whole (2002: 7).

Karin Lesnik-Oberstein (1996) in "Defining children's literature and childhood" in the *International companion encyclopedia of children's literature*, edited by Hunt, quotes Pamela Travers, creator of *Mary Poppins* as having said that:

You do not chop off a section of your imaginative substance and make a book specifically for children for – if you are honest – you have, in fact, no idea where childhood ends and maturity begins. It is endless and all one (1996: 20).

Yet most children writers never outgrow the child in them (childhood being some kind of an 'unfinished business') - even as they develop and mature. They write with all the seriousness of an adult, but with the innocence of the child in always wanting to believe in the unbelievable. J. K. Rowling, author of the phenomenally

successful Harry Potter books remains in close touch with her own childhood. She has told *Time* magazine that, “I really can, with no difficulty at all, think myself back to 11 years old.” Alison Lurie. (2003: 113). Children’s writers concede that childhood is a precious time of our lives; they notice the child, champion the child and connect to the child’s world. They seem to have their own childhood in mind and retain, in some respects, a childlike (not childish) outlook: always with wonder and keen observation only like a child. Phillippa Pearce (1992) in ‘The Making of Stories for Children’ in *After Alice: exploring children’s literature*, however, writes:

Writers for children very often draw on memories of their own childhood, especially I think, at the beginning of a writing career. Certainly, I did so. But experiences of childhood are usually only starting points, even at the most recognizable. There is much more to writing for children than having been a child oneself (1992: 34).

E.B. White, in turn, states that:

...you have to write up, not down. Children are demanding...They accept, almost without question, anything you present them with, as long as it is presented honestly, fearlessly, and clearly...They love words that give them a hard time. Lesnik-Oberstein, Hunt. (1996: 20).

Writers of children’s fiction, through new ideas, new characters, new attitudes and new ways of telling a story, continually add to the richness of the human experience. They offer children insight into how people live and suggest how to live well. Just like story-tellers of all ages and cultures, they have used their narratives to instruct, to persuade, to teach, to delight and to entertain.

This dissertation proposes that 19<sup>th</sup> century British children’s fiction writers selected for the study were a special sort of storytellers who enjoyed writing and wrote brilliantly, in unforgettable ways, stories that children and surprisingly adults too, have found delightful and entertaining.

## **CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: WHAT WORKS**

Children's fiction lies at the beginning of the continuum of lifelong learning and can sow the seeds for an enduring appreciation of literature. All approaches to children's fiction, therefore, are important because they can encourage children to become literate adults. Children today are enticed by several other more engrossing media (e.g. computer games, television programmes and DVDs) that promise alternative diversions of "quick-fix" entertainment and excitement. Thus, if they are not invited to appreciate literature, they may not become lifelong readers. Children need to be introduced to good literature from the start, in the words of the poet Walter de la Mare, "Only the very rarest kind of best in anything can be good enough for the young." Poor literature, that does not tell a story and has no humour, on the other hand, can harm them. Herbert Kohl (1995), who writes widely about educational issues, in his essay "Should we burn Babar?", believes that what is read in childhood not only leaves an impression behind but also influences the values, and shapes the dreams, of children. *The Story of Babar, the Little Elephant* (1933) by Jean de Brunhoff about an orphaned elephant taken in by a nice, rich, white lady, for example, may be read differently by children of different races. Children outside of Africa may perhaps react to other elements of the story, such as how sad the death of Babar's mother was while a black South African child may see the book as overtly racist and insulting. Kohl writes:

Books can provide negative images and stereotypes and cut off hopes and limit aspirations. It can erode self-respect through overt and covert racism or sexism. It can also help young people get beyond family troubles, neighborhood violence, stereotyping and prejudice – all particulars of their lives that they have no control over – and set their imaginations free. Diana Mitchell. (2003: 172).