



## QUINTESSENCE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT

*Children's literature, one of the fascinating streams of literature, spellbinds the reading young minds by its incredible association with fantastic elements. Along with this mesmerizing factor, it contains the seeds of basic values, principles and certain positive attitudes which will abet in the process of pruning and nurturing the personality of children. While shaping the psyche of the rising generation, it also introduces ideas about how the society around them is organized, how that social order fits into national and global perspectives; thereby it serves the purpose of preparing its readers to become the next generation of dutiful adults. After addressing the psychological and societal demands, reading stories enable the children to enhance their linguistic competence by enriching their vocabulary. Therefore, the present paper attempts to examine the quintessence of this literary spectrum by focussing on the grounds of these rationales in this stream of literature through which it garners special claim among the other genres of literary canon.*

**Key Words:** *Children's literature – definition and characteristics, psychological theories.*

### INTRODUCTION

Children's literature is a chief component in the mainstream of all literature. As an idiosyncratic genre, it is one of the most innovative and spellbinding literatures meant for young minds. Since, literature intended for children flourishes on the rhythmic flights of imagination and enthrallment, it has fascinated their world with its enduring, distinctive identity and paradigms. Offering delight and information as double-folded function through its infinite variety, this arena of literature stamps its uniqueness across the continents. And so, it has its own canon of classics and genres for which there are no specific equivalents in any other field of literature.

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The major characteristic that distinguishes Children's literature from other branches of literature is that the former is the only category that is defined in terms of its conceived and proposed readership. Generally, what can be termed as Children's literature? The broadest definition applies to those works of art, which are primarily ordained for children. In *Encyclopaedia of Children's Literature*, Karen Lesnik-Oberstein rightly affirms, "The definition of Children's literature lies at the heart of its endeavour; it is a category of books, the existence of which absolutely depends on supposed relationships with a particular reading audience: Children" (17). In the same text, Peter Hunt adroitly defines, "Children's literature is a term, which asks for subtle and flexible definitions, but as commonly used it has the almost universal common features of adult readership, child readership, professional publication and a stable text."(203). Moreover, K.Hanson appropriately delineates this genre as the material created for children which has been widely read, viewed and heard by them with an imaginative element. Hence, the strong adherence of these definitions promotes children, as Orson Scott Card declares in *Hogwarts* as, "... the guardians of truly great literature of the world, for in their love of story and unconcern for stylistic fads and literary tricks, children unerringly gravitate toward truth and power." (9)

On the other hand, French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan regards Children's literature as important in the construction of self-identity, since the self is a product of language, which is the medium of reading, and so children are simultaneously involved in learning and experimenting with language and constructing their identities. This results in an image of childhood that stands in for a cluster of adult desires – for innocence, coherence, and psychic balance – that bear little relation to actual children and childhoods.

It is quite evident that the journey of a human being begins from his childhood. The understanding of childhood as a distinct phase in an individual's development, its special needs and the importance of this phase which lays a strong foundation for an adult life has garnered various critical attention of many writers in the mainstream of literature. They have charted a clear evolution of the awareness of childhood through their writings. And also, social philosophers like Rousseau and John Locke brought forth the issue of the child and its need to be nurtured into social awareness; and this notion was quickly transformed in the ideals of many writers such as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake. For an instance, Wordsworth's phrase 'The Child is the Father of the Man' from the poem *My Heart Leaps Up* is one of the most quoted lines of poetry ever written to emphasise the significance of childhood in the formation of an adult.

The persistent recurrence of the theme of childhood accentuates the attention on pre-adolescence days. Writers from all genres have stressed the importance of formative years. In

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the domain of fiction, for instance, prominent writers such as James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, D.H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf have written with conspicuous focus on childhood. Other notable works that dealt with a particular interest on childhood are Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Mrs. Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1840), George Eliot's *The mill on the Floss* (1860) and R.L. Stevenson's *Kidnapped* (1886). Perhaps, it is Charles Dickens who established the seminal years of early days as a vital theme in English fiction. His concern for childhood is seen in many of his notable works, since his *Oliver Twist* (1838) is the first English novel with an exclusive awareness on pubescent days. Thus, as Indi Rana affirms the requisite role of childhood in *Children and Literature*:

The phases of childhood and adolescence are a process of individuation – of seeing oneself as a clear, separate entity, unshadowed, or at least minimally shadowed, by parents, peer and society. Individuation is necessary to create healthy, responsible, balanced adults, capable of networking with each other in the many complex levels and facets of life. (122)

Similarly, Seth Lerer in his *Children's Literature* avers that 'childhood' is inseparable from the history of this sort of literature and he states, childhood "... was not some essential or eternal quality in human life but was instead a category of existence shaped by social mores and historical experience." (2). Hence it is noticeable that one of the functions of Children's literature has been to prepare its readers to become the next generation of adults by introducing ideas about how the society around them is organized, how that social order fits into national and global perspectives and how it might function in the future. Max Bedacht in *New Pioneer Story Book* credits Children's literature which has the power to change individual lives and society as:

*... will help you understand the life about you. As you learn to understand life, you will learn to shape your own lives. You will not merely be pawns kicked around by destiny; you will become masters of your own destiny. You will not only be part of history, but you will become makers of history. (2)*

Hence, it is palpable that, this sort of literature inducts and actuates its readers into the norms, values, and systems of the societies in which they are growing up; and thereby, this genre proves its task in the emergence of a dutiful citizen.

While accomplishing its mission at sociological level, psychological significance of this genre has been one of the most pervasive components, which necessitates this literature among the budding generation. Diverse psychological theories and experiments have very imperative implications for the fabrication of Children's literature. Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung's theories have been influential on both, those who study and those who wish to create

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master pieces for children. Their ideas have cascaded through culture and they have had greater impact on this literature's writing and criticism.

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory attempts to discern the most universal psychology of human behaviour and culture. According to Freud, both fairy tales and dreams use symbols to express the conflicts, anxieties, and forbidden desires that had been repressed into the unconscious. In his writings such as *Die Traumdeutung (The Interpretation of Dreams)*, *Das Motiv der Kastchenwahl (The Theme of the Three Caskets)*, and *Marchenstoffe in Traumen (The Occurrence in Dreams of Material from Fairy Tales)*, Freud demonstrated that psychoanalytically, a fairy tale can be interpreted to reveal the latent or hidden content of the mind.

The theories proposed by Sigmund Freud also stress the importance of childhood events and experiences, but almost exclusively focused on mental disorders rather than normal functioning. According to him, child development is described as a series of 'psychosexual stages'. In "Three Essays on Sexuality", he outlined these stages as oral, anal, phallic, latency and genital. He stated that each phase involves the satisfaction of a libidinal desire, which plays a crucial role in the next stage of adulthood. If a child does not successfully complete any of these periods, then he or she will develop a fixation that would later influence the adult personality and behaviour. On the other hand, Carl Gustav Jung, a disciple of Freud, developed a new branch of analytic psychology that has had an enormous impact on child development. While Freudian psychoanalytic theory generally viewed symbolic expressions as manifestations of the individual's unconscious, Jung looked beyond the personal mind for the source and meaning of symbols. He posited the existence of an impersonal and a historical 'collective unconscious' which acts as a reservoir of images and forms universally shared by all humans. Typically, however, these psychologists view Children's literature as having a significant and positive role in the psychological growth of children. For instance, they consider fairy tale, not simply as a positive therapeutic tool, but should be a part of every child's experience. Their basic assertion is that children learn how to overcome psychological conflicts and grow into new phases of development through a symbolic comprehension of the maturation process as expressed in fairy tales.

Two other significant psychologists whose works have notable implications in Children's literature are Robert Gagne and David Ausubel. Succinctly, Gagne's work is mostly concerned with the classification of learning in terms of complexity. And Ausubel's theories relate to verbal expositions of concepts, which he considers as the most powerful method of communicating ideas.





Among modern psychological theories, the most prominent is the mental developmental theory of the Swedish psychologist, Jean Piaget. His theory of cognitive development has postulated the 'intellectual structure', which has revolutionised the conception of the psychological progress of children. In accordance with his theory, the phase of childhood plays crucial role in gaining knowledge of the world. Hence, he divides the early mental development of children into four clearly discernible stages such as sensory-motor period, pre-operational period, period of concrete operations and the period of formal operations. The first two stages refer to the mental status of a child, before the age of seven. The last two stages contemplate the age levels of seven to eleven and eleven to fifteen respectively, for which much of Children's literature is produced.

According to Piaget, in the period of concrete operations, a child equips with the attributes of 'stability'- ability to confine to one field of activity for a reasonable time, and 'logical ideas' – capability to control one's action in terms of logical thinking process. Moreover, the peculiarity of this level of mental development is that their understanding of the physical world is developed with the things and events of their immediate present. Conceiving things of the past or future is restricted during this period. The child's concern is with the instant happenings. The experiences provided by the surroundings are ordered and systematised into 'thought structures' or 'thought configurations', which the child applies for pondering. Many of these configurations are kept in isolation, in this stage. Their integration into a system of thought occurs during the next stage of development.

In the period of formal operations, using the rudimentary ideas and structures acquired from concrete experiences, the child now progresses to the level, where he is able to deal with ideas or is able to argue by using symbols. In other words, Piaget affirms that the child expands the adult aptitude for 'theorizing' and 'criticizing'. When the child during the earlier phase of growth ventures to stabilize and organise what comes directly to the senses, this period is characterised by the capability to imagine what might be present in a hypothetical situation. Thus, the mind obtains the skill to do hypothetic deductive type of thinking. The brief analysis of these stages clearly implies the camouflaged function of stories in Children's literature for the mental development of a child.

Besides, the major characteristics of these stages can also be boosted up by introducing vocabulary structures, illustrative models and diagrams. Stories – the treasure house of words – enhances their language skill and abet cognitive development, hence motivates and stimulates the children to think which establishes yet another rationale of this genre of literature. All genres in this literature serve the purpose of stimulating cognitive skills of the readers or the listeners. It offers a forum for the later development of brain cells for analytical thinking. Thus, many books are modelled for several tasks such as problem solving,

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inferencing and for evaluative skills. Furthermore, language and thinking are so closely interconnected that the ability to think for one's self depends upon one's mastery of the language. Exposure to language as an interactive process is a critical factor in acquiring high order of thinking. Hence, Children's literature assumes a greater magnitude, when considered as a model of language.

By catering to the needs of rising generation at varied levels such as psychological, sociological and linguistic competence, this stream of literature, navigates them to uplift their own personal traits by insisting on the moral values, principles and ethics of human existence.

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