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Trends in Children's Literature and the Social Implications

Rebecca Johnson

Chancellor's Honors Thesis

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“The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go.” –*I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!* By Dr. Seuss

As a young child, my mother religiously read to me and my siblings Sam McBratney’s darling picture-book *Guess How Much I Love You*. The five of us children nestled at the head of the mattress, gently warring over prime real-estate on the pillows, while my mother propped up at the foot of the bed. When my mother opened her mouth, the age differences between my brother and sisters fell into nothingness. We were all enamored with the tale the Big Nutbrown Hare affectionately trying to out-do Little Nutbrown Hare over their quantity of love for the other. The Little Nutbrown Hare stretches his arms as far as they will go as a measurement of his love, but Big Nutbrown Hare can stretch further. The tale concludes with Big Nutbrown Hare whispering to his son, “I love you right up to the moon—and back.” (McBratney 28). The clout behind McBratney’s words not only helped my family express our love for one another, but it pushed me into the role of a reader. I graduated to *Green Eggs and Ham*, *The Giving Tree*, *The Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*, then the *Ramona* series, *Nancy Drew*, and *Harry Potter*. Even though the time was short and the words were shorter, I was grateful of mother reading to me; it fostered a lifelong joy of reading.

My initial experiences with literature are like that of many other people: beginning in the lap of a parent. Though *Guess How Much I Love You* has only been around for about two decades, the action of a parent reading to a child has been around for ages. And before there was a written language, rehearsed storytelling fulfilled similar purposes. What has changed is the subject matter in many books and how children may now receive the information—such as through an e-reader. Moreover, children’s books have not always been concerned with notions

such as how much a parent loves their child, an idea some from an earlier time period could consider a triviality in literature. Not only is that theme commonplace today, but many other more socially-influenced topics are included in the children's literary canon. Contemporary books reflect the child of today, which allows modern children to best connect with the writing.

What Defines Children's Literature?

Most will agree that some of fondest memories of childhood are tied to a beloved book. Nothing seems more wholesome and simplistic than a loved one engaging a youngster's imagination with the power of story. And though not strictly enjoyed by a juvenile audience, the books read during the formative years of childhood are classified as children's literature. As Jill P. May notes in *Children's Literature and Critical Theory*, "Children reading for enjoyment bring their own experiences with them and relate them to the story. They want a positive experience, even when they are reading a textbook," (May vii-ix). Similarly, Rebecca Lukens writes in her *Critical Handbook of Children's Literature* about readers' motives:

"We choose literature that promises entertainment and, sometimes, escape. If other discoveries come to us too, we are pleased and doubly rewarded. However, our first motive for reading a novel or a poem is personal pleasure. We may lay the book aside with mixed feelings, but if there is no pleasure, we reject it completely or leave it unfinished." (3)

A worthwhile story thrills and can transport a child into foreign lands—away from the cares and stressors of daily life. But beyond this elementary benefit, pleasure, children's literature accomplishes much more. Understanding and knowledge develops with reading about another's viewpoint and circumstances. Furthermore, "Literature shows human motives for what they are, inviting the reader to identify with or to react to a fictional character. We see into the mind of the character or in the subconscious that even the character does not know." (Lukens 5). Compared

to an adult, a young person likely has limited life experiences, so good children's literature can function to open their eyes to new possibilities, difficulties, or life situations.

One of the most important facets of children's literature is that children's minds are engaged, leading them to become devoted and independent readers. Thus, a simple pastime has the capabilities of becoming a deep-rooted passion for good literature. As described by May, a child's connection to literature first begins with hearing stories and associating the illustrations to the storyline. With time, a child can recall the action and tie in the words until they can read the story themselves (May 14). In *Children's Literature and Critical Theory*, she explores the importance of meaningful reading material for kids as well as the proper methods for instruction. The reader response theory is a device utilized by many elementary school educators. After reading a book, a child writes a response about their opinions on the book and the significance of the material, if any. Going a step further, the teacher encourages the child to review the "story in relation to its literary form, to use critical process in order to discover different interpretations for the story they are reading" (May 16). Similarly, author Masha Kabakow Rudman expresses the weight on the role of an educator concerning a child's blossoming maturity. She writes in her book *Children's Literature*, "Educators have within their power the means to inculcate values; develop skills; influence attitudes; and affect the physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and more development of today's youth and tomorrow's adults," (Rudman 1). Outside of parents, the task of reading to children falls directly to school teachers, so their perseverance has an indirect effect on many of a child's attributes.

Lastly, literature for beginning and young readers must have distinction from adult literature. Rebecca Lukens argues that children's literature differs only in degree—not in kind.

She notes, “We sometimes forget that literature for children can and should provide the same enjoyment and understanding as does literature for adults,” (Lukens 8). Children fundamentally want to gain pleasure from reading or hearing a story, as does any other audience. Lukens adds that the pleasures obtained by children come from sources which “are more limited,” (Lukens 8). In direct correlation to age and thus life experiences, children have restricted knowledge of the world. Authors of children’s books are very mindful of this by tailoring stories to suffice with vocabulary discrepancies and inadequacies as well as a sometimes waning attention span (Lukens 9). Nevertheless, these adjustments do not detract from the book’s quality. After all, it is the grownup that functions as the ‘authoritative’ audience. “The adult,” May argues, “who knows about story structure, about genres, about rhetorical style, and who searches for the opinion of others, is often asked to evaluate children’s literature.” (May ix).

Historical Context and Early Examples of Children’s Books

Children’s literature has remained constant in that it has always been directed to adolescents, but many factors have evolved overtime. Books for today’s generation bear little resemblance to the books written for children hundreds of years ago. Cornelia Meigs maintains the necessity of studying the origin and past of the first books for children to better appreciate the historical context and to understand the differences of today’s literary examples. In *Critical History of Children’s Literature* she states:

“To be aware of the greatness of a literature is not always to understand it fully, since to have interest and regard for it does not imply entire knowledge of what it is and how it came to be. But if thinking people are to have any part in shaping the literature of the present and the future, they should have a fuller understanding of it as a whole and of its past. Literature for children not only has its greatness and an entity of its own in our present day, but has always had it,” (3).

Much of the entertainment in the “ancient world” was not discriminatory against age, but greater cultural cultivation shifted the tastes of the elders, causing them to outgrow some shared interests (Meigs 4). Additionally, adults used story-time entertainment to salve the era’s shortcomings in their knowledge of the world’s workings. Children’s curiosity could be pacified with the oral storytelling tradition, and eventually these tales became solidified in a community, passed down along the ages. “During that time,” Meigs continues, “long before there were books for anyone to read, there was, none the less, forming among children’s minds, as well as among their elders’, that basic foundation of taste and imagination and recognition of truth wherever it was encountered which one generation was to pass on to another,” (Meigs 5). The literature stemming from this time can be referred to as “traditional” or “folk” literature and includes: fables, folk tales, myths, legends, and folk epics (Lukens 24-27). The source is a nameless storyteller, so there is “no final and definitive version of a piece of folk literature,” (Lukens 24). In order to explain nature, enhance spirituality, or simply, to entertain, folk literature flourished. As the methodology was purely verbal until the advent of print, scholars cannot be sure how much of these tales have faded with time. Of the surviving ones, though, readers are able to gain an appreciation for the land and time responsible for said version.

One of the most widely recognized fairy tales is the *Cinderella* story. This story has been told for centuries in many far-reaching regions of the world, in quite varying fashions. One early telling features “Tattercoats, the granddaughter of a lord”, and the girl’s sole companion is “the gooseherd” (Meigs 9). Though Cinderella’s origin is nebulous, a Frenchman by the name of Perrault penned a version of *Cinderella* that strongly resonates with children of American and European birth (Meigs 9). His account, as any of this story’s retelling, has many differences. It is this French story that introduced the “pumpkin coach, the mice turned into horses, even the fairy

godmother”, what any American child would consider a staple to the tale of the cinder girl (Meigs 9). More recently, as in Shirley Hughes’s retelling, much of the focus falls on Cinderella’s menacing stepsisters. “Because of the strong focus on the stepsisters,” Lukens writes, “the impact of the story is that Cinderella is the victim of their envy but is magically saved,” (Lukens 47). Toying with the story through time brings adjustments, making each version completely its own.

Greater sophistication, or simply a new necessity, introduced new themes to folklore. Jean Shaw examines this in *Historical Survey of Themes Recurrent in Selected Children’s Books Published in America since 1850*. She writes that, “A survey of children’s books shows the rise and fall of a popularity of stipulated themes. These can be placed against an historical time line indicating political, social and economic milestones,” (Shaw 2). Tales of the Roman gods and Celtic legends, for example, shifted with time. Christianity’s extensive sweeping of Europe and connected regions meant that stories, especially those who had long functioned as a guide to understanding, morphed into adjusted accounts. Few pagan facets were left untouched, and festivals commemorating a Pagan god or event became recognized as Christian holidays. Meigs adds, “Christianity had brought the two great gifts—writing and, with it, the love of learning” (Meigs 13). As time progressed, the Christian work ethic stimulated more stories of discipline and means to achieve godliness. One of the earliest print examples is a manuscript by Francis Seager in 1557: “the schoole of virtue, and booke of good nourture for children and youth to learne theyr dutie by,” (Shaw 16). Almost exclusively, the first written stories for children featured themes of religion and then “instruction in polite conduct,” (Shaw 18).

In the book *Society and Children's Literature*, James Fraser declares, "Manners and deportment, whether in treatises focusing directly on the subject, in cautionary tales, or in incidental mention in other works, reflect the social etiquette of a given period," (Fraser 5). Technological advancements of the Industrial Revolution shifted the skyline from the simplicities of an agricultural world to one with smoke stacks and cities in the 1700s. Though there was hope for a bright future, working conditions were often deplorable, and the "exploitation of children" created a fresh need in literature: escapism (Shaw 19). Beautiful, meditative, and painful responses resulted via the Romantic Movement. According to Meigs' history, "It was the least heralded of the group of Romantic poets who left behind one of the deepest and most lasting of those few pieces of truly great poetry that have power to appeal to children of all time. This was William Blake with his *Songs of Innocence* (1789)," (Meig 146). This collection of poems is saturated with superb references to nature's splendor and the goodness of religion. In the introductory piece and the poem *The Lamb*, Blake pairs a child's intuitive behavior with a consciousness of divinity; Meig notes, "A very young mind's fumbling penetration and its divine curiosity are all embodied in the utter simplicity..." (147).

At the same time, the United States was still in the infantile stages of nationhood. Fraser details the country's rapid transformation, "For with the Peace of 1815, which closed the second British-American war, the country entered upon an era of great economic and physical expansion," (13). In addition to the Manifest Destiny and urbanization were reform movements, evangelical religion, and the debate over slavery. Thus, during this unsettling time in the new nation, "It was clear to thoughtful Americans that the permanent support of democratic institutions lay in the public virtue and equally clear that public virtue depended upon the character of private citizens," (Fraser 15). Resultantly, much attention went to a child's moral

character education; in fact, fiction written for children before 1860 was composed primarily to aid moral development like the fables from long ago. A striking difference, however, was that the authors at this time were cautious to use “the ‘gaudy’ allures of ‘high-wrought wonder,’ and the improbabilities of old folk tales,” (Fraser 15). Their work featured flat characters and a plot that consisted of a child in fault receiving moral correction. Cautionary tales were often effective, but they achieved their goal with little to no literary merit. Still, “there was a certain dignity and conviction in it went beyond a simple attempt to control society by indoctrinating children with safe moral values,” (Fraser 23).

The 1860’s and 1870’s brought with it realistic stories for young American ladies, stories that presented largely wholesome family units who were invigorated with religious zeal and strength. Authors with the sincerity of “Christian fortitude” found success with parents as well as young people (Meigs 203). The March family is possibly the most lasting example of this era and genre. Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868) explores the ideology of the separate gender spheres while instructing young female readers on the pillars of ideal womanhood. During this era, the United States was experiencing “its first wave of feminism” and the girls’ attitudes reflect the slow shift (May 52). Alcott’s tales of the enduring young March ladies stems directly from her unusual upbringing. Alcott’s father dabbled in philosophy and was inspired to move the family to a commune, Fruitlands. The cooperative living failed, but it was successful with ingraining memories of the tribulations permanently on Alcott’s mind. This writing for young ladies echoes the “courage, initiative, steadfastness and patriotism” that she, her sisters, and mother all exemplified when they were struggling to overcome the hurdles of life on a commune (Shaw 62). *Little Women*’s lead character Jo March embodies spunk and independence while still maintaining the dutiful daughter role; therefore, Jo March is often considered a stand-

in for Alcott herself. The character is a nonconformist in that she is willing to work to provide for her household, but Jo is also trying her best to fit the mold of an idyllic young lady. Similarly, Alcott was a successful female writer who struggled during her formative years to fit the standards of her father. Alcott, though, was rather effective in her timeless tales of instruction.

The themes of correction and teaching were equally popular in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Gordon Kelly writes in *Society and Children's Literature* about the significance of books in showing children how to imitate to society's standards:

“The process of ‘primary’ socialization—the child’s basic induction into the group ways—is likely to be a source of tension and concern in any society. A considerable measure of success in the socializing process—a marked conformity to behavioral norms as well as the desire to conform with a minimum of compulsion—is a necessary condition for maintaining the existence of a group at the level of behavior but more especially at the level of value and belief.” (Fraser 38).

The time period was one of cultivating the perfect little lady or gentleman. Virtues of the noble class were written into fictitious tales with distinct prominence. The body of work spawning from this disciplined mindset was rather tame, but simultaneously, an influx of adventure stories cropped up in literary circles. Likely, the long history of strict guidelines in children’s literature finally reached a breaking point. Instead of demanding self-control, the expedition stories explored the development of character through trying circumstances. Writers “George Henty, Robert Louis Stevenson, Richard H. Dana, and Jules Verne” were all writing adventure stories during this time (Shaw 20).

In 1865, using the pseudonym Lewis Carroll, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson penned *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a fantastical account which testifies to the power of dream. Fueled by boredom, Alice’s attention averts from the riverbank to a formal white rabbit. She tumbles gently

down the rabbit hole after the peculiar fellow and is soon lost into a new world. Juxtaposed to the refinement of the English aristocratic scene, the fresh land is a memorable one, a lively place where personified creatures vie for Alice's time: a true Wonderland. Whimsical creatures like the smoky Caterpillar, the Dodo, the Duchess, Cheshire cat, Queen of Hearts, March Hare, and Mad Hatter are immortalized in print and pop culture. In chapter two Alice asks herself, "Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle," (Carroll 8). Carroll's narrative dives into the mindset of childish imagination fully, including the quizzical attitude. Children are relentlessly asking questions and trying to determine their place in the world; Alice is no different. Simultaneously as Alice outwardly wonders where she belongs, readers are doing the same. The everyday world is constantly molding into a new shape and approach, though less extreme and fabulous as the caricatures in Wonderland. These playful attributes—quite diverting from the decorum of the times—solidify a place in literary history for *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

A later and equally beloved outcome of escapism was the tale of a boy who refused to transition into adulthood: J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*. First starring in the 1904 play *Peter Pan or the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*, Peter appears to have been inspired by Barrie's older sibling who passed away at an early age. The beloved boy was never given the chance to age or mature because of an ice-skating accident, and Barrie's mother was permanently changed. Acutely aware of this, Barrie's childhood mission was to keep his brother's memory alive in his mannerisms and performances (Barrie xvi). The eerie presence of death, decidedly absent in the Disney film, is subtly peppered throughout the novel. For example, in *Peter Breaks Through*, the first chapter in *Peter Pan* (1911), Barrie writes that Peter is "clad in skeleton leaves" (15). Furthermore, Peter teaches Wendy, Michael, and John Darling how to fly up and away from the cares of a structured and adult-influenced life. They escape to the dreamy Neverland, a place of

thrills and excitement. The tale examines the facets of transitioning from childhood to maturity, and because Peter refuses the fate of the Darlings, he is given the option of eternal youthful life. Children reading the novel can identify with the anxieties that couples with responsibility and maturation. Nevertheless, the emphasis of story is instead more fixated on the magic of youth, which highlights the importance of enjoying the delicacies of a simple and unadulterated life.

As the fantasy genre became a staple of the children's literature canon, an explosion of variability inundated the available books for children. Significant publications from the nineteenth century proved children's books could have literary merit, but the first decades of the twentieth century allowed children's literature to truly flourish, to come into its own as a distinct division of commendable works. The 1920s was a decade of experimentation for new forms; romantic adventure tales and fairy tales experienced modernization, American dramas and poetry gained momentum, and advanced technology inspired science fiction. One of the most noteworthy happenings of the 1920s involved the expansion of storytelling from type and vocal presentations to largely illustration driven works. Story-telling picture books, borrowed from Europe, were published in America in the late twenties with William Nicholson's *Clever Bill* (1927) being the first (Meigs 400). As William Blake showed, illustrations had long been accompanied to works for children, but critic Ruth Hill Viguers notes, "by 1920 many more artists than ever before began exploring children's book illustration as a medium of expression," (400). By the 1930s, Old World techniques were side-stepped in favor of newer developments which were practical and allowed for easy mass production of expressive images (402). The advancements—both in theme and methodology—pushed children's literature into the modern age; books were no longer simply training devices for an immature audience. Rather, children were given the recognition of their individuality and pegged "worthy of special attention," (401).

Elements and Style of Modern Children's Literature

In a child's quest for self-identification, one can become conscious of another's generalized character, and with avid reading, this often develops into gaining acute awareness of more understated personality attributes. In Lukens' chapter on literary character, she declares, "Even an infant responds to differences in people, hiding in a protective shoulder to avoid a noisy stranger, leaning out of a crib to be snuggled by a familiar friend," (75). Unsurprisingly, then, child will be capable of detection and will react similarly with character nuances in a book. A child's first acquaintance with reading comes when a parent, loved one, or educator reads to them. The child hears and observes the story, and with the reader's tone of voice, a young child can draw on the literary patterns of behavior (May 38). A sweetly softened voice often indicates wholesomeness while a deep, gruff tone identifies more often with an antagonist.

In children's literature, some characters in a given story may remain concrete and unchanged from start to end. Others, however, exhibit dynamic character development—"with the complexity of a living being," (Lukens 76). The story's primary character ought to, to the best of the author's capabilities, display realistic and believable personality traits. Those qualities often bode well for writer and reader if they are relatable and appropriate for young children, allowing them to imagine themselves in a similar situation. Other central characters need to follow suit and show complexity. Educators use the term 'round character' to label authentic players in a story, and some round characters that exhibit change over the course of the narrative are 'dynamic characters'. In J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, many of the recurring characters are dynamic, such as Hermione Granger. For all of Hermione's quick wit, she still initially struggles with her social skills. Her peers look down on her because her parents are muggles, a

classification of people that are ordinary and lack magic. The bond she forms with Harry and Ron, however, transforms Hermione into a better-rounded young lady. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, she declares to Harry, "Books! And cleverness! There are more important things—friendship and bravery," (Rowling 208). By the end of the book, she gains a new awareness of what is truly important in life.

On the other hand, secondary or minor characters can serve their purpose for the story without extensive development; they remain in the background, so the writer need not divert from the focus of the story with granting attention to a character of usually reduced importance—a 'flat character'. A flat character, however, can still take on the role of protagonist or central character. In Don Freeman's *Corduroy*, the lonely stuffed bear goes on a mission to find his missing button in a department store. Though his search is fruitless, having been caught by the nighttime security, Corduroy finds love regardless of his flawed appearance. The simple and timeless tale keeps the details on the bear to a minimum, but in a way this works best for very young book lovers. Additionally, literature's flat and round characters may not alter or evolve in the story, so they are 'static'. For example, Carroll's Alice is considered a round and static character. Being fashioned after a real-life girl, Alice easily makes a believable person. Her playful and inquisitive spirit is alive in every child. But, because she does not change her perspective or opinions, she is static. Her meandering in Wonderland is exciting, but Alice does not change by the end of the novel.

Especially in children's literature, a prime character can be a number of different creatures without any hesitation of acceptance from the reader. Animals, toys, or personified objects may lead readers on an exciting tale just as a human would be capable of doing so. Some

animals replace the role of humans; others are given a biologically-accurate representation. More genuine animal depictions “can show unusual loyalty to their human owners or cunning in the wild,” (May 46). Or, a book may bridge these depictions. It may show animals talking and carrying in a humanistic fashion while living in their natural habitat. *Froggy Learns to Swim* by Jonathan London features Froggy, his mother, and his father. Like real frogs, the family lives in an amphibious area, and the parents teach their young boy how nature designed frogs to be excellent swimmers. His mother states, “Don’t you know frogs are born in the water? They are *great* swimmers!” (London 9). The adorable illustrations perfectly capture the emotions tied to trying new ventures while portraying the frogs as persons. The home has a glass window and wooden door. The attire, too, is humanly. Froggy wears pineapple-stamped swim trunks, flippers, and snorkeling gear. A reader of this particular story will not share biological traits with Froggy, but a child can easily identify with the anxiety and joys associated with learning how to swim.

Similarly to Froggy, most protagonists in children’s literature face a dilemma and must come to a suitable solution. Books geared for children “become training grounds for everyday experiences,” (May 40). As a character ascertains answers to questions, readers will be able to note the steps needed for decision-making. An adult reading a book to a child will likely deliver an instructive spin on the reading. Victoria Kann’s *Pinkalicious* illustrates a young girl turning her favorite color, pink, after eating many rosy-tinted foods like cupcakes. An adult would conceivably tell a listener that eating healthy foods is important for proper nutrition. On the contrary, children “care less about the adult message of caution than about the hero’s ability to solve his own dilemma,” (40). Young readers appreciate the difficulty involved in self-discovery and problem-solving. Oftentimes a protagonist will seek resolution alone, and this highlights to

children that they are capable of coming to reasonable decisions with enough thought and patience. *Amelia Bedelia* by Peggy Parish showcases the humor in idioms. Amelia works as a maid, and she struggles to understand her employer's vernacular. As a result, she takes all of her tasks quite literally. Instead of dusting furniture in the traditional sense, Amelia adds dust. And when dressing the chicken, Amelia comically adds tiny clothing rather than preparing the meat for cooking. She may be a poor housekeeper, but Amelia is able to find a savory solution to a foreseeable pending unemployment: she bakes tasty pies. While she may not overcome every obstacle in the customary fashion, she resolves the dilemma with the utilization of her strong baking skills.

Problem solving becomes much more in-depth with dynamic characters that undergo an impressive narrative. Commonly, the heroes or heroines are those solely equipped to handle the immensity of the situation. Authors occasionally orphan the lead character, and the outcome becomes all the more impressive knowing a single young person provided the solution. "*Anne of Green Gables, The Little Princess, The Book of Three, Johnny Tremain, Tom Sawyer, and Heidi* are exemplary tales whose main characters are orphaned," (May 45). Quite possibly the best example of an orphaned hero, though, is Harry Potter. Rowling writes off the Potter parents in a dramatic initial scene, one that shows how love endures. The menacing Lord Voldemort savagely descends upon the Potter household. To save her baby's life, Harry's mother sacrifices her own life. Thus, Harry is shipped away to live with his maternal aunt and uncle. In meager living quarters—a nook under the staircase—is where the unlikely orphan begins his journey to legendary bravery. Harry's extraordinary rise and the quest of other literary orphans succeed "because they dare to journey alone, to question their situations, and strive to understand why things happen as they do," (45).

Characterization is revealed to readers through the author's description, dialogue and comments made by other characters. Moreover, much character development is exposed through actions. The author is mindful to tailor characterization to the adolescent audience as well as the equally important plot progression. Due to youngster's notorious fading attention spans, a lively story appeals much more than a detailed character study. With "carefully structured plots", readers' imaginations are whisked away on sequence adventures (May 47). An author's attention to chronological order of events makes even the most outlandish ideas appear more reasonable in the eyes of children. Complications arise with experimentation in time variations, such as flashbacks. According to Lukens, "A flashback may juggle time to show how things began," (99). Movement of time away from the story, though, is often difficult for beginning readers, who may feel confused. Increased memory recall of personal life situations helps readers to handle flashbacks and timely occurrences. "Since the child knows from experience, for instance, that one falls asleep and dreams, he or she understands Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*," (Lukens 99). A little maturity helps children understand when Max is sleeping or daydreaming. And though Max's subconscious leads him to the place of the wild things, readers understand how this universe is separate from his bedroom at home.

E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* examines multiple sources of conflict and "two very different plots in one story". One takes a quite accurate approach in the everyday life on a farm. The other story is a fantasy, borne from White's imagination, and focuses on "anthropomorphic animals" (May 48). Through Wilbur's quandary, the narratives interweave. The novel begins with a realistic scene; Fern Arable, a sweet-natured farm girl, discovers that her father plans to kill the pig litter's runt. Her determination to save the piglet sends her racing through the dew-soaked grass to her father's whereabouts in the barn. Early on readers are faced with a person-

against-person conflict; in this case, Fern opposes her father's plans to kill the animal simply on the grounds of his runt status. After successfully pleading for the pig's life—at least until his maturation, White introduces further familial interactions and sibling rivalry. From personal experience, children easily accept the Arable's exchanges.

Additional sources of tension come when Wilbur is sent to live in the barn and is ostracized by the other animals. To make matters much graver, Wilbur is continually on the edge of being sent to the slaughter house. He narrowly avoids death at the hands of Fern's dad and uncle, thus exemplifying the person-versus-society conflict style. Readers fear for the pig's safety, so they naturally want to read on and learn whether he will live (Lukens 103). Their anticipation drives the action forward through the rising action. One night, struggling Wilbur finds solace in a mysterious voice that promises compassion, which unexpectedly belongs to a spider named Charlotte. Once again, Wilbur's life is spared because of the assistance from a friend; Charlotte ingeniously spins attention-grabbing webs over Wilbur's spot in the barn, and this both delights and astounds the townspeople. By the story's conclusion, readers see the successful manifestation of fearlessness, creativity, and most importantly—friendship, and how instrumental these factors prove to be in saving Wilbur.

Interestingly, *Charlotte's Web* “resembles the earlier oral fairy tales that usually had two very different settings placed side-by-side within the plot,” (May 48). The narratives generally begin at home, and the climax almost always occurs in a different and more treacherous environment. For example, the fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood* often starts with the young lady being at home and preparing to visit her grandmother. She encounters the wolf in the forest and faces him in a near-death experience away from her house. Similarly, Belle from *Beauty and the*

Beast leaves her modest home in order to protect her father. She feels responsibility for his imminent imprisonment by the beast because she requested a rose, as opposed to her vain sisters who demanded fine clothing. Much of the story's action occurs at the Beast's mysterious and grandiose castle. This arrangement of dual settings is found in many other modern books, such as C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Barrie's *Peter Pan*, Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, and L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

The structure of children's books can generally be divided into two categories: progressive and episodic plots. *Charlotte's Web* follows the progressive plot style in which the central climax is quickly followed by denouement, or the tying up of loose ends (Lukens 118). This story construction aligns with many traditional European tales, such as the horrific account of *Bluebeard*. A hideous blue beard stains the face of a wealthy and widowed man; Bluebeard, as he is known, has been married several times, but no one knows what happens to his many wives. Soon after marrying once again, Bluebeard is called away on business, so he leaves his wife the keys to the house. She is free to use them all—save one key, and Bluebeard makes his bride vow not to open the particular room. Overcome with intrigue, however, the young woman uses the key after Bluebeard leaves. There she sees her worse nightmare. Bluebeard's previous wives hang lifeless on the walls, and in this moment of horror, the bride drops the key into a pool of blood. Though she tries, she cannot rid the key of the bloody residue, so when Bluebeard arrives home, he discovers that his wife broke the vow. Each scene of rising action builds on the suspense. Readers wonder whether the curious bride will share the same brutal ending as Bluebeard's other wives. He allows his wife a short time for final prayers, and in the last possible moment, her brothers barge into the estate. In the dramatic culmination of events, the brothers kill the monstrous Bluebeard.

This steady stream of occurrences is in contrast to an episodic plot “in which one incident or short episode is linked to another by common characters or by a unified theme,” (119). As opposed to progressive plots where the central conflict poses as the catalyst for action, episodic plots deal more with incidents related to a central character. The mental focus and memory devotion for toddlers are less than what is associated with older children, so entertainment functions best by focusing on a primary character or subject. Consider the television programs aimed towards this demographic. Shows such as *Dora the Explorer*, *Jake the Never Land Pirate*, and *Winnie-the-Pooh* amuse viewers with different weekly shenanigans. Whatever conflict that arises is resolved before an episode’s end. Dora and her trusty pals—Backpack, the Map, and Boots—manage to solve the problem, in each episode, whilst avoiding interference from Swipper the Fox (Bromberg). These shows do not require children to know the details of a prior episode. This way, the child will easily follow along with the storyline.

The crossover success of A. A. Milne’s *Winnie-the-Pooh* is unexpected given the episodic format of the books that received literary acclaim. Milne’s series is written with as much tenderness as a stuffed bear itself, and his simple diction matches the sweetness of Pooh’s beloved snack. In the Hundred Acre Wood, a young boy named Christopher Robin accompanies his toys that have come to life through the power of imagination. The star is, of course, Winnie the Pooh, a teddy bear that makes up for his naiveté with his playful and thoughtful nature, regardless of him being a “Bear of Very Little Brain”. Similar to his routine snack time, Pooh habitually visits his friends, including Piglet, Eeyore, Tigger, Rabbit, Owl, Kanga and Roo. He takes considerations for everyone and often goes out of his way to help poor Eeyore, even if he is met with an unenthused donkey. The tales have enchanted children since its introduction in the 1920’s, detailing the foundations of unadulterated friendship. In trying times, Pooh helps save

the colorful clan from a flood with an upside down umbrella. And when there is no urgency, Pooh Bear writes poetry and “hums” for the enjoyment of his cohorts. There is no shortage of lovely sayings and notions, like Pooh telling Piglet that he is lucky to have friend that makes saying good-bye so difficult. The plot design may be perfectly suited for beginning readers, but the dialogue is timeless and has been relished by many generations.

“There is no right plot structure in a story for children,” (Lukens 124). Reasonably, the nature of children’s literature invites freedom and playfulness at any dimension. Suspense heightens any tension already present concerning the central conflict. Perhaps an author ends a chapter with a cliffhanger. Shifts in time, like flashbacks or jumps forward in time, function similarly as well and propel the action. Readers gain skills with experience that enable them to decipher what scenes are contemporary. The importance lies with whether the child will be lost in shifts in time or will understand the true chronology.

The sheer liberation that accompanies writing for children extends further from plot and allows for diverse themes. Lukens defines literary theme as: “the idea that holds the story together, such as a comment about society, human nature, or the human condition. It is the main idea or central meaning of a piece of writing,” (129). Discovering a work’s “significant truth” provides much pleasure to the reader, and this act often provides enlightenment about a particular character trait or cultural detail (130). Themes may be openly stated through text or *explicitly* revealed. For example the theme of friendship in *Winnie-the-Pooh* is certainly obvious with the character’s conversations. The statement “A little consideration, a little thought for others, makes all the difference” could not be clearer of Milne’s intentions for Pooh Bear and friends. Their friendship will last a lifetime or “until forever”, as stated multiple times in the text.

Themes also have the option of expression through indirect and implied terms. Certain *implicit* themes may accompany or fall secondary to explicit themes. Or, they can stand on their own, with the possibility of representing an even heavier sentiment. Consider Francis Hodgson Burnett's 1909 classic *The Secret Garden*. Young Mary Lennox is an unpleasant and disagreeable child; her parents place her under the care of native Indian servants as they do not care very much for their own child. An outbreak of Cholera sends now-orphaned Mary from India to Yorkshire, England. Though her living arrangements have changed, Mary's capacity for love is unchanged. Likewise, she experiences no love from others. Her cousin Colin equally has a lack of feeling and receiving affection. The "poor cripple" spends most days shut up in his room, and his temperament reflects the void of love. His father, Master Craven, is too torn up from his wife's death ten years ago to form a proper relationship with his only child. Mary and Colin's lonely lives finally transform with the aid of social interaction. Their visits to the hidden garden allow the children to fully blossom into compassionate creatures. Camaraderie is essential in their development, though the text does not explicitly state this theme. Still the implied statements indicate that importance of forming lasting social interactions.

Some children's books utilize implications to delicately deliver a deeper and more mature theme. Lukens explores Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* and how the novel is capable of carrying a "child through a variety of fears that may haunt the reader in real life and yet are rarely clarified. We fear the unknown," (140). Oftentimes life's most dramatic subjects are left with a nebulous understanding—or rather lack thereof—from children. The Borrowers are a family of diminutive people; they reside under the floor and within the walls of a home belonging to average-sized people. As their namesake implies, they scrounge from other dwellers in secret, borrowing a thimble or blotting-paper "carpet" to fulfill life's necessities and to make their

surroundings homey. Pod learns that while he was on an expedition to retrieve a tea cup, he was seen by the “human beans”. The characters recall the unfortunate fate of a relative, Eggletina. After the big people saw her father, they brought in a cat, and she was seen no more. The Clock family understandably worries about a similar fate as well as the possibility of having to move. Additionally, the story has another theme that “adults find easy to understand but hard to put into words for children: Materialism is a destructive force,” (140). Pod’s wife Homily, though fearful of the unknown, is driven by the need for more. Their humble way of life becomes unsettled as she begs Pod to fetch more items for their dwelling; the big people see Pod and call for exterminators. A vague comprehension of materialism may become more distinct with the novel’s representations in the character flaws of covetousness and greediness.

Any one—whether it be an older sibling or parent—who has spent time caring for a young child knows that the introduction to literacy often begins in one’s infancy with nursery rhymes. Often told with “joyful economy”, these verses feign poetry and naturally connect to children because they “use the elements of literature and the devices of style, and because the rhymes are sources of pleasure and understanding,” (Lukens 231). Literary elements are present, though given the nature of succinctness, are not fully expounded upon. Characters are simply stated or stereotypically portrayed, like “Mother Hubbard”, the polygamist man traveling to St. Ives, or the old lady “who lived in a shoe”. Sometimes, even setting is given a moment’s detailing, such as a grandfather clock in “Hickory, dickory, dock”.

The brief lines and easy rhymes produce a quick, melodic movement which stimulates the attention of small children. They learn to chant along with the simple lines with very little difficulty, similar to how school children jump rope to rhymed verses. Regardless of any

possible gibberish, the tempo is natural. A colorful array of sound effects enhances the delight.

Consider the nursery rhyme “Hey, diddle, diddle”:

Hey, diddle, diddle
 The Cat and the fiddle,
 The Cow jumped over the moon.
 The little Dog laughed,
 To see such sport,
 And the Dish ran away with the Spoon.

This common Mother Goose rhyme shows internal rhymes, assonance, and consonance in addition to the agreeable end rhyme (233). Furthermore, animals and inanimate objects come to life through personification. The historical significance and context of it remains speculative, so the lines appear to have no theme at all; rather, they are seemingly nonsensical. The spirited ridiculousness extends to the limerick form, a traditionally arranged nonsense verse (236).

There was an old lady named Crockett
 Who put a new plug in a socket
 But her hands were so wet
 She flew up like a jet
 And came roaring back down like a rocket.

Certainly the electrifying accident could weigh down the rhyme with solemnity, but the lighthearted and laughter-filled tone prevents this possibility. As Lukens notes, “The sounds are short, with happy rather than serious overtones,” (236).

The progression from nonsense rhymes to poetry may make children uneasy because the compacted style remains and yet it welcomes greater complexity. As a result of the limited space, the word choice in poetry is much more selective than that of prose. Cadence becomes more regular in poetry, as is the presence of sound patterns. Onomatopoeia, too, is not uncommon to rhythmic verse, especially concerning those aimed at young children; the sound-related words evoke a greater sensory element that charms listeners and readers alike.

Nevertheless, the differences between prose and poetry are more subtle than what one may imagine. The forms are not alike in style or methodology, but the intended messages can be parallel. Both forms of literature are capable of emotional intensity. Whereas a novelist may provide suspense with a cliffhanger, a poet may do something similar by deciding where to end and begin lines. If a phrase begins a line, yet its last word is placed on the following line, emphasis is created. In order to fully connect with audiences, a poem should be “viewed as both an aesthetic experience that causes the reader to ‘dream’ and to ‘muse’ and an efferent one that requires the reader ‘make sense’ of its meaning in a precise and ‘sharply objective’ way,” (May 153). The “word puzzles” are an amusing way in which a child learns to decipher more advanced vocabulary and deeper meanings (154). The key for a child to become an accomplished reader requires balance between poetry and prose, between artistically charming literary patterns and structured descriptions.

Genre in Children’s Literature

In categorizing children’s literature, the designations of between poetry versus prose only can go so far. Certain works, like *Alice in Wonderland* contain both formulations. Therefore, scholars use more profound criteria to classify literature into different genres. A genre is a category of literature that shares certain criteria and characteristics (Lukens 13). Each literary element is examined in terms of the genre, but some classifications put greater emphasis on one element or another. Moreover, distinguishing the differences between genres can become hazy. Genres, then, have “distinct and overlapping” components in “varying combinations and degrees” (14).

“The first book of fiction written specifically for children was realistic, and its realism reflected social, education, and economic aspects of the period with which it deals,” (Meigs 349). A realistic account ought to be conceivable, although the likelihood of such an event may be slim (Lukens 14). Character is thoroughly developed and interconnects with a conflict that is either with oneself, society, or concerning another character. Authors must be careful to write conflicts as they would naturally or realistically occur. The tone, too, should follow this accordingly. In the real world, problems are hardly solved with ease and in little time. If a character with deeply riddled problems easily comes to a solution, readers can perceive the writing as “condescending” (15). Moreover, realism may give readers a “sense of uneasiness” since some ideas can be shown in “controversial ways” (May 125). Readers may further ponder the text in order to grasp the genuineness. Authors who properly approach realism will generally “allow for different responses to the same story” (125). This allows readers to be mindful, examine every dimension, and internalize the conflicts.

A subset of realism is a historical account, one that takes place in the past. Oftentimes, the subject matter holds “current significance” or was a monumental occasion (May 53). Elements like clothing, speech, and technology must also reflect the designated time period. Even though historical realism is fiction, it incorporates historical facts with an imaginative flair. *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry is such “well-written historical fiction” that readers wonder where the truth ends and creative story telling begins (Lukens 17). In 1943, Nazi forces implemented arrest of Danish Jewish people and forced deportation. With particular attention to details, Lowry describes the acts of heroism done by the Danish people; though her story centers on friends Annemarie Johansen and Ellen Rosen, who are fictional young ladies, the specific events feel real. In one scene, leaders of the Resistance stage a mock funeral to gather Jewish

people in need and disperse goods. German soldiers suddenly appear in a dramatic and quite realistic fashion, demanding to open the casket, but with quick thinking—one woman states the casket is sealed to contain the highly contagious pathogen—the assembly is spared for the time being. The accomplished writing leaves readers wondering how much of the event was real. The Danish Resistance was certainly a historical event, but were there families like the Rosens and Johansens? Regardless of whether the protagonist was created, readers still gain a greater appreciation for those who risked their lives to save others during the Second World War.

Romantic stories are another genre of children's literature, not to be confused to adult romantic literature. Childhood stories of romance, rather, are linked back to the fairy tale tradition and later female protagonists in Victorian novels. The lead roles are almost always “deeply feminine yet feisty”, gentle ladies with a hint of the masculine archetype that creates a tomboyish approach (Lukens 19). Consider Alcott's *Little Women*; she viewed life in an unabridged manner, saw “illness and death, sorrow and trouble and poverty as parts of life to be met with normality and courage” (Meigs 351). She expected that children ought to be exposed to all of these facets in literature, as life holds both tribulations and exultations for everyone. With the tale, readers pine after Laurie, dreaming that he and Jo take their friendship to a deeper, more romantic level. Though this courtship does not come to be, Alcott does include weddings for all three surviving March sisters. Jo does end up with man many readers anticipated or hoped for, but she, nevertheless, falls in line with the romantic prototype and marries.

As Romanic stories follow a particular pattern—think of how Disney heroines share a number of attributes—it is considered formula fiction. Another genre that fits this mold or pattern of storytelling is the mystery genre. Lukens notes, “They rely for suspense upon

unexplained events and actions that are sometimes, by story's end, resolved or explained by reasonable and carefully detected discoveries," (18). Parents who are now reading their children thrillers like *The Westing Game* or *The Series of Unfortunate Events* find modern tweaks on classics like *Nancy Drew*, *The Hardy Boys*, or *Encyclopedia Brown*. Mutually, these novels and series contain a timeless recipe for mysteries suitable for young readers. By reading this type of book, children are able to "acquire skills in putting together the bits of foreshadowing to predict the outcome" (18). Furthermore, these skills translate into the real world where readers will become keener with deciphering a person's true character.

Increasingly popular is yet another category of literature: fantasy. What started off from humble origins is now a behemoth of a genre, responsible for many of the most successful children's literature franchises in the modern era. Critic Ruth Hill Viguers describes the fundamentals of fantasy:

"Wisdom that has drawn nourishment from the deep consciousness of the human race and wide knowledge and understanding of the 'real' world, linked with a vital imagination and story-telling skill, are requisite for the writing of successful fantasy. Its theme is built around fundamental truths, but its protagonists are often creatures of another world, the settings are over the border of reality, and time, as measured in our everyday lives, does not exist; yet the stories must be logical, events must follow in proper sequence, the plot must build up to a climax, and the outcome must be reasonable." (Meigs 447).

Children of the 1950s were enamored with C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* and J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and subsequent *Lord of the Rings* series. With an air of agelessness, the writing remains just as relevant today. Talking lions and elves are not part of the past, present, or likely future, but they are easily accepted as suitable characters in worlds of fantasy. Imagination is given free rein. Today, series such as the *Hunger Games*, *Twilight*, *Harry Potter*, and *Divergent* are among the most enjoyed with young readers.

Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy envisions a country named Panem that is governed by a totalitarian regime. To enforce its power, quell rebellion, and ignite fear, the Capital requires that each district send two teenagers into a televised game lasting until the death. Spitfire Katniss Everdeen grows up in the country's poorest district, a place shadowed in coal and dirt. To spare her angelic younger sister from a sinister ending, Katniss volunteers herself, and in doing so, she becomes the unlikely voice of the voiceless. The fantastical factors of the novels are able to take the extremes of humanity and amplify them. Love and sacrifice becomes the livelihood of Katniss as she faces off against the Capital's deceit and treachery. A realistic novel may achieve similar sentiments in readers, but the fantasy allows readers to better expand their imagination, their thinking, and ponder some of life's greatest questions. The improbable situations let the audience imagine themselves in the situation without any recollection from their personal lives so as to not detract from the moment. Still, it is not the genre that defines a good book; a suitable book for children provides pleasure, awareness, and increased understanding. And, these attributes can be achieved from any genres included in children's literature.

Social Factors

In 1978 Frances Henne wrote, "Only recently have we begun to be concerned, from a variety of angles, with children's literature as reflected in society," (Fraser 3). In the 36 years since that statement first saw print, social considerations have gone from only being included in edgier children's pieces to inundating the market. Henne continues by describing the "consideration of mankind" in children's literature and how these values reflect the ways in which society evolves over time. Youthful temptations are confronted differently, minorities and ethnic groups are given more honest and welcoming portrayals, and greater expressions of social

justice are just a few of the markers addressed (5). This new wave in children's literature exposes young readers to newer, more socially sensitive topics, and when used as an aid to parental guidance, these books help to eliminate misunderstanding and awkwardness. The effect of social factors on books, though, does not always go over so smoothly.

Consider Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. At the time of first publication in 1885, the novel spurred some contention; the protagonist—a young white boy, Huck—forms a close bond with a runaway slave, Jim. The interracial friendship and reliance was a peculiarity and even deemed offensive in certain regions of the country. Additionally, the duo's antics challenged the norm and the role of authority. Then in 2011, the perennial scholastic favorite was met with a different controversy. The new edition of the novel replaced a racial slur (the N-word) with the word "slave" to keep with the times. Certainly, in today's world, that slur is particularly profane and offensive. In the time of the story's setting, on the other hand, the word choice is a precise echo of what one may hear. As some readers supported the decision to tweak Twain's diction, others were unsurprisingly insulted with the tampering of a masterpiece. Lovers of good literature are left pondering whether to edit the word or to stay true to the original. Regardless of what decision is best, the novel's contentious reception is remarkable in demonstrating the involvement of society in writing.

Karen Sands-O'Connor's essay "All There in Black and White: Examining Race and Ethnicity in Children's Literature" takes a deeper look at the world's progressively positive reception of different races in terms of children's books. Because young readers are especially "impressionable", considerations of race or ethnicity are especially significant (Chapleau 38). Children easily pick up on the cultural attitudes of characters, and depending on how other

characters react, children can be influenced into a state of greater or lesser social awareness. She declares that historical outlooks are now outdated; race is becoming “increasingly blurred” in place of an “either/or proposition” (39). At the same time, though, others’ tales of heritage have gained momentum. Whether a child’s particular race is of the minority, majority, or of a mixture of races, books for children need to express equality and hospitality. The fragile self-esteem of young readers can be strengthened when learning about the friendship of characters across ethnic lines. Furthermore, children can gain a deeper understanding of different cultures through books.

In her book *Children’s Literature: An Issues Approach*, Masha Kabakow Rudman dissects the manifestation of social implications in children’s literature. She notes that in order for the material to be effective, “the reader is required first to examine his or her own knowledge, attitudes, and prejudices,” (Rudman 2). Constructive reading provides educated and well-rounded viewpoints which, in turn, allow children the prospect of self-discovery in a sheltered situation (2). The books ameliorate awareness and understanding of certain issues that children find complex. In the first section, Rudman explores the role of the family in children’s literature, noting that family is the “first social structure” with which a person interacts, and it “provides a model for other relationships,” (9). Siblings are oftentimes the first friends a child will have, and siblings help to mold a person’s personality and morals. They know each other’s mannerisms and peculiarities “in a way that no other people do”, which helps form a connection so deep it has the longevity to last a lifetime. By using this primary interaction as a model system, it helps children to interact, bond, and form new acquaintances outside the family.

In C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the four Pevensie siblings stumble in the magical world that is Narnia. Lewis uses four children, two boys and two girls,

who are united in their ultimate innate quest for goodness. The birth order is a driving force for the behavior of the Pevensie clan. Peter is the oldest sibling, and after overcoming initial skepticism and then the confrontation from the White Witch, he is crowned the High King of Narnia. His success fits with Rudman's crude basis for birth order in character development. She states, "The eldest takes charge and cares too much about achievement," but later in life they are "often very successful" and "assume positions of leadership," (11-12). Similarly, young Edmund, the third-born, fits with the standard representation of middle children. He is enchanted by the evil forces of the White Witch with promises of Turkish delight, causing him to betray his siblings for a bit of time. Middle children, according to Rudman, are sometimes shown as "resentful, quick-tempered, overly sensitive, and rebellious" though they do learn "how to compromise and to make friends" (12). Eventually, Edmund sees the error in his ways and becomes a just ruler of Narnia alongside his siblings. C. S. Lewis's characterization of the Pevensie children generally follows what is established concerning family order, though stereotypes are carefully avoided through three-dimensional development (12).

As siblings are raised together, jealousy naturally arises; they share certain belongings and vie for parental attention. Arguments between siblings in literature are not out of the ordinary as they are commonplace in everyday life. One way to help stymie the evitable jealousy is to confront the issue at its start. Today, there are accessible books that address a new addition to the family. Much material is devoted to examining the anxiety an only child or older siblings may feel with the arrival of a new baby and how to adjust the apprehension into joy. Generally the books are "factual" as well as successful with helping older children to adjust (13). Rudman discusses Fred Rogers's *The New Baby* and why the simple book is successful in its purposes. The book illustrates inclusiveness with agreeable activities that are enjoyed by mom, dad, and all

of the siblings. In addition, the book looks at an infant's development and explains the subject in a manner easily understood by preschool age children so that the new born will not be met with "resentment" for natural infantile behavior (13). Because of the supplemental knowledge provided to young readers and listeners, *The New Baby* helps the child not only feel more comfortable but also more excited about the arrival of a new brother or sister.

A new addition to the family does not hinge upon a mother's pregnancy. Adoption and foster care are two options in which children are received into a new environment, and as other children must adjust, the new member must as well. Over the last few decades, authors have begun to venture into literature that deals with these weighty life events, and they pay particular attention to the word choice. Language is a significant consideration in books on the topic of adoption, with specifications in regards to "birth mother" rather than "real mother" (41). Although the parents that raise adopted children are not the biological mothers or fathers, writers want to convey a message of love and acceptance by the family.

For children in foster care, it is a somewhat different story. Rather than facing the certainty of enduring familial inclusion, foster children may be moved into a different household periodically. Rudman declares, "Probably the finest example of a well-written, moving, multidimensional book on this topic is *The Great Gilly Hopkins* by Katherine Paterson," (42). Shuffled from home to home, eleven year old Gilly forms a hardened exterior, upholding the idea that the world is incapable of showing any love to her. She waits for a day when her birth mother will want to retake custody, but this keeps Gilly from properly connecting with foster parents and peers at school. Paterson's tale realistically depicts the background and behavior a foster child may exhibit, the challenges experienced by the child as well as the adults trying to

enrich the child's life. Fittingly, the ending is not easily squared away, as life is not; still, Gilly learns invaluable life lessons. This piece of fiction is a wonderful addition to children's literature as it is able to incorporate the swaying modern family unit while upholding the fundamental elements of children's literature.

When some families experience additions, others may undergo a fracture. Approximately half of all American marriages end in divorce. And for most, the cause is not clear-cut or simple; for separating couples that share children, "blame-fixing can be destructive because it maintains anger" instead of nurturing the relationships with the children (56). Thirteen year old Brian, the protagonist in Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet*, comes from a family with divorced parents. He boards a plane that is headed to a remote part of Canada in an effort to visit his father. The emotional and physical separation between his parents devastates Brian, and he no longer classifies himself as belonging to a family unit. A plane crash forces the young man to forge for himself in the Canadian wilderness. In doing so, he finds his own identity as a self-reliant and resourceful being. Though Paulsen's piece features the rebuilding of a child impacted by divorce, he does not approach the topic clinically. His main purpose lies in producing good literature, so his representation of divorce does not examine the parental perspectives. They are not important to the *Hatchet's* message. This leads back to the question of whether or not an emphasis on social factors detracts from the quality of the literature.

In ancient folk tales, female leads are always shown as pious and virginal creatures. Not only that, but women are shown as dutiful and submissive; a chance for independence does not exist, and the strapping male saves the heroine in distress. Little Red Riding Hood's life is spared by the good timing of a woodsman; Snow White, who spent her time cleaning for men, is kissed

and saved by a prince; Cinderella's prince offers the lost glass slipper, and with this, he shows her a new possibility for life. In her essay "The Apple That Was Not Poisoned: Intertextuality in Feminist Fairytale Adaptations", Vanessa Joosen acknowledges, "One of the first issues raised by feminist critics was the lack of positive, active roles for women in the best-known tales," (Chapleau 30). Children's stories of today represent a much different take on feminism. Does this detract or add to a tale's merit? In many cases, a focus on female empowerment is doubly advantageous in that it creates a more holistic and idyllic representation of ladies in fresh stories, narratives that better relate to modern readers. Joosen examines the feminist push to revise classic fairy tales with a stronger female mindset; she concludes, "These revisions bring about in young readers an awareness not only of other texts, but also, most importantly, of their own reading processes," (36). Rightfully so, gender liberation has reached other genres in children's literature. In Judy Bloom's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, the female protagonist goes through puberty. The daring introduction of sexuality does not diminish Bloom's work; conversely, Margaret's apprehensive experience allows readers to connect even further.

An additional book that features the sexual exploration of young females is the 2000 novel *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* by Ann Brashares. Lena and Bridget, two of the four protagonists in a group of inseparable, lifelong friends, both reach a threshold where they long for deeper maturation in romantic relationships. For Lena, she sheds the walls of inhibition in order to finally openly declare love for another. Bridget, conversely, struggles with a lustful interaction with her soccer coach. Moreover, Brashares introduces another device of equal importance to sexuality: death. Prior to the events of the novel, readers learn that Bridget's mother committed suicide after a bout with mental illness. This excruciatingly painful experience

strains Bridget's relationship with her twin brother and father; luckily for her, though, she finds solace in the arms of her three best friends.

Readers likely react more strongly to another character's death. A third protagonist is best friend Tabitha, or Tabby for short. This artsy teenager spends her summer working at an economy superstore, and in her free time, Tabby films a documentary that focuses on people who she considers lame. In doing so, she meets young Bailey. The twelve year old girl gradually progresses from the status of a nuisance to Tabby's favorite summertime companion. Brashares lets the readers enjoy their experiences and see the beauty in Bailey's personality. Despite her grim prognosis with Leukemia, she is one of the most uplifting souls introduced in the novel. The impending expiration of the summer aligns with the end of Bailey's life. According to Rudman, young adult and children's books that deal realistically with death are part of a new movement. Up until recently, books that feature dying characters have been avoided as if death itself was a "contagious disease" (Rudman 141). Certainly Bailey's death is an unfortunate event, but the realistic account is a longed-for addition to literature aimed at youngsters.

A child may first encounter death with the passing of a relative or a goldfish that sadly floats to the top of the tank. Until around age five, children are unable to grasp the finality of death for a loved one or pet. For exposure to death in the literary world, Rudman recommends books for young children that focus on funerals and appropriate reactions to death, such as Margaret Wise Brown's *The Dead Bird*; this work features illustrations of empathetic children who appreciate the ceremony that allows them to mourn the loss of the bird (142). It is only around nine years old in which children fully understand and concede that "death is permanent, universal, and inevitable" (143). Narratives that include or even devote emphasis on a character's

death are often read with the appropriate sadness. Nevertheless, they are helpful for readers that need an outlet to manage their own fears of dying.

There exists a mindset in which some people are offended by the amount of social material others find offensive. In deed a truth lies in this notion; after eras of gender and racial inequality, hypersensitivity is the modern outlook. Certainly educating today's youth is paramount, and incorporating socially acceptable behavior into the reading material provides more widespread awareness of different experiences. Authors with this as their primary goal ought to approach their writing with caution. At some point, books cease to become pleasurable pastimes and morph into didactic guidebooks. A skilled children's book writer, though, is able to incorporate the world's changing attitude into material that maintains the keepsakes of good literature: strong and relatable characters, unforgettable plots of adventure, and themes that connect with children. Today, mental and physical special needs, sexual or emotional abuse, disease, the presences of war, or a number of other social elements can be found in some exceptional books for children.

Different Media

Romantic poet William Blake understood the power of artwork accompanying literary work. He successfully stirred emotional convictions with his ethereal engravings, sometimes reaffirming a poem's message or provoking inquiry of another direction. Illustrations in children's books are far from a new addition, though the last century has ushered in a golden era for illustrations in children's books. For very young children, those that cannot understand a written language, pictures are vital for the story's expression. They can be used to provide backstory and/or foreshadowing to a story as well. "The illustrator puts into visual form what the

words say, and yet, in amplifying the text, conveys more than what the words say,” (Lukens 69). The creativity of the artwork outweighs the text in some instances. Eric Carle, the illustrator behind classics *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (written by Bill Martin, Jr). and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (written by Carle), uses colorful collages to capture attention of young children. The words are easy enough to comprehend, but it is clear that the magic in these books lies with illustrations.

Some books take the prominence of drawings or illustrations to an entirely new level in the form of wordless picture books. Naturally, the idea for nonverbal and artistic stories transformed with technology, giving rise to motion pictures. Since the advent of the “talkies”, though, movies are not subjected to merely wordlessness. The possibility of dialogue means that in this new, digitalized era, popular books are often sent to the silver screen. Movie adaptations might be limited by running time constraints as well as collaborations with many others involved in the production. Still, authors are able to reach a greater audience, and if viewers enjoy the story, they are more likely to stay up to date on the author’s works. Literary critics fear movies as a replacement for books; children can simply devote an hour and a half to the entertainment of a movie. What one should consider, though, is that many children see the movie versions as complementary and secondary to the books. A true lover of the story wants to know all the details as the author intended, so he or she will be most fond of the book.

Other media includes audio books. Over the past few decades, audio books have revolutionized the literary world for the visual impaired, those traveling, or people needing a respite from using their eyes. Readers record the novel just as written by the author. Often times, readers incorporate variations on their voice to stand in for different characters. Without a doubt,

this media holds significance for much of the population, a distinction it rightly merits. There exists, however, a number of downsides to this approach. Obviously the beauty of illustrations is absent. Additionally, the art of word organization is lost with audio books. Milne's *Winnie-The-Pooh* series includes pages uniquely presented. A reader of the audio version cannot capture the brilliancy of tumbling letters.

The latest technological innovation, the e-book, has helped to marry the problems of audio books. Electronic books, or e-books, highlight the great benefits of digital enhancement. Receptive children are quite comfortable with learning new technology. With e-books, children can easily highlight quotes and search the definition of an unfamiliar word. An entire collection of works can be stored in convenience of a single device; therefore, children are taught from a young age to handle electronics with care. One particular brand that has dominated the children's electronic books sector is Leappad. Their leappad learner system allows children to work on their reading pace and enunciation. Simply by hitting a word or sentence, a reader will read the selected area similarly to a reader of an audio book. Undoubtedly this method of reading is quite beneficial to children, and it is seen as the way of the future. Nevertheless, the e-book is yet to replacement the enchantment one experiences when returning to an old-fashioned, worn, dog-eared book. This kind of tangible experience is remarkable.

Closing

My childhood feels as recent as yesterday, but already children's literature looks much differently than when I first experienced *Guess How Much I Love You*. My younger cousins allocate half of the reading time to printed books, and the other half is spent reading electronic books on a tablet. Some of the material available to kids today is quite socially minded. And as a

result, impressionable young minds are raised with more awareness. Nonetheless, not all aspects of children's literature have changed drastically. The style remains steadfast; an effective children's book character is relatable and engages in an interesting plot. Innovative storylines, likewise, follow the well-established genres of fantasy or realism. The last few centuries have helped to solidify the association between children's literature and expanding imaginations, a movement most assuredly hailed by children in favor of pleasure over didactic books. Whatever the future of children's literature may hold, one can reasonably surmise a number of truths. Technology will undoubtedly maintain its sensational legacy and union with literature. Educators will continue to select equally enjoyable and enlightening books for youthful readers. And, children will keep gravitating to books that encourage creativity, ones that are filled with remarkable storylines and possibly vibrant illustrations.

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