

## Eureka Journal of Language, Culture & Social Change (EJLCSC)

ISSN 2760-4926 (Online) Volume 2, Issue 4, April 2026



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## THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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### Abstract:

English children's literature has developed through a long historical process shaped by changing social values, educational theories, and cultural transformations. This article examines its evolution from early didactic and religious texts to modern imaginative and global literary works. It highlights key stages, major authors, thematic shifts, and the growing recognition of childhood as an independent cultural and psychological category. The study shows that children's literature in England has moved from moral instruction toward creativity, emotional depth, and social diversity, reflecting broader developments in society and literary culture.

**Keywords:** Children's literature, English literature, childhood, fantasy fiction, moral education, Victorian era, narrative development, literary evolution, Roald Dahl, J. K. Rowling.

### INTRODUCTION

The development of English children's literature is closely connected to the historical transformation of the concept of childhood itself. In early English society, particularly during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, children were not regarded as a separate audience with specific literary needs. Instead, they were seen as miniature adults who required strict moral and religious guidance. As a result, the earliest forms of children's literature were primarily didactic in nature, focusing on teaching reading skills alongside Christian values

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and moral discipline. Texts such as hornbooks, catechisms, and religious manuals dominated early educational reading materials. These works were not designed to entertain but to instruct, emphasizing obedience, virtue, and religious responsibility. However, even within this strict framework, the foundations of children's publishing were gradually being established, particularly through the work of publishers such as John Newbery, who began to produce books specifically aimed at younger readers.

### MATERIAL AND METHODS

During the eighteenth century, children's literature became more structured, yet it remained heavily influenced by moral and educational goals. Stories such as *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes* reflected the belief that good behavior and hard work led to success, while disobedience resulted in punishment. Writers like Maria Edgeworth continued this tradition by promoting rational education and moral development through storytelling. In this period, imagination was often viewed with suspicion because it was thought to distract children from proper moral instruction. Nevertheless, these early texts played an important role in shaping reading practices and establishing storytelling techniques that would later evolve into more complex literary forms.

A significant transformation occurred in the nineteenth century when English children's literature began to move away from strict moral didacticism toward imagination and fantasy. This period is often associated with the rise of Victorian children's literature, which introduced more creative and emotionally engaging narratives. One of the most influential figures of this era was Lewis Carroll, whose works *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* revolutionized children's storytelling through nonsense logic, linguistic play, and surreal environments. These texts marked a clear departure from moral instruction, focusing instead on imagination, curiosity, and cognitive exploration. Similarly, George MacDonald's fairy tales combined fantasy with spiritual

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symbolism, offering readers deeper interpretative layers rather than direct moral lessons. Illustration also became increasingly important during this time, with artists such as John Tenniel contributing to the visual imagination of children's books. As Victorian society began to idealize childhood as a period of innocence, children's literature gained a new cultural status as a space for creativity and emotional exploration [1].

### DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are often referred to as the "Golden Age" of children's literature in England. This period produced many classic works that remain influential today. Writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, and Frances Hodgson Burnett created stories that combined adventure, moral growth, and emotional depth. Unlike earlier didactic texts, these works did not directly instruct readers but instead allowed moral and emotional lessons to emerge naturally through narrative experience. Adventure, exploration, and personal development became central themes, and child protagonists were placed at the center of complex narrative worlds. The expansion of literacy and publishing industries also contributed to the widespread popularity of children's books, making reading an essential part of childhood culture [2].

In the twentieth century, English children's literature became even more diverse and complex. Authors such as A. A. Milne introduced gentle and emotionally rich stories like *Winnie-the-Pooh*, which emphasized friendship and imagination. At the same time, C. S. Lewis created the fantasy world of Narnia, blending mythological elements with moral and philosophical themes. One of the most transformative writers of this period was Roald Dahl, who introduced a darker, more humorous, and often subversive style of storytelling. His works challenged adult authority and celebrated children's intelligence, creativity, and resilience. This shift reflected broader social changes, including evolving attitudes toward

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education, authority, and childhood autonomy. The twentieth century also saw the emergence of young adult literature, which addressed more serious themes such as identity, social inequality, and psychological conflict, expanding the boundaries of what children's literature could represent [3].

In the contemporary period, English children's literature has become a global cultural phenomenon, particularly with the success of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Modern children's literature is characterized by complex world-building, multidimensional characters, and the integration of diverse social and cultural themes. Issues such as identity, multiculturalism, environmental awareness, and emotional well-being are increasingly central to contemporary narratives. In addition, digital technologies have transformed the way children access and interact with literature, introducing e-books, audiobooks, and interactive storytelling platforms. These developments have expanded the reach and influence of children's literature beyond traditional print culture [4].

Throughout its historical development, English children's literature has undergone significant thematic and structural transformations. It has moved from moral instruction and religious education toward imagination, psychological depth, and cultural diversity. The concept of the child has evolved from a passive recipient of instruction to an active interpreter of meaning. As a result, modern children's literature reflects not only artistic creativity but also broader social, educational, and ideological changes. In conclusion, the development of English children's literature demonstrates a continuous process of adaptation and innovation, making it one of the most dynamic and influential fields in literary history [5].

In conclusion, the development of English children's literature reflects a long and dynamic process of transformation that mirrors broader historical, cultural, and educational changes in English society. From its early didactic and religious foundations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the imaginative and diversified narratives of the modern and contemporary periods, children's

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literature has continuously evolved in both form and function. Initially, its primary purpose was moral instruction and the promotion of religious and social values; however, over time, it gradually incorporated elements of imagination, creativity, and entertainment.

The nineteenth century marked a significant turning point with the emergence of fantasy literature and the recognition of childhood as a unique and valuable stage of human development. The “Golden Age” of children’s literature further strengthened the genre by introducing rich storytelling, emotional depth, and child-centered narratives. In the twentieth century, authors expanded the boundaries of the genre by addressing more complex psychological, social, and moral issues, while also challenging traditional authority structures. In the contemporary period, English children’s literature has become a global phenomenon characterized by diversity, innovation, and digital transformation. Overall, English children’s literature demonstrates how literary production is closely connected to changing perceptions of childhood, education, and society. It remains a powerful cultural tool that not only entertains but also educates, shapes identity, and fosters imagination in young readers.

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