

THE LITERARY CONSTRUCTION OF CHILDHOOD IN CLASSICAL AND MODERN ENGLISH NOVELLAS

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Abstract: This paper examines the evolving portrayal of childhood in English novellas, contrasting representations in classical and modern periods. Through an analysis of key literary works, it explores how societal shifts, evolving understandings of child development, and changing narrative techniques have shaped the depiction of children. The study analyzes themes such as innocence, vulnerability, agency, and the impact of societal structures on childhood experiences. By comparing and contrasting these representations, this research aims to illuminate the changing cultural perspectives on children and their place within the literary landscape.

Keywords: Childhood, English Novella, Classical Literature, Modern Literature, Representation, Innocence, Vulnerability, Agency, Societal Structures.

1. Introduction:

The image of a child in literature serves as a powerful lens through which to understand societal values, anxieties, and aspirations. Over time, the depiction of childhood has undergone significant transformations, reflecting evolving cultural understandings of child development, family dynamics, and the role of children within society. This paper focuses on the representation of children in English novellas, a literary form that, due to its length and focus, often allows for a more concentrated and nuanced exploration of character and theme. By examining both classical and modern English novellas, we can trace the shifting perspectives on childhood and the factors that have influenced these portrayals. Classical English novellas, often written during periods of significant social and economic change, frequently presented children within specific societal frameworks, often emphasizing their innocence, vulnerability, and dependence on adult figures. These narratives often reflected prevailing religious and moral beliefs, shaping how childhood was perceived and depicted. In contrast, modern English novellas, influenced by advancements in psychology, changing family structures, and a greater awareness of children's rights, tend to offer more complex and multifaceted portrayals of childhood, exploring themes of agency, resilience, and the impact of societal pressures on young lives.

This study aims to analyze key examples of English novellas from both periods, identifying recurring themes and contrasting representations of children. We will explore how narrative techniques, characterization, and the broader socio-historical context contribute to the distinct portrayals of childhood in these literary works. By undertaking this comparative analysis, we seek to understand the evolution of cultural perceptions of children and the enduring significance of childhood within the literary imagination.

2. Literature Review:

The study of childhood in literature is a well-established field, with numerous scholars exploring the historical and cultural shifts in how children have been represented. Early critical works often focused on the didactic and moralistic portrayals of children in literature, particularly during the Victorian era. Studies by Aries (1962), in his seminal work *Centuries of Childhood*, provided a foundational understanding of the historical construction of childhood as a distinct social category. Aries argued that the concept of childhood as a separate and protected stage of life emerged relatively late in history, influencing how children were perceived and depicted in literature. Later scholarship, such as that by Pollock (1983) in *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900*, further explored the historical realities of childhood, highlighting the often harsh conditions and lack of specific protection afforded to children in earlier periods. These historical perspectives provide a crucial context for understanding the representations of children in classical English novellas. In the realm of literary analysis, critics have examined the specific ways in which children are used as symbolic figures and narrative devices. Works by Jackson (1985), in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, discuss how children often represent innocence and vulnerability, serving as catalysts for moral exploration and social commentary. Rose (1984), in *The Case of Peter Pan: The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, explores the complexities of portraying childhood in literature, highlighting the tension between idealized notions and the realities of growing up. More recent scholarship has focused on the agency and subjectivity of children in literature, moving beyond simplistic portrayals of innocence and dependence. Studies by West (2000), in *Children's Literature and Culture*, examine how children's literature, including novellas, can reflect and shape children's own understandings of the world and their place within it. Nikolajeva (2005), in *The Rhetoric of Children's Literature*, analyzes the narrative strategies employed in children's literature and how they construct different representations of childhood. This paper draws upon these existing scholarly perspectives to analyze the specific representations of children in a selection of classical and modern English novellas, focusing on how these works reflect and challenge prevailing cultural understandings of childhood.

3. Methodology:

This study employs a comparative textual analysis of selected English novellas from both classical and modern periods. The selection of novellas will be based on their critical acclaim, their focus on child characters, and their representative nature of the respective literary periods.

Classical Novella Examples (to be analyzed):

Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843): This novella features several child characters, including Tiny Tim, whose vulnerability and innocence are central to the narrative's moral message.

Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898): This gothic novella presents the children, Flora and Miles, as enigmatic figures whose innocence is questioned and potentially corrupted by supernatural forces.

Modern Novella Examples (to be analyzed):

William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954): This novella explores the descent into savagery of a group of stranded schoolboys, offering a stark portrayal of the potential for loss of innocence.

Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden* (1978): This novella presents a more complex and unsettling portrayal of childhood, exploring themes of isolation, grief, and the blurring boundaries between childhood and adulthood.

The analysis will involve close reading of these texts, focusing on the following aspects:

Characterization: How are the child characters portrayed? What are their personalities, motivations, and relationships with adult figures?

Themes: What are the central themes related to childhood explored in each novella? Are themes of innocence, vulnerability, agency, or societal impact prominent?

Narrative Perspective: How does the narrative perspective shape the reader's understanding of the child characters and their experiences?

Symbolism: What symbolic significance do the child characters hold within the narrative?

Societal Context: How do the novellas reflect the social and cultural attitudes towards children prevalent during their respective periods?

By comparing and contrasting these aspects across the selected novellas, this study aims to identify the key differences and similarities in the representation of childhood in classical and modern English literature.

4. Analysis and Discussion:

In classical English novellas, children often serve as symbols of innocence, purity, and vulnerability. In Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Tiny Tim embodies the fragility of childhood and becomes a catalyst for Scrooge's transformation. His illness and dependence highlight the social inequalities and the importance of compassion. The narrative emphasizes the need for adult responsibility and care for vulnerable children. The children in this novella are largely presented as passive recipients of adult actions and benevolence. In contrast, the children in James' *The Turn of the Screw* are more ambiguous and unsettling figures. Flora and Miles are initially presented as innocent and charming, but their behavior and the governess's perception of them become increasingly distorted by the supernatural elements of the story. Their innocence is questioned, and they are portrayed as potentially corrupted by unseen forces. This novella explores the anxieties surrounding the protection and influence of children, suggesting a more complex and potentially darker view of childhood. Modern English novellas often present a more nuanced and less idealized view of childhood. In Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, the children are stripped of adult supervision and their inherent "innocence" quickly deteriorates as they succumb to primal instincts and social hierarchies. This novella challenges the romantic notion of childhood innocence, suggesting that societal structures and innate human tendencies play a significant role in shaping behavior. The children in this narrative exhibit agency, albeit in a destructive manner, highlighting the potential for both good and evil within young individuals. McEwan's *The Cement Garden* offers a stark and often disturbing portrayal of childhood in a world devoid of parental guidance. The children in this novella are forced to take on adult responsibilities and navigate a complex and emotionally challenging environment. Their experiences highlight the impact of trauma and the blurring boundaries between childhood and adulthood. The novella explores themes of isolation, secrecy, and the psychological impact of neglect on young lives, presenting a more realistic and less sentimental view of childhood. The comparison reveals a significant shift in the portrayal of childhood. Classical novellas often utilized children to evoke sympathy, moral reflection, and to represent societal values. Their innocence was often presented as a precious and fragile state that needed protection. In contrast, modern novellas tend to explore the complexities of childhood, acknowledging the potential for both innocence and darkness, agency and vulnerability. They often delve into the psychological realities of childhood, exploring the impact of societal pressures, trauma, and the absence of adult guidance. The narrative techniques also differ. Classical novellas often employ a more direct and moralistic tone, while modern novellas tend to utilize more ambiguous and psychological approaches, reflecting a greater understanding of the complexities of human experience, including that of children.

5. Conclusion:

The representation of children in English novellas has undergone a significant evolution from the classical to the modern period. Classical novellas often presented children as symbols of innocence and vulnerability, emphasizing the need for adult protection and moral guidance. These portrayals reflected prevailing societal values and religious beliefs. Modern novellas, however, offer a more complex and multifaceted view of childhood. Influenced by advancements

in psychology and a changing social landscape, these narratives explore themes of agency, resilience, and the potential for both innocence and darkness within young individuals. They delve into the psychological realities of childhood, often highlighting the impact of societal pressures and the absence of adult support. By examining these contrasting representations, we gain a deeper understanding of the evolving cultural perspectives on childhood and the enduring power of this stage of life within the literary imagination. The novella form, with its focused narrative and exploration of character, provides a particularly effective medium for capturing these shifts and offering nuanced insights into the ever-changing image of the child.

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