

Childhood in English literature

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Abstract: Some writers maintain that children literature differs from adult literature in degree of "kind", that is, that the word literature when used in the context of children literature cannot necessarily be related in any straightforward way to the word literature as used in other contexts. That purpose is sometimes seen in terms of both information and entertainment; sometimes, however, entertainment alone is the critical definitional feature, the emphasis generally being on works belonging to the narrative genre. Less often, definitions that relate primarily to purpose focus on empathy, children literature being classified as literature that is designed to help children to understand, and emphasize with, the world views and experiences of others, including other children. Even though children literacy was hardly universal during the Romantic period, more and more children were learning to read and, beginning at the end of the eighteenth century, children literature began to develop. While many twentieth-century children texts explored the lives of older children, most critics point to Maureen Dalys "Seventeenth Summer" and J. D. Salingers "The Catcher in the Rye" as the beginning of adolescent literature as a genre separate from children literature. Despite the recent trend of categorizing children literature by age, an increasing number of adults have begun reading children books, blurring the boundaries between children and adult texts

Keywords: children, Literature, World views, categorizing.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today it is difficult to imagine the book industry without its huge output of children books. The mass production of children books is taken for granted as a prominent and indispensable part of publishing activity, and also it's difficult to trace the origin of the first children's story. Because many cultures viewed children as people already on their way to adulthood, they didn't perceive childhood as its own sacred time that they should value for its experience; rather, it was about preparation. Prior to the mid-19th century, children stories consisted mainly of moral principles and/or realistic perspectives of the world.

One early form of literature children had access to the chapbook, a small, saddle-stapled book that usually included a fairy tale, poems, and almanacs. This type of book was also much more affordable for the common layperson. The first tales of Jack, the giant, and the beanstalk were printed in this fashion in the late 18th century. Interestingly, when we look at past we can see that the popularity and production level of children literature were directly proportional to the development of philosophies and/or theories about children and childhood.

The 19th century is considered the golden age of the genre, so society grew to respect childhood more, which can be partially attributed to the growing middle class and the amenities the Industrial Revolution provided, children literature absolutely blossomed! Writers such as Lewis Carroll and his Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Robert Louis Stevenson and his Treasure Island, and Mark Twain and his Huckleberry Finn moved away from the strict moralism of earlier productions and turned instead to writing imaginative pieces to entertain. Notably, though, the literature of this period did still reinforce stereotypical gender roles. For instance, we see in Little Women by Louisa May Alcott a heroine who, while embracing her independence briefly, does still marry and grow into a submissive wife.

Today, however, children literature is more expansive and diverse than at any other time throughout history. Changes in technology and even more modern amenities and luxuries have birthed a greater level of entertainment. We now have children literature that encompasses many genres in and of itself, from historical fiction to fantasy to science fiction.

2. DEFINING CHILDREN LITERATURE

Childhood is an ancient word in English, not a young one. The *Oxford English Dictionary* takes as its earliest example for “cildhad” an English gloss inserted during the tenth century between the lines of the Lindisfarne Gospels. The meaning expressed there appears consistent with the most literal strand of our contemporary usage: this passage from the Gospel of Mark employs childhood as a temporal marker: a father explains to Jesus that his son had been wracked by fits since the earliest years of his life. The miraculous cure Jesus performs stands as a test of belief and a compelling instance of power of prayer. The gathered crowd the disciples and generations of interpreters since have voiced many questions about the scene and what it means, but no one questions the meaning of childhood. This apparent clarity- the confident unanimity over the implications and significance of “childhood”- is perhaps the most potent and indeed dangerous, thing about the keyword. We have, it seems, a miraculous faith in childhood itself. ⁽¹¹⁾

-“Children literature” is a term used to describe both a set of texts and an academic discipline – and it is often regarded as an oxymoron if children commonly connotes immaturity and literature commonly connotes sophistication in text and reading, then the two terms may seem to be incompatible. Henry James in “The future of novel” observed that the literature as it may be called for convenience of children is an industry but not one to be taken seriously. The sort of taste that used to be called good has nothing to do with the matter we are demonstrably in the presence of millions for whom taste is but an obscure, confused, immediate instinct. ⁽¹²⁾

Before the nineteenth century, very few books were especially written for children. Since then, changing attitudes towards childhood and children's development, along with the increased sophistication of print technology, have led to the development of children literature as a major industry. There is, however, no simple, straightforward definition of children literature that can be applied with equal validity at different times and in different contexts. Just as concepts of ‘child’, ‘childhood’ and ‘literature’ have changed over time, so too have definitions of ‘children literature’. ⁽¹³⁾

It is not a simple matter to define ‘childhood’ or ‘literature’. Some writers maintain that children literature differs from adult literature in degree only maintain that it differs in kind, that is, that the word ‘literature’ when used in the context of ‘children literature’ cannot necessarily be related in any straightforward way to the word ‘literature’ as used in other contexts. Thus, for example, Bottigheimer argues that children literature is “an important system of its own”. To complicate matters further, there are those who maintain that to be included in the category of ‘children literature’, writing must be of ‘good quality’. Thus, for example, Hillman would exclude from the category of ‘children literature’. ⁽¹⁴⁾

Writing, that is “stodgy”, “too predictable” or “too illogical.” Precisely how one determines whether a work meets these extremely vague criteria largely remains an open question.

Definitions of children literature can be assigned to three broad categories (intended audience; purpose; style/quality), the second of which includes three sub-categories (entertainment; entertainment and information; empathy).

Although, in terms of overall emphasis, the majority of definitions fall into one of these categories and sub-categories, some include aspects of more than one of them.

The most commonly occurring contemporary definition of children literature is one that focuses on intended audience. For many writers, children literature is simply a body of texts that is intended for a particular readership, that is, children, children being defined loosely in terms of a range of socio-cultural and individual characteristics

Also common are definitions of children literature that focus on purpose. That purpose is sometimes seen in terms of both information and entertainment; sometimes, however, entertainment alone is the critical definitional feature, the emphasis generally being on works belonging to the narrative genre. Less often, definitions that relate primarily to purpose focus on empathy, children literature being classified as literature that is designed to help children to understand, and emphasize with, the world views and experiences of others, including other children

Finally, there are those who believe that children literature should be defined in terms of style and quality ⁽¹⁵⁾

3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1960, Philippe Ariès advanced the hypothesis that the idea of childhood was practically inexistent before the early modern period. The controversy about the existence or absence of the idea prior to that time in history gave rise to a host of studies on childhood. But what does the word “childhood” mean? Our awareness that it refers to a distinct period of

human life is natural but how do we determine its duration? How long does childhood last? Many psychologists and Children Studies specialists have emitted an opinion on the subject and they have come to the conclusion that “childhood” is a complex term. All have agreed that it refers to a set of experiences and behaviors, characteristic for the earlier part of our lives, meant to prepare us for adulthood and active life. As to its duration, both individual differences and differences over a historical time span should be taken into account. In this sense, childhood is defined in opposition to maturity and adulthood – one is no longer a child when one becomes an adult. However, this opposition has not sufficed and the multiplication of research and critical writing on the subject is telling. The common denominator of many studies on childhood is the attempt to grasp its essence, to define the experience of being a child and to explain the nature of children. One of the most important conclusions these studies have drawn is that our notions of childhood have changed. They have been adapted to the changes in our society and to our conceptions of what a child should be. Thus, the ideas about childhood during the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries evolved continually. Writing and literature tell us more about this evolution. ⁽⁶⁾

Childhood has for long been one of the central themes of English literature. Children were the subject of a great number of Elizabethan lyrics and we can find them in the work of Dryden and Pope. However, as a truly substantial and self-sustainable theme, childhood arose with the novel. Its importance gradually increased through the 18th century. Later on, the theme developed and matured, and we can easily find its numerous ramifications in the literatures of the 19th as well as the 20th centuries. Today, childhood is seen as essential for the critical understanding of the literary production of the 19th century and the Victorian period. In addition, the 19th and 20th centuries saw the steady emergence of a real literature for children, either for their instruction or entertainment. Thus, the child became either the central subject and/or object of a plethora of writings since the 18th century. These reflected the dichotomy of childhood which was seen as a symbol of growth and development on the one hand and as a symbol of regression and ignorance of the world on the other. ⁽⁷⁾

Early writing for children:

This was new. At the beginning of the century very few such enjoyable books for children had existed. Children read, certainly, but the books that they probably enjoyed reading (or hearing) most, were not designed especially for them. Fables were available, and fairy stories, lengthy chivalric romances, and short, affordable pamphlet tales and ballads called chapbooks, but these were published for children and adults alike. Take Nathaniel Crouch’s *Winter-Evenings Entertainments* (1687). It contains riddles, pictures, and ‘pleasant and delightful relations of many rare and notable accidents and occurrences’ which has suggested to some that it should be thought of as an early children book. However, its title-page insists that it is ‘excellently accommodated to the fancies of old or young’. ⁽⁸⁾

Meanwhile, the books that were published especially for children before the mid-18th century were almost always remorselessly instructional (spelling books, school books, conduct books) or deeply pious. Yet just because a book seems dull or disciplinary to us today, this doesn’t mean that children at the time didn’t enjoy it. Godly books of the sort produced from the 1670s by Puritans like John Bunyan are a case in point. James Janeway’s *A Token for Children* (1671-72) gives what its subtitle describes as ‘an Exact Account of the Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives and Joyful Deaths of Several Young Children’. These children lie on their deathbeds, giving accounts of the sins too often committed by children – idleness, disobedience, inattention to lessons, boisterousness, neglecting the Sabbath – but tell those assembled round them that salvation awaits all who renounce such wickedness, and they explain how happy they are to be going to their eternal reward. Hardly fun, we might think, yet memoirs and letters, as well as continuing sales over more than a century, testify to young readers’ genuine enjoyment of these descriptions of heroic and confident, if doomed children. ⁽⁹⁾

Romanticism and the Child:

The figure of the child prompted poetry, prose, and political debate during the Romantic period. This debate occurred because society reconsidered what it meant to be a child. Before the nineteenth century, children were seldom viewed as having an identity separate from adults; instead, they were miniature adults, not much different from their parents. ⁽¹⁰⁾

In contrast to Enlightenment thinkers, Jean-Jaques Rousseau recognized the child as its own entity. Rousseau’s unique characterization of the child led to discussion surrounding the way children were raised and the manner in which they developed into adults. The material conditions of children’s lives changed, specifically in terms of education and early

employment, as definitions of children and childhood shifted. With a much shorter life expectancy in the nineteenth century, diseases as well as maternal deaths following childbirth left many children orphans. As an abandoned child at the mercy of rapidly changing social and economic systems, the orphan became an important literary and political figure as contemporary politicians and public reformers struggled to care for these children left without support.⁽¹¹¹⁾

Even families with both parents living might still have to fight in order to survive, and with the onset of the Industrial Revolution, the working-class's children were often sent to work at an early age in factories and workshops, depending on the region in which their families lived, whereas in earlier periods they would have done mostly agricultural work. The mechanized nature of factory work and its long hours led people to question if it was endangering children's health. Middle-class and upper-class children lived very differently from those of the working class and were often primarily raised by a governess, a figure who would inspire literary depictions as well as social anxiety, and who would educate children and teach them how to behave. Working-class children would have received their education from various types of informal schools since they did not have a governess. However, because schooling was not legally mandated, not all children were educated.

Even though children's literacy was hardly universal during the Romantic period, more and more children were learning to read and, beginning at the end of the eighteenth century, children literature began to develop. Although literature written for children was coming into its own, literature about children was also equally important. Ideas of the child influenced adult literature in the way poets such as William Blake in "Songs of Innocence and Experience" and William Wordsworth in "Intimations on Immortality" portray children for adult readers. British Romantics often figured children in adult literature and poetry because of ideas about the child's closeness to nature. The child, some Romantic poets believed, had access to a unique worldview, precisely because a child has not yet rationalized and assimilated the workings of society the way an adult has. The literary and political influence of Romanticism retains its potency even today as it still colors our perceptions of children.⁽¹²⁾

Post World War II:

Among the many side-effects of World War II were changes in the representation of childhood in British literature. During the period between 1945 and the mid-1970s, this was reflected both in children literature itself and in the portrayal of pre-adolescent children in books anticipating an adult readership. As more information came out of continental Europe about the horrors of the concentration camps, and relief agencies sought to alleviate the hardship resulting from the devastation of so many cities, there was a universal resolve that carnage like this, which had claimed so many innocent victims, especially young children, must never happen again. Although Britain had not suffered the horrors of enemy occupation, the bomb damage, loss of life, and revelations about atrocities, led politicians, humanitarians, and ordinary people to a consciousness of the depth and scale of human suffering and the potential for disaster that faced the human race, particularly in the aftermath of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan. Coupled with stringent post-war austerity (which led people to feel that the war was not yet properly over) and increased tension in Europe between Russia and the West, these factors meant that there was also in some quarters a nostalgia for more care-free times, a feature also reflected in some children literature.⁽¹³⁾

To avoid anything similar happening again, particularly given the short interval that there had been between two world wars, there needed to be a new spirit. Where else could this be engendered but in the child? Even before the end of the war, the passing of the 1944 Education Act had signaled an awareness that justice demanded the provision of opportunities for all children, something that would also widen the pool of human talent available to society at large. In the 1945 General Election, many voters, especially the returning members of the armed forces, were swayed by idealism in their hopes for a new and fairer society; this spirit resulted in the election of a Labour Government which vowed to enact change, especially in education and health services. That literature could be one of the agents of that change seems to have been a sentiment felt, perhaps subconsciously, by many of the writers of the period.

Light on the way in which those concerned with children literature felt about it being a redemptive force is provided, in a European context, by the work of Jella Lepman, who founded the International Children Library in 1946 and the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) in 1952. She was motivated by her hope, after she had witnessed the ravages of war, that literature could help bring children together and save the world from a repetition of its horrors – a desire voiced in the title of her book, *A Bridge of Children Books* (1964), and shared by many British writers.⁽¹⁴⁾

Characteristics relating to the contemporary situation can be detected in several significant literary texts of the post-war period, which is taken here to cover the years from the end of the war until the early 1970s. These aspects may take the form of nostalgia for the past, when values seemed more secure, or a hope for the future personified in the innocence of a child character, an innocence however sometimes betrayed by the adults in whom these children have placed their trust. This belief in the innocence and potential redemptive capacity of the child almost assumes mythical status, reminiscent of the Rousseau-esque belief that has pervaded much of both writing for children and writing about children literature. As Stephen Thomson claims about much of this writing: ‘The child offers up the promise of an ineradicable core: the good, simple, true voice, that will resist the clutter of society, neutralize its more harmful effects’ Never could such a ‘core’ have seemed more desirable. The increasing tendency to widen the portrayal of society to include characters from a working-class background that had until now seldom been main protagonists in British children literature could also be deemed to arise from a similar impulse.⁽¹⁵⁾

Children in Postmodern Literature:

In specific examples of postmodern text and stories, we can see this deconstruction of the standard idea of childhood as a happy age of bliss, in which the authors impose adult emotions and understandings of the world around them in their child characters. Many of these depictions are disturbing in their treatment of children and incorporate these children existing in adult worlds and dealing with adult issues. As a result, these depictions become an effective literary tool in the sense that they add an element of shock value to the stories that catch and hold the reader’s attention. Although themes such as violence, vulgarity, and sexuality often times are over-exaggerated and exploited in these stories featuring child characters, it begs the question of whether there is an element of truth in these stories through the ways children may have to deal more and more with the adult world today. Is the boundary and gap between children and adults in our society decreasing? And if so, then does postmodern literature exploit their child characters in their attempt to send adult messages through them? Or, are they reconstructing an idea of childhood that attempts to reflect the darker aspects of it— an aspect that may exist today, seemingly hidden behind the standard happy-go-lucky, ideals? By exploring these questions, the child’s symbolic power also becomes important through the way it change to fit the needs of the adults of that time. Within postmodern literature, we can see this symbolic power of the child changing in their use as agents of messages and catalysts of adult emotions, often responsible for sending heavy, politicized messages. It is within this use of the child to convey the messages of an adult that we can see the child becoming more intertwined within the adult world in postmodern literature and the distinction between child and adult slowly dissolving.⁽¹⁶⁾

Looking at the ways postmodern literature subverts the standard idea of childhood, changing the symbolic power of the child, we can see how often times the child character embodies adult emotions and understandings of his or her surroundings. In the story “Zami: A New Spelling of My Name,” found in the text *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology*, Audre Lorde writes of her memory of herself as a four year-old child, and her longing for a companion in the form of another little girl.

The beginning of the story is filled with seemingly innocent events that emphasize the childishness of her character, such as her hopes for a younger sister, her attempts at bartering in prayer for a little companion: “no matter what I promised God in return...”, and her superstitions that she believed would bring her a sister “I had decided that if I could step on all the horizontal lines for one day, my little person would appear like a dream, It is in these small, intimate beliefs of the child where we can see Lorde attempting to appeal to us as readers, as many of these innocent events are things that perhaps we too can relate to when we think back to our childhoods.⁽¹⁷⁾

Contemporary Children Literature:

Twentieth-century children literature was marked by increased diversity in both characters and authors. Earlier popular children books—such as Joel Chandler Harris’s *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings* (1880); Helen Bannerman’s *The Story of Little Black Sambo* (1899); Hugh Lofting’s *The Story of Dr. Dolittle* (1920); Jean de Brunhoff’s *Histoire de Babar, le petit éléphant* (1931), translated by Merle Haas from the French as *The Story of Babar, The Little Elephant* (1933); and Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964)—have since been judged racist. Most children literature prior to the twentieth century embodied a white ideology that was reflected in both the text and illustrations. From the 1920s on, there have been attempts to provide a more multicultural approach to children literature. W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Brownies Book* (1920–1921) was the first African-American children magazine. It featured stories, poems, and informational essays by authors such as Langston Hughes and Jessie Fauset. Over time

publishers became more concerned with multiculturalism and issues of diversity. Notable African-American writers—such as Arna Bontemps, Lucille Clifton, Mildred Taylor, Virginia Hamilton, and John Steptoe—and Asian-American writers—including Laurence Yep, Allen Say, and Ken Mochizuki—have forever changed the once all-white world of children literature.

On the other hand, children literature has become more segmented in terms of age appropriateness. In the 1940s Margaret Wise Brown, inspired by the education theories of Lucy Sprague Mitchell, the founder of the Bank Street College of Education, began to produce picture books intended for children under age six. Brown's best-known picture books for the very young are; *The Runaway Bunny* (1941) and *Goodnight Moon* (1947), both illustrated by Clement Hurd. Mitchell also promoted stories that reflected the real world in collections such as her *Here and Now Storybook* (1921). This newfound interest in age-specific material led to the creation of the widely used Dick and Jane readers (1930–1965) developed by William S. Gray and Zerna Sharp and distributed by Scott Foreman and Company. Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat* (1957) was written as a creative alternative to such basal readers, although it was also designed as a controlled vocabulary book.

While Lothar Meggendorfer developed the movable picture book at the end of the nineteenth century with tabs and pullouts, pop-up books, shaped books, and tactile books did not achieve widespread popularity until the twentieth century. The best known of these books is Dorothy Kunhardt's interactive *Pat the Bunny* (1940). More contemporary texts, such as Jan Pienkowski's pop-up books *Haunted House* (1979) and *Robot* (1981), blur the distinctions between book and toy. Board books are available for infants and toddlers; some of the most imaginative are the series of Rosemary Wells's Max books, beginning with *Max's Ride* (1979), which provide compelling stories for preschoolers.⁽¹⁸⁾

While many twentieth-century children's texts appealed to and explored the lives of older children, most critics point to Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer* (1942) and J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) as the beginning of adolescent literature as a genre separate from children literature. More recently, middle school literature has emerged as a distinctive category. Texts such as Beverly Cleary's Ramona series, which began with *Beezus and Ramona* (1955), Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy* (1964), and Judy Blume's problem novels, such as *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* (1970), have attracted readers too old for picture books but not ready for the adolescent novel.⁽¹⁹⁾

Series books remain a larger, but contested, segment of children literature. Books that follow the same set of characters or repeat an established formula have been an important part of children literature since the nineteenth century with the publication of Horatio Alger's novels, which feature plucky boys who go from rags to riches, or Martha Finley's series on the pious but popular Elsie Dinsmore. Early in the twentieth century Edward Stratemeyer's syndicate of anonymous writers wrote books for multiple series under various pseudonyms, including the Nancy Drew series as Carolyn Keene, the Hardy Boys series as Franklin W. Dixon, and the Tom Swift series as Victor Appleton. While librarians and critics have tended to dismiss the repetitive nature of series books, some series books—such as Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series, begun with *Little House in the Big Woods* (1932), and C. S. Lewis's collection *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–1956), which started with *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950)—have been recognized as outstanding works of literature. Nonetheless, most series fiction—such as L. Frank Baum's *Oz* series, begun with *Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900); R. L. Stine's *Goosebumps* series, begun with *Welcome to the Dead House* (1992); and Anne Martin's *Baby-Sitters Club* series, begun with *Kristy's Great Idea* (1986)—have been embraced by older children but generally dismissed by adults and critics as insubstantial.

Media adaptation of children books as films or as television series has become an increasingly important aspect of children literature. Popular television series have been based on books such as Wilder's *Little House* series and Marc Brown's *Arthur Adventure* series, begun with *Arthur's Nose* (1976). Walt Disney has dominated the field of film adaptation of children's texts into cinema, beginning with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), the first feature-length animated film. Best known for animated films based on fairy tales, Disney has produced a number of live-action films, such as *Mary Poppins* (1964), based on P. L. Travers's *Mary Poppins* (1934), as well as animated features based on Carlo Collodi's *Le avventure di Pinocchio* (1882) and T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone* (1939). As is the case with Victor Fleming's film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), based on L. Frank Baum's 1900 novel, or Alfonso Cuarón's film *A Little Princess* (1995), based on Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1905 novel, film adaptations often change, if not revise, the original text. This complicates the meaning of a children's text when children are more familiar with a text through viewing a media adaptation than through reading the book.

Since the 1960s, an increasing number of well-designed picture books have been produced. Such book illustrators as Maurice Sendak with *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), Chris Van Allsburg with *Jumanji* (1981), and Anthony Browne with *Gorilla* (1983) have created highly imaginative picture books. Talented graphic designers—such as Eric Carle with *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1969), Leo Lionni with *Swimmy* (1963), and Lois Ehlert with *Color Zoo* (1989)—have provided bold new approaches to creating picture books. .⁽¹²⁰⁾

Despite the recent trend of categorizing children literature by age, an increasing number of adults have begun reading children books, blurring the boundaries between children and adult texts. J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, begun with *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1997), has wide appeal with both child and adult readers. Francesca Lia Block's postmodern fairy tales, such as *Weetzie Bat* (1989), and the darkly ironic *A Series of Unfortunate Events* series by Lemony Snicket, which began with *The Bad Beginning* (1999), both have strong adult readership. Picture books have always been a showcase for designers and illustrators to display their talents. Increasingly sophisticated picture books—such as David Maccaulay's *Black and White* (1990) or the postmodern revisions of fairy tales written by Jon Scieszka and illustrated by Lane Smith in *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Fairy Tales* (1992)—appeal as much to adults as to children. Contemporary children literature continues to be a highly innovative and challenging field. As children literature has become an increasingly financially profitable business, more successful writers who have first established themselves as writers for adults, such as Carl Hiassen (*Hoot*, 2002) and Michael Chabon (*Summerland*, 2002), are choosing to write for children.⁽¹²¹⁾

4. CONCLUSION

Although the 19th century is considered the golden age of the children literature, so society grew to respect childhood more, which can be partially attributed to the growing middle class and the amenities the Industrial Revolution provided but Today, however, children literature is more expansive and diverse than at any other time throughout history.

The most commonly occurring contemporary definition of children literature is one that focuses on intended audience. For many writers, children literature is simply a body of texts that is intended for a particular readership that is children.

Children being defined loosely in terms of a range of socio-cultural and individual characteristics, Also common are definitions of children literature that focus on purpose. That purpose is sometimes seen in terms of both information and entertainment.

Childhood has for long been one of the central themes of English literature, Children were the subject of a great number of Elizabethan lyrics and we can find them in the work of Dryden and Pope.

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The figure of the child prompted poetry, prose, and political debate during the Romantic period. This debate occurred because society reconsidered what it meant to be a child. Before the nineteenth century, children were seldom viewed as having an identity separate from adults; instead, they were miniature adults, not much different from their parents.

Among the many side-effects of World War II were changes in the representation of childhood in British literature. During the period between 1945 and the mid-1970s, this was reflected both in children literature itself and in the portrayal of pre-adolescent children in books anticipating an adult readership.

Within postmodern literature, we can see symbolic power of the child changing in their use as agents of messages and catalysts of adult emotions, often responsible for sending heavy, politicized messages. It is within this use of the child to convey the messages of an adult that we can see the child becoming more intertwined within the adult world in postmodern literature and the distinction between child and adult slowly dissolving

In contemporary Children Literature, publishers became more concerned with multiculturalism and issues of diversity, and children literature has become more segmented in terms of age appropriateness

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