

## **THE MAIN GENRES OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE HISTORICAL AND LITERARY PROCESS OF ENGLAND IN THE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES**

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**Annotation:** This article explores the main genres of children's literature in England during the 19th and early 20th centuries. It examines how these genres evolved in response to the historical, cultural, and social transformations of the period, including the impact of the Industrial Revolution, the rise of the middle class, and the shifting perceptions of childhood. Key genres discussed include fairy tales and fantasy, animal stories, adventure literature, moral and didactic fiction, and realistic fiction. The article also highlights the role of illustrations in making children's books more engaging and accessible. Through detailed analysis, it shows how these genres not only entertained but also served as tools for moral and educational instruction, shaping young readers' imaginations and values.

**Keywords:** children's literature, 19th century, early 20th century, England, historical context, fairy tales, fantasy, animal stories, adventure literature, moral instruction, didactic fiction, realistic fiction, illustrations, Victorian era, moral lessons, education, social change, childhood, fantasy literature, literary genres, British Empire, childhood development.

### **Introduction**

Children's literature in England underwent significant transformation during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The period marked a major shift in how children's books were written, reflecting changes in society, education, and attitudes toward childhood itself. The genres that emerged during this time were influenced by the historical, social, and cultural currents of the period, which included the rise of the Victorian middle class, the expansion of the British Empire, and the philosophical debates surrounding childhood education and moral development. This article will explore the primary genres of children's literature that defined the era, examining their development, key authors, and the societal roles they played.

### **Historical Context of Children's Literature in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries**

The 19th century was a period of profound change in England, not least due to the Industrial Revolution. As the country became more industrialized, social and economic shifts led to changes in how childhood was viewed. In pre-industrial times, children were often seen as miniature adults who contributed to the household through work. However, with urbanization, the idea of childhood as a special, formative time for education and growth took hold. This transformation gave rise to a growing market for children's literature that was both entertaining and instructive.

Education reformers, such as Hannah More and Maria Edgeworth, championed the development of literature specifically for children. Their works combined entertainment with moral and educational content, setting the foundation for future children's books. Meanwhile, Victorian society, with its strong moralistic tone, sought to instill values like duty, discipline, and respect for authority. In this context, children's literature became a tool for molding the character of young readers, while also providing them with stories that nurtured imagination and creativity.

### **Fairy Tales and Fantasy**

Fairy tales and fantasy stories for children gained significant popularity in the 19th century. While fairy tales had existed for centuries in various cultures, they became a distinct genre in England, largely through the influence of European traditions, especially those of the Brothers Grimm. Their fairy tales, though German in origin, were widely circulated in England through translations. These tales, often featuring magical elements, moral lessons, and fantastical creatures, provided children with a window into worlds far removed from their own.

One of the most influential authors in the genre was George MacDonald, whose *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) blended elements of traditional fairy tales with a unique narrative style that integrated fantasy with moral instruction. Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) further pushed the boundaries of the genre, introducing children to a nonsensical world full of whimsy and paradox. Carroll's exploration of themes such as identity, growth, and logic had a lasting impact on how fantasy literature for children was viewed and appreciated.

Fairy tales and fantasy stories provided children with opportunities to explore complex themes in an accessible way. Through magical worlds and adventures, young readers were able to confront moral dilemmas and psychological growth, all within the safe confines of fiction.

### **Animal Stories**

The 19th century also saw a rise in animal stories, where anthropomorphized animals acted as main characters, often teaching children valuable life lessons. This genre proved especially popular because it combined the innocence and appeal of animals with the moral structure of children's literature.

Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902) is one of the most iconic works in this genre, featuring a mischievous rabbit whose adventures teach children about the consequences of disobedience. Similarly, Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) is a more elaborate and whimsical animal story, offering a deeper exploration of friendship, social responsibility, and adventure through its cast of animal characters. These stories were particularly effective in encouraging empathy and a sense of morality in young readers by allowing them to view human-like qualities in animals.

Animal stories also allowed for an engaging exploration of nature and the environment, as well as providing a comforting and relatable lens through which children could view the world.

### **Adventure and Exploration**

As the British Empire expanded and exploration became more prominent in the national consciousness, adventure stories for children began to flourish. These tales often centered on distant, exotic lands and featured daring characters who embarked on journeys of discovery, heroism, and survival. The genre of adventure literature captured the spirit of imperialism and exploration, appealing to children's sense of adventure and curiosity.

Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) remains one of the most famous adventure stories for children, offering tales of pirates, treasure maps, and swashbuckling heroes. Similarly, R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1857) presented a romanticized vision of life on a remote island, complete with encounters with indigenous people and the challenges of survival. These stories were important in shaping children's understanding of the world and their place in it, as well as reinforcing values such as bravery, teamwork, and resourcefulness.

Adventure stories were a way for children to vicariously experience the dangers and excitement of the world beyond their immediate surroundings, all while imparting moral lessons about courage, loyalty, and perseverance.

#### **Moral and Didactic Literature**

The Victorian period was heavily marked by its emphasis on moral instruction, and this philosophy found expression in the growing genre of didactic children's literature. These books were created with the intent of teaching children the values of good behavior, proper manners, and respect for authority.

One prominent author of this genre was Charlotte M. Yonge, whose *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853) combined an engaging narrative with strong moral lessons on duty and responsibility. Similarly, Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857) depicted the experiences of a young boy at a boarding school, highlighting themes of friendship, discipline, and social responsibility. Didactic literature aimed to guide children toward proper conduct by presenting characters who faced moral dilemmas and were rewarded for making virtuous choices.

These works also reflected the strong influence of Victorian ideals, which emphasized the importance of education, respectability, and personal growth. By focusing on virtues such as honesty, diligence, and perseverance, moral tales helped to shape the development of children's character and understanding of the world.

#### **Realistic Fiction and Social Commentary**

By the end of the 19th century, there was a growing trend towards realism in children's literature. Writers began to focus on depicting everyday life and the realities of childhood, often drawing attention to social issues such as poverty, class inequality, and family dynamics. Realistic fiction gave children a window into the lives of others, showing them characters who faced struggles similar to their own.

Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1886) is an excellent example of this genre, as it tells the story of a poor boy who unexpectedly becomes the heir to a grand estate. The novel explores themes of social class, wealth, and the importance of kindness and compassion. Another notable work in this genre is E. Nesbit's *The Railway Children* (1906), which tells the story of three children who experience hardship and social change when their father is wrongly imprisoned.

These works were significant in portraying the complexities of society and the challenges faced by children, offering a more grounded and relatable form of literature compared to the more fantastical genres.

#### **The Role of Illustrations in 19th and Early 20th Century Children's Literature**

Illustrations played an important role in children's literature during this period. The rise of illustrated books in the late 19th and early 20th centuries contributed to the growing popularity of children's literature by making books more visually appealing and accessible. Illustrators such as Walter Crane and Arthur Rackham became household names, contributing illustrations to some of the most beloved books of the time. These illustrations helped to bring stories to life, enhancing the reading experience and deepening the connection between children and the stories they were reading.

The combination of engaging text and beautiful illustrations allowed for a more immersive reading experience and often added an extra layer of meaning to the story. Illustrations also

played a significant role in reinforcing moral lessons and themes, as the images often depicted key moments in the narrative that highlighted important messages.

### Conclusion

Children's literature in the 19th and early 20th centuries in England evolved as a direct reflection of the changing social, cultural, and educational landscape. The genres that emerged during this period—fairy tales, animal stories, adventure, moral and didactic works, and realistic fiction—played an essential role in shaping the imaginations and values of young readers. These works provided not only entertainment but also moral and educational guidance, while also offering windows into different worlds, whether fantastical or real. The legacy of this period in children's literature continues to resonate in contemporary works, making it a pivotal chapter in the history of children's writing.

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