

Kaylie Pelletier

Abstract

The focus of this research project is to examine childhood based literacy texts and connect them to lessons that children from the time period were taught. Research was composed to gather what children were expected to know from each of the time periods that will be examined through this research project. The time periods that will be looked at are 1700's, 1800's and 1900's. Each time period chosen will have three different popular literary novels that children were expected to read during their schooling. The present paper focuses on specific characters from each text, quotes from the novels, all intertwined with the research gathered from the time period. The characters will be looked at in depth and analyzed as role models, both positive and negative, for the specific children they were written for. The research is centered around the main question of, "*what were children taught?*" throughout different time periods. The paper will also focus on how the lessons shifted throughout each different time period. It will include a general look at historically concurrent events and the role they played in solidifying specific themes. Such themes include "adventure", "romance", and "whimsy" which are seen throughout each of the chosen novels. Each of these themes will differ throughout each time period but remain very similar to their counterpart texts in each respective time period.

Introduction

Throughout recent history, books have been a way for children to cope with the challenges of their lives. When children read or have a book read to them they can easily enter the realm of that novel and possibly forget their own troubles for a moment or two. No matter what time period, this has remained a commonality for children. Every time period has its own challenges that people are forced to embrace, and although it is different throughout the decades

the themes have been the same. These themes are adventure, romance, and whimsy and they can be seen within literature during the 1700's, 1800's, 1900's and even in contemporary novels. These three concepts allow children to get wrapped up in the literature and to use their imagination.

Themes:

Whimsy: The concept of "Whimsy" is quite important to children. According to The Webster Dictionary there are two definitions of this word. The first definition is "playfully quaint or fanciful behavior or humor" and the second is "a thing that is fanciful or odd". According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) children learn best when they are playing. Children should not be forced to sit still for long periods of time. A lot of adults used to believe that children were "mini" adults and should be able to sit still so that they can learn how to be an adult and how to be "proper". When children were forced to sit they were often forced to read as well, which was not a bad thing when the right story got into the hands of a young child. Stories that contained playful materials allowed the children to play in their minds where they were not allowed to do so in their own lives. They were able to sit with their book, laugh along with the character and experience the joys that went along with the story such as getting to imagine the story through their own minds or even by just looking at the pictures present. A lot of children did not have the luxury of being able to go to their parents and just tell them what was on their minds.

Adventure: Adventure stories have a long history of wide popularity among children. Children of all ages can appreciate being able to go out into the world and explore. During the earlier time periods it was expected that boys could appreciate these stories more than girls,

however. Boys were supposed to go outside and cause a little bit of chaos as they learned how to become men. Young girls, however, were supposed to enjoy things that were considered to be “lady-like”. They were supposed to be preparing to take on the role of their mothers. That is, they were supposed to be the ones learning how to cook, clean, take care of children etc. So although many girls are now enjoying adventure stories such as *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe*, this research paper looks at adventure in terms of the male children.

In typical adventure the main protagonist explores on his own and has multiple challenges that he must work through. The boys who go off on these adventures typically return as ‘men’. They experience hardships that force them to grow up faster than they normally would have otherwise. During the time periods listed, war was prevalent, and this is one main reason for all of these coming of age adventure stories.

Romance: A lot of people would not recognize “romance” as an important theme for children, when in fact it is. Romance does not have to pertain to the adult “standard”. In the sense of childhood, it is a theme that little girls related to. They loved the idea of getting married, having a wedding, and eventually having a family to cook for, clean up after, and take care of. Since adventure was left to mainly the male audience this was important for the girls of the various time periods to having something they could read and relate to as well.

1700’s

Daniel Defoe: *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) - Adventure

Jonathan Swift: *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) - Adventure

The Governess, or The Little Female Academy: Sarah Fielding

1800’s

Alice in Wonderland: Lewis Carroll (1865)- Whimsy

Alice In Wonderland is a classic children's story in which Alice embarks on a whimsical adventure. Alice is often lost inside of her own head and when she falls asleep one day she accidentally falls down a rabbit hole which leads her into the magical world of Wonderland. Her imagination is explored throughout the story especially with all of the different characters that Alice meets along the way. Each character has their very own distinct personality in the story, and I think that is important so that every child that reads the story can pick out which characters they relate to, and which characters they can relate to someone else they know in their own lives. For example the Rabbit in the story, who is so rightfully called The White Rabbit is very punctual. He likes to be on time and has some Obsessive Compulsive Tendencies when things are not going exactly the way he wants them to regarding time. He feels that he is always up against the clock. Children of this time period may have felt the same was as The White Rabbit if their parents were rushing them. Children did not have the freedom to go about their lives as they pleased. They had to do their school work after school got out and they always had somewhere to be at a specific time.

Alice also finds herself in quite some trouble and has a lot of obstacles that she faces in Wonderland. She has work her way through some complicated situations on her own and with the help of her new friends as well.

Essentially throughout the whole story Alice is learning how to cope with her overwhelming emotions. At times in the story she is quite happy and content, while at other times she is confused and upset. There is a lot of parts in the book where Alice is also curious and unsure of what situation she has gotten herself into. Children face a lot of emotions

throughout their lives and it truly can be overwhelming and coping skills are ones that do not come easy, especially when children are first learning coping mechanisms.

Here are a few illustrative quotes:

- “If you don't know where you are going any road can take you there”
- “I wish I hadn't cried so much!” said Alice, as she swam about, trying to find her way out.
- I shall be punished for it now, I suppose, by being drowned in my own tears !”
- “One day Alice came to a fork in the road and saw a Cheshire cat in a tree. ‘Which road do I take?’ she asked. ‘Where do you want to go?’ was his response. ‘I don’t know,’ Alice answered. ‘Then,’ said the cat, ‘it doesn’t matter.’”

This story is important for children to read again and again. Imagination is key for Alice and many children often like to get lost inside of their own minds. It is important that sometimes children dream to escape what is going on in their own reality. There is a lot of psychological research as to why children wander in their minds.

Another importance of the story is the symbolism behind Alice’s adventure. There are many changes in the storyline itself. At one point Alice feels that she is either too little or too big for one of the houses that she is in. Carroll is suggesting that all children eventually go through bodily changes, especially during puberty. But not only are body changes happening in adolescents, a lot of younger children went through their own issues with their bodies as well. Some children were bullied for being “too little,” and others were disliked by their peers for being seen as “too big”.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: Mark Twain (1885) - Adventure

Little Woman: Lisa May Alcott (1868/1869) - Romance

1900's

The Secret Garden : Frances Hodgson Burnett (1911)

Madeleine L'Engle: A Wrinkle in Time (1962) - Whimsy

Madeline L'Engle is the author may books including the whimsical novel *A Wrinkle in Time*. She was born in 1918 in New York. Madeleine lived a fairly typical life, having studied creative writing and graduated with honors. She raised a family, but continued to write throughout her life before dying in 2007 at the age of 89.

This novel (and series) offered relief to children that were facing their own hardships during this time. The whimsical world that L'Engle has painted provided children with an imaginative escape. It is one where the characters can travel through time and have to figure out situations on their own. This is important because a lot of children do not have that emotional support from parents. Some parents during the early 1900's time period saw their children more "trophy" of their marriage and wanted them to be "mini adults" before experiencing childhood. L'Engle proves that even without the full support of their parents the children managed to pull through and make it out alright in the end. The whimsical aspect appears when they children have to talk to three different "witches" in the novel. These witches help the children in the story by offering advice through their dialogue. Some of those quotes were:

"Life, with its rules, its obligations, and its freedoms, is like a sonnet: You're given the form, but you have to write the sonnet yourself. - Mrs. Whatsit"

- "People are more than just the way they look."

- “I don't understand it any more than you do, but one thing I've learned is that you don't have to understand things for them to be.”

The characters of this story are also relatable. Children need characters that they can either read about or verbally listen to, depending on the age, that they can directly see a part of themselves in. For example, Meg is a highly relatable character for most children. She is the quirky older child who sometimes gets bullied in school because of her glasses. Many children in the United States wear glasses and can relate to the struggle of being bullied in school.

This research demonstrates the importance of why children needed this whimsical and adventurous escape so badly during this time period. This has been a running issue throughout not only the 1900's but in every single other time period before it as well. Children, especially at a young age, often face prejudices against them. This is especially prevalent during their middle school years. Children are “trying on” different personalities to see which one fits them best, and that can lead to a lot of emotional abuse. It is like Roosevelt pointed out when children are bullied about things like this they tend to hide from themselves and who they truly are which leads to a lot of conflict later on in life. This is why L'Engle's characters are so important to the reader's well-being.

Another character in the book, the youngest child of the family, also offers emotional support for readers. This young boy is also bullied at school because he is considered “odd” and “different”. For the children that have heard this growing up countless number of times, he gives them hope. He is the character that ends up saving everyone in the end. He provides hope to the readers that even if one is different, struggling to fit in school, there is hope.

A Wrinkle in Time has won several awards including the John Newbery Medal, Sequoyah Award, Lewis Carroll Shelf Award, and it was also runner-up for the Hans Christian Anderson Award. These are all prestigious awards. This demonstrate that *A Wrinkle in Time* has made a lasting impact on the children during the time period it was released, and will continue to do so for long after as well.

Work Cited

Alcott, Louisa May. *Little Women: Louisa May Alcott*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. Print.

Carroll, Lewis, and Donald J. Gray. *Alice in Wonderland*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1992. Print.

Curtis, Christopher Paul. *Bud, Not Buddy*. New York: Delacorte, 1999. Print.

Davis Wood, Daniel. "Character Synthesis In THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN." *Explicator* 70.2 (2012): 83-86. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 16 Apr. 2015.

Defoe, Daniel, and N. C. Wyeth. *Robinson Crusoe*. New York: Scribner, 1983. Print.

Fielding, Sarah. *The Governess; Or, The Little Female Academy. Calculated for the Entertainment and Instruction of Young Ladies in Their Education*. London: Printed for A. Millar, 1758. Print.

Howe, James, Thomas B. Allen, and Frances Hodgson Burnett. *The Secret Garden*. New York, NY: Random House, 1987. Print.

L'Engle, Madeleine. *A Wrinkle in Time*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1962. Print.

McCoy, E. 1981. "Childhood through the ages." *Parents Magazine*, January.

"'Secrets' And 'Sequence' In Children's Stories." *Studies In The Literary Imagination* 18.2 (1985): 35. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 16 Apr. 2015.

Swift, Jonathan. *Gullivers Travels*. New York (30 Beekman St.): McLoughlin Bros., 1864. Print.

The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe. Cleveland: World Pub., 1946. Print.

Tippett, Brian. *Gulliver's Travels*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities International, 1989. Print.

Twain, Mark, Naunerle Farr, and Francisco Redondo. *Huckleberry Finn*. West Haven, CT: Pendulum, 1973. Print.