

**Pride and Prejudice: Post-war childhood and modern children's fiction**

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El período de posguerra en Gran Bretaña en lo que se refiere a la literatura infantil y juvenil es una etapa en la que se escriben obras de una calidad comparable a períodos anteriores, como las décadas medias del siglo XIX en las que la literatura infantil tuvo su edad dorada. En este artículo se intenta explotar los temas y preocupaciones de estas obras nacidas en la posguerra, dentro del género de la fantasía y se procura examinar las condiciones culturales y sociales que se hicieron esto posible. Prestamos atención a una serie de textos del género fantástico en los que percibimos un significado profundo más allá del relato para niños, relacionado directamente con el desarrollo emocional de los protagonistas. Las obras elegidas para este análisis han hallado diferentes maneras de representar la experiencia emocional y la crisis de la infancia tras el trauma que supone un período de adaptación a una situación nacional y personal diferente tras una guerra mundial, y lo logran de una forma imaginativa y a veces hasta poética.

Los textos seleccionados son: *The Borrowers* de Mary Norton (1952), *The Children of Green Knowe* de Lucy M. Boston (1954) y *Tom's Midnight Garden* de Philippa Pearce (1958).

The Post-war period in Britain has seen a remarkable flowering of literature written for children. In quality, this body of writing is comparable to the work of the two earlier periods in which the first major classics of the genre were produced –the middle decades of the nineteenth century in which the works of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, Charles Kingsley, and Robert Louis Stevenson appeared, and the late Victorian and Edwardian years which saw the writings of, among others, A.A. Milne, J.M. Barrie, Kenneth Grahame, Beatrix Potter, and Rudyard Kipling. In this article we seek to explore the distinctive themes and concerns of some of the best writing of

these post-war years, and to examine the social and cultural conditions which made this development possible. We pay attention to particular texts which have not been given the careful critical analysis they deserve. These stories belong to the genre usually called fantasy. With this work we want to explain the astonishing emotional depth and moving power of these stories which might at first sight appear deceptively simple to adult readers, written as they are to be read by children. One of the criteria which led us to write about these stories was the perception of latent depths of meaning (usually related to states of feeling) which distinguishes some of the best writing for children. The writers we discuss here are concerned, in a way or another, with issues of emotional development in children. They have found ways of representing some themes of emotional experience and crisis in childhood in imaginative and often poetic terms.

At the end of the nineteenth century the issues dealt with in children's literature were controlled by the images adults had of childhood. Therefore, children in children's books were beautiful, innocent and the guards and future preservers of the nation. This version of literary childhood persisted more or less unchallenged throughout the Edwardian period and between the wars. The uncertainty of the future perpetuated the same need to return to origins –the Imperial England- and forget the present declining of its worldwide power and influence. But the declaration of war between Britain and Germany in 1939 signalled drastic changes in many people's lives.

Accordingly, the most remarkable developments in juvenile fiction came in the period following the Second World War. This post-war period reflected a number of social pressures: changes within the family, gender and the sense of living in a post-atomic age. We are not going to discuss in detail the range of books for children published in the fifties, but we will examine three representative texts that provide a good picture of the dominant trends in juvenile fiction and the ideology underpinning them but it surprises us the air of nostalgia we can breath from them because they also long for better times like the children's novels written forty years earlier did. The texts we have selected are Mary Norton's *The Borrowers* (1952), Lucy M. Boston's *The Children of Green Knowe* (1954), and Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958). Although all the books mentioned were written within six years of one another, they demonstrate the rapidity with which ideas about the family and its place in society were being

redefined and how the idea of childhood was changed as well. There is a close relation with the past –Pride-, represented by childhood loneliness caused by social practice, and the present- Prejudice-, the expression of anxiety due to social chaos. We noticed several similarities among these three books. These similarities are, in fact, so extensive that it seems possible to say that each of them tells the same story over and over again, that each of them plays a variation on this basic plot: The child, usually a boy, is separated from its parents. Without their protection the child suffers from neglect. He usually makes a journey to another place and lives with another family or relatives. In these new circumstances the child is treated harshly by an adult and sometimes has help from another adult of the opposite sex. Eventually, the child triumphs over its antagonists and grows up into a responsible, more mature child. The destination of the child's journey is also similar and twofold: the Big House and the Outdoors. Perhaps this dual locale is best represented in a previous book *The Secret Garden*, with its mysterious mansion and the garden itself (a zone of taboo adventures). I am sure all these authors had this book in mind when writing, especially Mrs Pearce. In Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* a bereaved little girl who came from India, a colony of the British Empire, finds a locked garden in which her new guardian's wife, the mother of a child she discovers in the house, has died in an accident. She and this ill and unhappy boy try to restore this garden, and through this persuade the father to return and care for his son. There is also a gardener who befriends the girl and supports her project.

In *Tom's Midnight Garden* there is a big house now converted into flats and no garden at all during the day but the scene changes when the night comes and a Victorian House and a wonderful and magic garden tempts the child.

Another similarity is the "adoption" of the child by a second family. The Kitsons adopt Tom for a while, although the chapter is more precise with the title of "exile".

They are a kind of surrogate parents. These new adult guardians frequently "persecute" the child-hero but he doesn't have to face these persecutions alone. Frequently, he has a helper in an adult of the opposite sex: motherly females, a helpful male. Tom finds his uncle didactic and uncomfortable with children and his aunt affectionate but too anxious for

him to feel at home. Hatty, the girl he meets at the garden is an orphan. She has been taken in, as a “charity girl” and is unhappy. Both are alone and in a way feel rejection. There are similarities that link these books with the ones of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where we can find a lot of orphans, although we can understand that during a war there were a lot of children who were evacuated due to the war from an urban area to the countryside or they were orphans. In some instances the stories offer a powerful if miniaturised image of a society in which child readers can locate themselves, and about which they can learn. The story is usually charged with a particular moral and emotional standpoint. Sometimes it represents deeply held values in a national culture.

Hatty suffers a dramatic loss, through the death of her parents and Tom’s is a more minor separation through illness and holiday. Tom also feels rejected (even though he knows, when he compares himself with Hatty, that he has not really been abandoned).

There is a triumph over the situation. The problems faced by the child eventually reach a crisis and he triumphs. He emerges as saviour. There is a return and a recognition of identities.

There is also a grandfather clock in the hall of the house, which belongs, he is told, to old Mrs Bartholomew, the house’s owner. The clock is somewhat strange, and sometimes strikes thirteen. This clock provokes arguments between Tom and his rationalist uncle about scientific, regular time and the imaginary time that Tom experiences in the midnight garden.

How are we to account for these similarities between these books? My own means of explaining these similarities is psychological and this has been the activity of folklorists and psychologists such as Otto Rank and Vladimir Propp. If we adapt their ideas we can see that these stages mentioned represent the transition from infancy (when needs are largely met and demands are few) to childhood (when the child has this feeling of being neglected). This means maturation, a process of the child’s separation from its parents to achieve autonomy. The impetus for this process arises partly from a child’s own wish for independence and partly from the parents’ encouragement and expectation of the child’s becoming independent and assuming responsibility. Likewise, the shift from the bliss of infancy to the

more demanding time of childhood is symbolised by themes of being dispossessed or by references to a vanished happy time.

The journey in these children's books is an extravagant symbol of separation from the parents. But it also marks a transition to a second life. This new life is both exciting and frightening. At various times, the big house seems to be either a refuge or a prison. Similarly the outdoors (gardens, for example) appear as either an attractive arena of adventure or a mysterious region of danger. These dualities seem to represent the competing emotions of separation anxiety: the child's simultaneous desire to be independent and fear of separation from the parents. At the same time, this twofold setting, the outdoors and the big house, symbolises conflicts involved in the transition to maturity: the pleasures of inhibited behaviour versus the need to repress impulsive desires in order to become more responsible.

The social problems with the same sex antagonist that the child encounters in the second life where he lives with his surrogate parents or relatives can generally be described as oedipal. This is made clear because the antagonist is an adult and a parent figure. Because the child loves its same-sex parent, guilt arises when the child harbours oedipal hostility toward that parent. To accommodate that guilt, the antagonist is disguised through symbolic mitigation: the villain is not a parent, but a parent figure –an aunt or uncle, a grandmother or grandfather, or a persecutor completely outside the family. Oedipal emotions are a normal part of every child's life. It is not surprising, consequently that the child often finds a special helper in a person of the opposite sex. Hatty's aunt hates her but her cousin and Abel the gardener are kind to her. Mrs Driver is horrible to the boy in *The Borrowers* and Arriety becomes his friend.

The second family of the child-hero provides a means for them to work through their complex emotions in a remote fashion with parental substitutes. And the child's triumph over the antagonist is a salutary symbol of the child's resolution of those oedipal problems and the achievement of independence.

Once these problems are resolved, the fantasy structure of the second family is no longer needed; once the child has achieved a definition

of itself as an independent person, the original family can be reconstituted. And the boy has changed and now is someone on the threshold of maturity. And all these events are often accompanied by a conclusion that the child-heroes must strike some accommodation between their two lives, between what they were and what have become.

This psychological interpretation of the fundamentally similar story discovered in these children's books suggests the presence of a nearly universal account of childhood development. Since this pattern can be found in other national literatures, what makes it particularly British? Because it is a paradigm of the British situation after the war. But why these writers were drawn to this particular pattern? To answer this question is to begin to recognise how much England's sense of national identity is intimately connected to its children's books. We can see English political history after the Second World War in terms of the development of a child.

These similarities in the situations of Tom and Hatty allows the writer to contrast the time and place in which they live and thus provide an imaginative entry into the past for her readers. The writer establishes a contrast between a unified, hierarchical safe world, which reminds us of a Victorian or Edwardian world, cultivated inside its garden boundary but close to nature and the river outside it, and a blank and uninteresting suburb of the present day. The river has become polluted, between the time of Hatty's childhood and the present. A sense of greater community in past time is also conveyed. Whereas the old household was a set of relationships, the present-day inhabitants of the flats seem scarcely to be acquainted with one another. The beauty and mystery of the garden, with its flowers, trees, secret places and long history, is contrasted with the mean little dustbin yard which is all that remains.

This metaphor can work if we think about the lost happy times and the uncertainty of the post-war times in England when these books were written. The author balances a feeling for the greater spaciousness and connectedness of the Edwardian social world, long time gone, with knowledge that it was also frequently more cruel and pain-filled for children than the present. But nevertheless one can regard the feeling of these books for nature, for the past and for the spirit of place as conservative themes.

Chronologically earliest, *The Borrowers* is also the text that is most concerned with trying to reconcile pre- and post-war images of childhood. The boy who is to change the Clock family's life belongs to the pre-war world of upper- and middle-class Britain. Like so many children of his class, the boy was born in India but sent home to England to be educated. His is a story which emphasises the problems of separation endured by generations of British boys and girls, and made more acute when trial of boarding school were compounded by huge geographical distances. Holidays, or in his case convalescence, were rarely spent with families, but required that children be sent away to friends or relatives, or professionally cared for. While the pattern is familiar, Mary Norton tries to blur the edges of the boy's story –details of time, place and duration are kept to a minimum –which means that the boy's separation from his family can be read metaphorically.

On one level it is the old story of childhood loneliness caused by social practice; on the other, it is an almost archetypal expression of anxiety about lost families and social chaos brought by the war aftermath.

No longer is the pattern of life, including periodic reunions with family, predictable. In the post-war period many families were still recovering from the traumas of loss and separation caused by war. As far as children were concerned, the widespread disruption to family life caused by the policy of evacuating children from urban centres was an entirely new and cross-class experience, which was often profoundly disturbing. Added to this were the problems caused by food shortages, rationing, and the sporadic and chaotic removals caused by bomb damage, all of which are conveyed in the story of the Borrowers. Though once part of a thriving and stable community, the Clocks now live a meagre existence and no longer know where to find their family and friends.

There is another child in the story (a girl again as a counterpart), Arrietty, the youngest Borrower. We can compare both children. The boy lives in a malign adult world full of irrational anger (Mrs. Driver), benign irresponsibility (Great Aunt Sophy) and institutionalised murder (represented by the rat catcher, with its terriers and gas, though clearly Aunt Sophy is also linked to the force of destruction that invades her house as her initials form the word "gas").

The boy is neglected and abused. By contrast, Arrietty is over-protected. Unlike the boy, she is better educated than her parents (another gesture towards the social changes taking place in post-war Britain and which were resulting in divisions in families), and ambitious. The Clocks parents are traditionalists. They want to maintain the old social order, including its reliable divisions based on class and gender (though occasionally Homily criticizes those, like the Overmantles, who think themselves superior on the basis of material possessions). Circumstances demand change, however, and Arrietty is allowed to do things no female Borrower has ever done before. The problems and tensions which result from her actions are portrayed as both liberating and potentially dangerous—they lead to the devastating destruction of the Clock household and the attempt to exterminate the family, but also bring about the end of the family's moribund and isolated existence. The upheaval may signal the beginning of the end, but it may also represent the dawning of a new and better life.

The significance of the Clock family's exodus is marked by the fact that the old grandfather clock in the old house deep in an old and quiet bit of the country stops. The clocks are used metaphorically in both texts. Thinking back to the pre-war preoccupation with time and the desire to halt progress suggests one way of reading this, but it is also possible to understand it as symbolising the break in continuity brought about by the wars, and especially the threat represented by the atom bomb. Not only had technology and social change advanced so far and so fast that it was inconceivable that the old world could be recovered (and many had begun to consider the pre-war era as a Golden Age), but there now existed the means of stopping time permanently through the mass destruction of life on the planet.

The guilt, fear and uncertainty of the post-atomic age are central concerns in the Green Knowe books of Lucy M. Boston. The desire to bridge the abyss between past and present and so heal some of the psychic and social wounds she felt were damaging society takes a number of forms in *The Children of Green Knowe*. The story begins with Tolly's arrival at Green Knowe, which, like the house in *the Borrowers*, is an ancient country manor. To get there Tolly has to cross the flooded river, and in his dreams that night he recognises that the old house is like Noah's Ark, as he tells Granny Oldknow, a kind surrogate mother. The resemblance to the Ark is



strengthened as the story progresses and it becomes clear that the house, and Granny Oldknow, belong not to any one time but to all time. Generations co-exist at Green Knowe (an important part of the plot involves Tolly's making friend with his ghostly ancestors and accommodating their pasts into his present), which is a place of healing. At Green Knowe Tolly learns about the past, but he also learns to live in harmony with the natural world and to appreciate the powers of the creative imagination. He begins to dream, and in his dreams finds links to his everyday life. Structurally, Tolly's dreams are paralleled with stories from the past told to him by Granny Oldknow, and gradually Tolly begins to see the links between the stories, the dreams and the real world of Green Knowe. Thus, the kind of healing that Tolly experiences is both personal and metaphoric.

On the personal level, Tolly's needs are very like those of the boy in *The Borrowers*. This is another story of a displaced child –his mother has died and his recently remarried father is living in Burma. He is unhappy at his boarding school, and frightened of spending his holidays with an old relative he has never met.

Unlike Mary Norton's boy, however, Tolly finds at Green Knowe an adult world that welcomes and supports him. The differences between their experiences can perhaps best be understood by comparing their attitudes to the houses they visit.

Very often houses are used to symbolise the psyche. A huge dark, cold house such as Aunt Sophy's, with many unexplored rooms to which entry is forbidden, effectively mirror the fear and repression felt by the child. In *The Borrowers*, the boy finds a tiny space that he is able to inhabit, and significantly he populates it with the kind of loving family from which he is excluded. The home under the floorboards can be understood to be his fantasy world, which sustains the qualities of love, relationships, femininity, and imagination that are largely denied in his present reality. Significantly, when he leaves Aunt Sophy it is to go on a voyage with his sisters back to their home.

Tolly's experiences at green Knowe are very different. While Norton's boy in many ways seems to regress, Tolly begins to grow up and to expand. He explores the whole of the house and its grounds; he learns its history, and in the process becomes more confident of himself and able

to function in the world. Perhaps most important of all for the purposes of this discussion, whereas the boy in *the Borrowers* never makes any satisfactory links with the adult world, Tolly learns to see the relationships between past and present, which makes him understand that inside himself is the adult he will be. The sense of discontinuity that typified the post-war period and found its best-known expression in adolescent culture (music, dance, fashion, films, all of which rejected adults and adult values) is systematically combated in *The Children of Green Knowe* and intentionally forgotten by the authors mentioned before. With her interest in the collective unconscious and her determination to foreground continuity and coherence, Boston essentially brings the “beautiful child” into the present day.

As we can see many of the themes and issues characteristic of Norton’s and Boston’s novels are also found in *Tom’s Midnight Garden*: The isolated boy in the large house; the disruption of linear time with the clock as a metaphor (Tom always enters the garden when the clock strikes thirteen); the exploration of the relationship between child and adult; anxiety about the effects of change on the landscape; and perhaps as important as any of these qualities, the mutual affection and dependence of male and female characters. In this story time loses its limits for two people. First, for Tom, a schoolboy sent to stay with a rather unenterprising aunt and uncle while his brother has measles. One night the clock strikes thirteen. Tom goes down to investigate, opens the back door and finds himself not in the concrete yard with dustbins and clothes-lines but in an apparently limitless garden. There he meets a small girl, Hatty, who accepts him as a playmate in her Victorian world. He believes that he can share everything that happens to Hatty before he has to return to the present. But it is not to be. Although time stands still in Tom’s world while he is in the past, it does not stand still for Hatty. She is growing up even as Tom plays with her, and the magic of the garden, the transcending of time must come to an end with the ending of her childhood. This familiar ending to time fantasies is beautifully handled, with great sympathy for the boy who suddenly sees his companion as a young woman. And there is a bold twist to the ending, which sends the reader rethinking the whole. For Tom, on the very day he is due to go home, meets the owner of the house, old Mrs. Bartholomew, who lives in seclusion upstairs. He goes to her flat, opens the door- and finds that she is Hatty. So, did he go back in the past, or did she create the past with her dreams as she laid in bed, an old woman? History is a succession

of events; the past a circle of images. In this book Hatty's history is Tom's past, Tom's history Hatty's past. They dream each other; or rather, Hatty dreams Tom, and Tom's brother, Peter dreams Hatty for him. That dreams disrupt sequential time is not a new insight. Since Freud they are not seen as disordered imaginings but as the frames of a deeper truth, dreams have become a precise tool with which to explore temporal and psychological dimensions.

In different ways each of these writers emphasizes the unnatural nature of gender-specific behaviour. As part of the process of growing up and becoming independent, the boys are made to acknowledge and accept the feminine aspects of themselves as they appear in their female companions. This is an interesting development, as independence in boys was usually thought to involve denying many of the feminine aspects of the self, and especially the capacity to nurture and develop affective relationships.

Each of the three books reveals a preoccupation with the child as inheritor of a fallen world. Each concentrates on the activities of a single male child, cut off from family and his efforts to make a bridge between the modern world and the past. They use pre-war literary devices such as the use of fantasy worlds to make comments about the present state of civilisation. In the past, writers had used these fantasy worlds as ways of exploring their own needs and fear of adult responsibilities (J.M. Barrie and Lewis Carroll), now writers use fantasy to deal with the kinds of problems the children have to face as part of the process of growing up, as in most basic forms of children's literature: fairy tales.

It is a characteristic feature of English culture that positive feelings are so much more easily symbolised in a kind of historic, rural pastoral setting, than in representations of the modern world.

It seems quite curious that these authors who wrote in the fifties did not present the new youth culture of this time, which marked the sense of discontinuity with the past. It is deliberately absent. The principal commitment of these authors is the nostalgia for the past but perhaps not as a preferred world, but as a need to remain connected to it, in memory and relationship so that one can regain one's identity from it.

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