E-ISSN: 2997-9439

American Journal of Education and Evaluation Studies

https://semantjournals.org/index.php/ AJEES

| Research Article

Check for updates

The Self-Image of Children's Literature in the Anglophone Cultural Polysystem of the Nineteenth Century

Sobirova Firuza Urunbayevna

Samarkand state institute of foreign languages, teacher of department of English Philology,

fiza_sobirova@mail.ru

Abstract: This article explores the position of children's literature within the Anglophone cultural polysystem of the nineteenth century, focusing on the notion of self-image as a defining factor of its literary and social function. Self-image is understood as the dynamic interaction between internal self-perception and external evaluation by dominant cultural and literary institutions. Drawing on polysystem theory (Even-Zohar, 1979; Toury, 1974), the study argues that although children's literature occupied a secondary position in relation to the literary canon, it played a crucial role in transmitting moral values, shaping social norms, and constructing models of childhood characteristic of Victorian culture.

Keywords: children's literature, self-image, polysystem theory, Victorian culture, Anglophone literature.

This is an open-access article under the CC-BY 4.0 license

The nineteenth century represents a formative period in the conceptualization of childhood as a distinct cultural and psychological category. In Anglophone societies, this shift was closely linked to broader social transformations, including industrialization, educational reform, and changing family structures (Avery, 2010). As a result, literature addressed to children began to expand in scope and complexity, reflecting new ideas about moral development, emotional sensitivity, and imagination.

During this period, children's literature gradually moved beyond the rigid didacticism of earlier centuries. While moral instruction remained central, writers increasingly sought to engage young readers through narrative, character development, and emotional appeal. Scholars have noted that nineteenth-century children's texts often functioned simultaneously as educational tools and as literary works that explored social inequality, personal growth, and ethical responsibility (Grenby, 2011; Hunt, 1990). These developments created the conditions for children's literature to emerge as a recognizable literary subsystem.

Children's Literature in the Polysystem

From the perspective of polysystem theory, children's literature in the nineteenth century occupied a peripheral or secondary position within the broader literary system. Even-Zohar (1979) argues that such secondary systems are typically conservative, relying on established norms and

dominant genres rather than innovation. This observation is particularly relevant to Victorian children's literature, which was strongly influenced by educational institutions, religious discourse, and social expectations.

As a result, children's literature was largely shaped by adult values and priorities. Narrative forms, thematic choices, and character models were designed to reinforce discipline, moral behavior, and social conformity. According to Toury (1974), literary subsystems often reflect the ideological structures of the societies in which they operate. In this sense, children's literature functioned as an instrument of socialization, preparing young readers for their future roles within an ordered and hierarchical society (Avery et al., 1971).

At the same time, despite its subordinate position, children's literature developed its own internal logic and cultural significance. This process can be best understood through the concept of *self-image*, which captures how the field perceived its own purpose while responding to external constraints imposed by the dominant literary canon.

Self-Image: Internal and External Dimensions

The self-image of children's literature is shaped by the interaction between internal self-definition and external evaluation. Internally, authors and publishers increasingly recognized children's literature as a space for creativity, narrative experimentation, and engagement with the child's perspective. Externally, however, the field continued to be evaluated primarily in terms of its pedagogical usefulness and moral reliability (Nodelman, 2008).

This dual positioning produced a persistent tension between instruction and imagination. On the one hand, children's literature was expected to promote obedience, industriousness, and moral virtue; on the other, it sought to capture the curiosity and emotional world of the child. Hunt (1990) observes that this balance between adult authority and child-centered storytelling is one of the defining characteristics of the genre.

An important aspect of this self-image was the internal differentiation of children's literature according to gender and theme. Literature intended for boys typically emphasized adventure, exploration, and heroism, promoting ideals of independence and public responsibility. In contrast, literature for girls focused on domestic life, emotional discipline, and moral refinement, reinforcing socially constructed gender roles (Grenby, 2011). As Toury (1974) suggests, such internal stratification reflects broader cultural hierarchies and serves as a mechanism of ideological transmission.

Norms, Constraints, and Creative Development

The strong pedagogical orientation of children's literature imposed clear limitations on narrative freedom. Themes, character arcs, and stylistic choices were expected to align with prevailing moral standards. Even innovative authors were required to operate within these boundaries. For example, Dickens's representations of children combine social critique with moral instruction, reflecting the expectations placed on literature aimed at young audiences (Avery, 2010).

Nevertheless, these constraints did not entirely suppress creativity. Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland demonstrates how imaginative play and linguistic experimentation could coexist with the moral framework of Victorian culture (Hunt, 1990). Such works reveal that children's literature, even while constrained, gradually expanded its expressive possibilities.

Over time, this process contributed to a transformation in the representation of childhood itself. Children were increasingly portrayed not as passive recipients of instruction, but as active thinkers capable of curiosity, doubt, and emotional depth. This shift is evident in narrative perspective, character complexity, and the growing emphasis on psychological realism (Nodelman, 2008).

The self-image of nineteenth-century Anglophone children's literature emerges as a complex and evolving construct shaped by both cultural constraints and creative aspirations. Although positioned at the periphery of the literary polysystem, children's literature played a central role in mediating between education, morality, and artistic expression. It not only reflected dominant Victorian values but also participated in redefining concepts of childhood, identity, and social responsibility. Understanding its self-image allows us to view children's literature not merely as a subsidiary genre, but as a significant cultural force within the literary system.

References

1. Avery, G. (2010). *Childhood and Children's Books in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
2. Avery, G., Lea, A., Robinson, J. R., & Brown, R. (1971). Writing for children: A social engagement? *Children's Literature in Education*, 2, 17–29.
3. Even-Zohar, I. (1979). Polysystem studies. *Poetics Today*.
4. Grenby, M. O. (2011). *The Child Reader, 1700–1840*. Cambridge University Press.
5. Hunt, P. (1990). *Children's Literature: The Development of Criticism*. Routledge.
6. Nodelman, P. (2008). *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
7. Toury, G. (1974). *Translational Norms and Literary Polysystems*. Tel Aviv University.