

A CRISIS IN A FAMILY, A FAMILY IN A CRISIS – THE FORERUNNERS OF THE THIRD GOLDEN AGE OF CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

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This paper aims at presenting a picture of family in British children’s literature. The analysis covers the period from the First Golden Age (1860-1914) to modern times. It focuses on the works of Anne Fine and Jacqueline Wilson who are perceived by the author as the representatives of the new literary period within the history of a family story.

Key words: A family story, didactic function of literature, irony, black humor, child’s perspective, child’s agency

The picture of a complete, happy, multigenerational family may hardly be encountered in British children’s literature, especially in one of its literary kinds I intend exclusively and thoroughly to refer to in this article, namely a family story. This paradox might be resolved in two ways: either by the reverberations of social and cultural changes occurring in the periods family novels were created or by the ideological shift of their function aiming sinusoidally at entertainment or didacticism. John Stephens directly described this phenomenon as “a struggle for young people’s minds” [20, p. IX], though contemporary, revisionist theories of children’s literature criticism deny the existence of such a division as early as at the end of the nineteenth century. Thereby they pay tribute to Harvey Darton who in his extensive study on children’s books published in 1932 announced the beginning of the diminishing influence of moral tales. They also “appreciate Darton’s early sensibility that a child’s book is one designed ostensibly for pleasure, however defined by time and place” [15, p. 444]. On the other hand, tracing back to the research of ideology in children’s books may lead to the conclusion that family stories merely comprise any novel that intentionally provides entertainment for children, as it was in the case of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventure in Wonderland* or Edward Lear’s *Book of Nonsense*. In my opinion, the essence of ideology in children’s fiction seems to be accurately uttered by the above-mentioned critic, John Stephens, who claims that “writing for children is usually purposeful, its intention being to foster in the child reader a positive apperception of some socio-cultural values which, it is assumed, are shared by author and audience” [20, p. 3].

Therefore this article aims at proving that the picture of a family in children’s literature has continuously been exploited to serve a didactic purpose and, what seems very interesting, being susceptible to social and cultural changes, has always exhibited its dark side. Moreover, I would like to demonstrate that family novels published in the 1990s incessantly provide a similar picture and that their new, disruptive aspects are recognized only in terms of form, aesthetics and an author’s attitude.

Throughout the First Golden Age of children’s literature (1860–1914) [10, p. 16], [13, p. 25] family novels for children presented pragmatism and formalism so characteristic of the Victorian period which propagated the bourgeois model of child rearing based on severity, conformism and stereotypical interpersonal relations. Above all, they promoted the patriarchal family structure where the “father’s love is patronising, is a matter of choice, favours his beloved child (...), and where mother loves all her children alike” [4, p. 160].

Family bonds in the Victorian era were based on subordinating children's wills and desires to those of adults and, as Harry Hendrick explains, "within the family, obedience meant respect and deference for parents, allowing them peace and quiet, the punctual performance of chores, and a sense of order. For many parents among the unskilled classes, the home was the only place where they could act authoritatively; here at least the adult could be 'master'" [9, p. 22]. The common way of introducing this code of conduct to children was by parental discipline, including abuse, threats or corporal punishment. Family stories of that period perfectly depicted the emotional condition of a Victorian family, where the higher parents were in a social class, the more remote and less affectionate relationships they had with their children. Subsequently, parent figures are mostly invisible in those novels, being replaced with servants, nannies or nursemaids. Additionally, the novels were under an enormous influence of religious movement. Thus disobedience to parents was equal to violating the divine order.

Along with their didactic purpose, so commonly present in children's fiction of the nineteenth century, family novels alluded to moral tales first written for children in the mid-eighteenth century, and they gave a heart-wringing account of childhood that, beyond doubt, would not be treasured in any heart. It stood in contrast to the mainstream British Victorian literature for children, where childhood was elevated to the status of a perfect state of mind; there was Arcadia, the Never Never Land so rarely encountered in other European literatures. This literary type can be distinctly characterised by the lack of concern for children, the neglect of their emotional needs, the permanent absence of close relatives in their lives and the complete denial of affectionate feelings. In novels by Charlotte Yonge, e.g. *The Pillars of the House* (1873), *The Daisy Chain* (1856), or Catherine Sinclair's *Holiday House* (1839), children are habitually envisaged as orphans brought up by their grandparents, vicious aunts or strict governesses. Victorian writers pushed parent figures into the background creating two complementary images at the same time: of a mother as too young, weak and immature a person to run a house, as in *Magnum Bonum* (1879) by Charlotte Yonge or *Jessica's First Prayer* (1867) by Hesba Stretton, and of a permanently absent, awe-arousing father as seen in Edith Nesbit's *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* (1899). Additionally, the novels resembled sermons delivered by an omniscient narrator in a haughty, moralising tone.

The family composition, ideology and their representation in children's literature were modified after World War II due to numerous socio-cultural changes which took place in the British society of the 1950s. The triggering factors I should mention are emergency evacuations of children from cities threatened by mass bombing in 1940 or the loss of close relatives who died or went missing without a trace during the war, to name but a few. Such traumatic war experiences inflicted irreversible harm on family life, causing not only its disruption but also evoking a growing sense of alienation and a feeling of overwhelming loneliness in children. These emotions might be encountered in novels or diaries of that time. If, by any chance, family bonds managed to endure unbroken, then family members were forced to cope with the harsh realities of everyday life in the post-war period. The most disturbing activities ranged from removals imposed by bomb damage to food shortages and food rationing. Hence little wonder that the novel by Mary Norton entitled *The Borrowers* (1952) was quickly recognised as the quintessential book of the Second Golden Age of British children's literature which stretches from the late 1950s to the 1980s [13, p. 25]. It was almost the archetypal expression of anxiety about growing up, living in a family and human conditions in the new, post-war reality. In the second half of that period I can identify writers' growing interest in other social and cultural phenomena, among which the most significant are: the rapidly growing category of single-parent households, the increasing number of divorces and second-time marriages, a prevailing sense of insecurity

and a new social conviction that nothing was certain to remain the same any more, the decline in traditional moral values and the increasing crime rate.

The above-mentioned concerns would constitute the background for the Second Golden Age of children's literature during which the ideals of childhood as a uniquely innocent phase, so eagerly propagated by the mainstream Victorian writers, were relinquished for good. That allowed the enrichment of children's novels with new themes commonly perceived as improper until then. Terry Pratchett, a British fantasy writer, put the need to address directly the unpleasant realities of life by calling for writing relevant books, by which he meant "books set firmly in the child's environment, or whatever hell the writer believes to be the child's environment" [17, p. 6–7]. New themes corresponding to the new, prevailing social issues were almost immediately implemented in literary works for children, where "the contemporary child character, (...), was an actor on a stage upon which few, if any, monumental figures were to be found" [13, p. 25] because they were not as idealised as their Victorian counterparts. However, neither new themes nor the revealing manner of presenting the child managed to change the sombre picture of the family. Yet again, what readers could encounter in writing for children was the overwhelming lack of parental warmth and affectionless distance in parent-child relationships.

The above-mentioned appalling family patterns were akin to the findings of contemporary psychological researches by R. D. Laing, a famous British psychiatrist, who in his book *The Politics of the Family* (1969) announced his controversial statement on the family as the source of all evil influencing young people's psyche and leading to such pathological conditions as, for example, schizophrenia. Subsequently, the family ceased to be sacred in the eyes of public opinion.

The most representative works of a family story at that time are Philippa Pearce's *The Children of the House* (1968), Penelope Lively's *Going Back* (1975) or Michelle Magorian's *Good Night Mr. Tom* (1981). Their protagonists are entangled in a sorrowful adult world, alienated from the blissfulness of childhood, condemned to the hardship of everyday life in post-war conditions. From the preface to the first of the above-mentioned novels, we learn it is to present children who experienced "the lack of love or interest from their parents, and how they had learned to play in silence and never to pass in front of their father's study window in case he saw them. The truth was that their mother was too devoted to her house to worry much about whether they were happy, and their father never thought twice about them except to exhort them to gratitude" [16, p. 1]. The novel by Penelope Lively acquaints readers with two siblings, Jane and Edward, who had to mingle with the grim post-war reality without the protective presence of their mother, who died too early, but with their exasperating father instead, whose strictness and emotional coldness added up to their mutual hatred. After he was called up to serve at the front, Jane, the narrator, wished he would never come back. She confessed it bluntly:

"And I, who had never even considered that there might be a choice, thought Good that father's gone back to Scotland and Good that Scotland's miles and miles away and please God may he not have leave again for ages and ages. And then I felt guilty for thinking that" [14, p. 45].

The passage I quoted above supports the statement that the picture of a family did not improve in family stories. Yet their narrative stance allowed readers to keep emotional distance and not identify themselves with a child character. Reading the novels of the Second Golden Age, we participate in the fictional world, but we do not see it through children's eyes. In many of them, in a truly Victorian fashion, we can easily distinguish between adult mentality and perception. Generally, authors generally, found it difficult to create a narration that would expose feelings of children and their views on the world to the reader. The family novels of the 1960s and 70s prove authors' disengagement. They are full

of obscure allusions, lack visceral concerns, and present veiled or subdued feelings. However, despite all that, they did introduce noticeable changes to the family story in the area of technique, style and structure. They proved that the child's world did not exist in separation from the adult's world. It was not a secret garden any more, a place where children may feel safe and sound far from childminders' eyes. It may also be observed that young protagonists finally endeavoured to put considerable effort to challenge the external reality, though they did not become highly successful in that. Furthermore, they settled the idea that growing up, painful as it was, could also be a very exciting stage of human life.

Still, the most groundbreaking turn took place in the 1990s due to the unique works of two British writers-Anne Fine and Jacqueline Wilson. The literary period stretching from that time onwards has not acquired a distinctive label and separate criticism yet. According to Peter Hunt, "critics have been slow to recognise how profound the change has been" [11, p. 12]. Nevertheless, those two authors managed to win young readers' recognition. They have not only sold millions of copies of their books but also have been on countless shortlists and have won many awards, including The Carnegie Medal and Whitbread Children's Novel Award in the case of Anne Fine and The Smarties Prize and The Children's Book Award in the case of Jacqueline Wilson. Furthermore, they were given the great honour when chosen as Children Laureates, the former in the years 2001-2003, the latter being the current one. This reputable title "is awarded once every two years to an eminent writer or illustrator of children's books to celebrate astonishing achievements in their fields. The appointment of a Children Laureate acknowledges the importance of exceptional children's authors in creating the readers of tomorrow" [24]. A different kind of recognition the authors gained among the scanty group of literary critics who unanimously hailed them as the forerunners of a new, scathing phase of the family story. Peter Hunt calls Anne Fine to be "central to the radical changes in British children's literature" [10, p.X] and "the very model of the British children's writer of the end of the century" [11, p.15]. Simultaneously he ascribes the role of the founder of a new, complex style in children's literature to Jacqueline Wilson, prizing her for incorporating some elements of pop music, television and other media into her works.

It has been observed that literary critics have recently focused their attention on cultural studies rather than literary ones as a better, more adequate means of studying modern children's literature. Peter Hunt makes a telling point out of the difference between those two approaches using the definitions provided by Jonathan Culler in his *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Like the author of the book, he finds the socio political analysis a legitimate and pragmatic method of studying literature as "that work on recent culture will be an intervention in culture rather than mere description" [5, p. 52-53]. Therefore, I would like to refer to the socio-cultural background of the 1990s to prove the notable contribution on the part of Anne Fine and Jacqueline Wilson to the modern discourse on the picture of a child and a family in the post modern society. The latest findings in sociology and social history set a new direction for the research on the role of a child in a family and society. They duly submitted three main theses which resulted from the necessity to rethink childhood caused by "apparent ambivalence in society's estimation of its children-patronising on the one hand and idealising on the other" [18, p. 2] and the influence of the recent social phenomena such as family disruption and reconfiguration. Those three pillars constituting a new paradigm of the "sociography of childhood" [3, p. 16] are as follows: the admission of children's agency in social actions and the acknowledgment of children's perspectives on social and familial changes, the questioning of absolute authority of parents and the formulation of a theory about "disappearing childhood" [9, p. 94]. Experts stress the fact that to be able to offer new insights into children's perspective on their ability to cope with new social circumstances they take a child-centred approach in their research. Knowing

and understanding the child's world has become a new priority of numerous social sciences, which unanimously confirm children's eagerness to have a say in the changing arrangements of today's world. In the light of those latest scientific studies, I presume critics' attention will soon properly concentrate on Fine's and Wilson's novels as both authors incorporate the main assumptions of cultural studies about childhood into their books in a very precise and intentional way. Peter Hunt confirms that they elevate family fiction by introducing "the fusion of sociological ideas" [11, p. 14] into it as it was previously done only by authors such as Enid Blyton, who is commonly regarded as a producer of "popular" literature. The firm sociological background of their books empowers children, make them more respectable members of community. The novels such as *Goggle-Eyes*, *Step by Wicked Step* or *Crummy Mummy and Me* by Anne Fine or *The Bed and Breakfast Star*, *The Suitcase Kid* or *The Illustrated Mum* by Jacqueline Wilson have a first-person narrative; therefore, the first pillar of modern sociological studies has its representation in the family story: at last we can observe the world from the child's perspective with no adult censorship guided by a "not-I- front-of-the-children" policy. The authors have ceased to be solely the watchers of children, but started to be "in collusion with them" [2, p. 72]. Apart from the discovery of the world of children's hatred or helplessness, we witness their developing ability to negotiate, to express their needs and to act in a responsible way.

Anne Fine characterises her writing for children as a task-oriented, didactic activity, and she believes that "one of the most valuable things an author can do is show how very complicated life is" [23]. In her book *Step by Wicked Step* she presents five stories about families who do not get on well. In each of them children experience, like a boy whose diary they find at the attic, the hardships of living in a stepfamily. All children do their best to adjust to a new environment. They have to find their own way to cope well in a new situation, and in most cases they are the ones who feel responsible for taking the first step, as "somebody has to make the effort"[8, p. 134]. The right finally given to children to speak out about their feelings is used in this novel to let the protagonists express their grief and frustration as well as to share their opinions on the social phenomenon of divorce. It helps them to adapt to their new lives. Additionally, psychologists gradually advance a thesis that "children are not necessarily casualties of divorce, but can be helped by parents involving them and giving them a say over decisions" [3, p. 4]. Anne Fines proves that thesis conclusively in her book. Another psychological improvement in her novels is that negative feelings are no longer cloaked as it was in the works of the 1970s. The difference is well-illustrated in the following quotations coming from two different literary periods.

So that what follows is inevitable. Edward is sent to bed with no supper. I scream at father, through the closed door, after he has gone, "I hate you! I think you are the meanest person in the world!" And he hears and I am condemned with Edward and sent also to bed. But separately, alone and raging in the spare room [14, p. 54].

"Stop it!" I yelled. "Just stop it! You can't make thing right by wishing them. You know that! That is just as silly and hopeless as me wanting you to get run over by accident, so Mum and Dad can get back together, and buy our old house back again! It isn't going to happen, and you ought to know it!"

All the blood in her face had drained away. And when she spoke, her voice was just a tiny croak [8, p. 102].

The first passage presents the child who does not even dare have a face-to-face confrontation with an adult, and the strict father entirely prevails whereas the second passage conveys, in a very apparent way, not only the intense frustration of the young girl in a sharp exchange with her stepmother but also a very emotional reaction of the adult who has to acknowledge the youngster as a rightful member of a new family.

A figure of an irresponsible parent who can barely cope self with a new life and who is by no means a help to his children becomes another culture-bound novelty introduced by both authors into the family story. The only means he or she uses to resolve painful, piling, martial problems is to let others take on the mission, while he or she becomes a passive observer, helpless and unable to act. Such is a psychological profile of Daniel Hilliard, a divorced father from the novel *Madame Doubtfire* by Anne Fine. He uses deceit when, dressed up as an eccentric housekeeper, he moves into his ex-wife's house to be closer to his children. He prefers this to taking a conscious effort to fight for his parental rights. Only halfway through that weird and dangerous experiment does he realise that the only solution to his family problems is to fight with his own weaknesses. Yet an even more peculiar parent character can be encountered in Wilson's *The Illustrated Mum* and Fine's *Crummy Mummy and Me*. In the latter we observe a total upturning of family roles. The main protagonist, ten-year-old Minna, does not only have to take care of herself and her younger sister but also nurses her mother when she falls ill and refuses to run the house. She also acts as a mediator between her mother and grandmother when the former dyes her hair blue and the latter curses her. Minna's mother consciously rejects all the attributes of adulthood, striking the pose of a teenager: she wears extravagant clothes, neglects her household chores, insists on buying her a dog or persuades Minna to stay up late at night to accompany her. The passage below presents a part of a conversation between the mother and daughter in the late afternoon:

ME: I really think I ought to be going up to bed now.

MUM: (astonished) Why?

ME: (patiently) Because it's getting rather late.

MUM: It's not *that* late.

ME: (looking at my watch) It's well past my bedtime.

MUM: Oh, you're getting older all the time. You don't need that much sleep.

[6 p. 105]

Having read that exchange one can gain an impression that a careless editor swapped the lines since it is challenging to recognize a stern parent in that idle adult.

The last sociological turnabout, which is a revolution in family fiction at the same time, is a thesis about the fall of childhood. Theories presented in Harry Hendrick's *Children, Childhood and English Society 1880-1990* provide numerous evidence to support that statement. Among other things, we can read that "important features of this trend are said to be sexualisation of the world of childhood from the innocence-and ignorance-of the past to the more worldly wise child of today"[9, p. 95]. The researchers claim that the process was not initiated by any conscious or deliberate activities on children's side but rather results from the external sociocultural factors, the influence of adults, media, and especially TV. Sociologists refer particularly to such activities as: children advertising adult products, designing children's clothes so that they resemble adult fashion, increasing crime rates among youngsters or the gradual disappearance of street games. These observations coincide with Anne Fine's opinion on the modern world. In one of her interviews she expressed her view that contemporary children are scarcely childish. She puts the blame for it on the ubiquitous sense of constant social threat. It makes parents keep their children at home and, subsequently, let them witness family arguments on which they feel obliged to take a stand. A suitable example of blurring the line between childhood and adulthood is provided by Kitty from *Goggle-Eyes* and Natty from *Madame Doubtfire*. The former is deeply involved in the nuclear disarmament movement, fiercely defends her rights to support it, demonstrates in public places together with adults. The latter, despite her young

age, is mature enough to be able to tell fiction from reality, right from wrong and, being aware of her emotional needs, she demands that her father stick to his deceitful masquerade as it helps her to survive the conflict.

While describing the new distinctive features of the family story, I must not omit the changes taking place in the field of style, text structure, narration techniques and authors' attitude towards the chosen themes. Peter Hunt names the books for children created in the 1990s "WYSIWYG" [11, p. 25], which in computer jargon means 'what you see is what you get'. By that he stresses their didactic purpose, their ability to concentrate on vital social phenomena and their indifference to the conveyance of subtleties of language or creation of a spotless, ephemeral child figure. Instead, we are offered a realistic picture of a family life built up of numerous tropes, among which the most salient features are irony and black humour. Anne Fine's mastery of those literary devices makes the interpretation of her novels a very challenging task. Her two books, *Madame Doubtfire*, which is commonly perceived by the public as a comedy about divorce and makes the readers roar with laughter, and *Goggle-Eyes*, which is reviewed as funny and warm-hearted, are in fact black farces aiming at alleviating the pain children have to suffer when the world around them falls into pieces. The books are to provide us with the necessary therapeutic help rather than a hearty laugh. The following quotation illustrates the use of black humour as a means of expressing the protagonist's frustration with the presence of her mother's new boyfriend in their life:

On Monday I'd arrange for a huge industrial chimney to topple on his head. On Tuesday he'd succumb to a grisly and incurable disease. Some drunk driver might run him over on Wednesday. On Thursday he'd lose his footing strolling with Mum along the path beside the reservoir, slip in and drown. Honestly, I spend so much time thinking up fatal accidents for Goggle-eyes that sometimes when he turned up at our house on Friday with the customary box of chocolates under his arm, I'd catch myself feeling astonished he looked as fit and healthy as he did [7, p. 35].

Similar stylistic devices are used by Jacqueline Wilson. Applying irony and black humour in her book *The Bed and Breakfast Star*, she presents the world as seen from the child's perspective. It is the world where the child is able to realise and judge the absurdity of adults' behaviour. The following quotation illustrates the main protagonist's ironical and bitter remark on her stepfather's preposterous question:

He hisses out of the side of his mouth: "Are you asking for a good smacking, Elsa?" What sort of question is that, eh? As I I'd prance up to him and say, "Hey, Uncle Mack, can I have a socking great smack, please?" [21, p. 11].

The same girl is also infallibly able to recognise Mack's inconsistency and mistakes in bringing up his children:

I needed sympathy. Mack was in a foul mood. "What do you think you're doing, rushing around yelling your head off?" he yelled, rushing around [21, p. 71].

Assessing novels belonging to the family story from the perspective of three distinguished periods, I would like to point out their common denominator: all of them have their plots based on cause and effect or purpose clauses arranged in chronological order to make it easier for an inexperienced reader to follow them. They mostly develop one main theme, though in the most recent novels we can distinguish subplots, digressions or divisions into separate chapters, e. g. in *Madame Doubtfire* or *Step by Wicked Step*. Furthermore, in the Victorian period direct descriptions of characters predominated in novels due to the presence of an omniscient narrator, whereas since the 1970s, owing to the growing interest in the psychological depth of characters, we can mainly encounter self-assessment. Yet it does not seem to be the unique pattern as even some novels discussed in this article, e.g. *Madame Daubtire*, have a third-person narrative which is counterbalanced by numerous dialogues in direct speech to strengthen its objectivity. A new feature in the field of linguistic aesthetics is the introduction of colloquialisms and slang into a text which aims to bring characters closer to real life and make a text more authentic, especially if to be viewed from a child's perspective. The contemporary authors' concern about the recreation of the child's perception of the world is perhaps the most challenging task in modern writing for the young, especially when children are not the only target readers of books. Due to

their didactic ambitions, contemporary novels have a dual address—they are created to be understood and enjoyed by children and adults alike. Jacqueline Wilson meets that challenge in an exemplary manner. The following quotation illustrates a scene embarrassing from an adult's perspective, yet convincing (though naive) when narrated by a child:

I pushed the door open and peeped round. There was a little man in a brown suit sitting at a desk. A big lady in a fluffy pink jumper was sitting at the desk too. She was perched on the man's lap and they were *kissing*. When they saw me the lady leapt up, going pink in the face to match her jumper. The little man seemed to be catching his breath. No wonder. The lady was *very* big, especially in certain places [21, p. 30].

As the final word about the development of the family story, I would like to underline once again the importance of the factors that have shaped the literary outcomes of the three creative periods. They are time – bound sociocultural paradigms, ideology and purpose of children's books, authors' attitude and engagement in the process of writing. Among them, the last variable seems to be the most influential in shaping the identity of the contemporary family novel. Although the picture of the family has not ceased to be sombre and appalling, its presence in modern writing for children has, in my opinion, a totally different aim. The books are not to inspire awe or instruct young readers any more. An author's intention is to support a child, in the most convincing and accessible manner, and help him understand the harsh reality around as well as find his own, unique place where he/she belongs. The open endings of Fine and Wilson's novels make them more realistic, trustworthy and convey an optimistic message. Both writers claim they intend to cheer their readers up and encourage them to creative in difficult situations. Wilson's conviction that happy but realistic endings are needed to show a child that the world is not a dark, bleak place, uttered in one of her interviews, could serve as their artistic motto. Once she said: "I would hate a child to grow up mistrusting all adults. I think dealing with things in as lighthearted a manner as possible and keeping a sense of humour is a good coping mechanism. At the end of each book I want them to feel: thank goodness, they've come through that. They can cope now, they're all right, they'll be fine" [24].

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**КРИЗА В РОДИНІ ТА РОДИНА В КРИЗІ – ПРОВІСНИКИ
ТРЕТЬОЇ ЗОЛОТОЇ ЕРИ ДИТЯЧОЇ ЛІТЕРАТУРИ**

Магдалена Новацка

У статті досліджено зображення сім'ї у британській дитячій літературі. Аналіз стосується періоду з Першого Золотого Віку (1860–1914) і до сучасності. Увагу зосереджено на творчості Енн Файн та Жаклін Уїлсон, які сприймає автор як представників нового періоду в літературі в контексті історії сімейних оповідань.

Key words: сімейне оповідання, дидактична функція літератури, іронія, “чорний гумор”, дитяча точка зору, child’s agency