

# Young literature in english – from stevenson to rowling

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



Many of the books considered classical children's literature today, such as Peter Rabbit, Alice in Wonderland, Peter Pan or the Boy Who Would Not Grow Up, The Wind in the Willow and Winnie the Pooh, are in fact stories that little children were told over the ages. Literary critics often questioned whether these books are truly worthy of being considered under children's literature, and their research led them to conclude that there is far more value to these stories than mere entertainment for children.

The writings of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear reflect the cultural need during the Victorian era to understand the world from a child's perspective. In their works, children were depicted as the epitome of innocence. Later in this period however, the increasing pressures of society and morality reached oppressive levels. Perhaps in response to these pressures, the focal point of an ideal childhood shifted during the Edwardian era when children's writers created a new kind of hero — a selfish, rude and arrogant child immersed in fun and frolic all day, who refused to grow up and wanted to remain a playful child forever. The rise of the playboy hero image in the 1880s gave a further pushback to the earlier ideal of the innocent child. The irresponsible Prince Edward inadvertently boosted this image further. With the eventual onset of the war, youngsters were gripped by the fervour of martyrdom at a young age, because apparently life after childhood was no fun. " Nothing that happens after we are twelve matters very much" became the motto of this period. Two children's authors who brought this morbidly fascinating image of youngsters to the fore were James Barrie and Kenneth Grahame.

While children's authors in the Victorian era sought the ideal of harmony and enjoyment in their view of childhood, Edwardian authors went a step further, seeking to relive childhood even as adults to and bask forever in the bliss of childhood. As the earlier argument of morality and religious ideals began to recede, a new trend of spiritual, secular literature slowly took over. This idea of secularism in literature showed a fondness for nature worship and for Pan, the Greek god of nature who is depicted as half man, half demon. Barrie, Grahame and even Kipling were enchanted by this image of Pan. Barrie and Grahame had been brought up in a culture that was engulfed by the ideals of youth. Moreover, they were writing against the backdrop of the war. Under these circumstances, there was a prominent tone of escapism in their works, along with a desire to enjoy the present moment to the fullest, reflecting the psychological need of the hour.

Thus, Barrie gave life to Peter Pan who defeated Captain Hook, saying " I'm youth, I'm joy, I'm the little bird that has broken out of the egg".

When Barrie was six years old, his thirteen-year-old brother David died in an accident. Their mother was overcome by shock and grief. She constantly mourned for David and obstinately continued to wait for his return, consequently neglecting Barrie and her other children. To make his mother happy, little Barrie started to live and act like David, talking like him and wearing his clothes, becoming the living version of David who was now ageless in death. Both David and Barrie's growth thus remained stunted, though in different ways.

Barrie's mental state is apparent in the name Peter Pan or the Boy Who Refused to Grow Up. This story tells a make-believe tale of the triumph of youth over old age. Peter Pan reflects the dream of an era that yearned to live in Neverland forever in a state of suspended youth. Peter Pan symbolises not only Barrie's individual desires and wish to remain young forever, but those of contemporary society as a whole.

Kenneth Grahame's most famous work *The Wind in the Willows* is an allegory of the Industrial Revolution and its impact on the British Empire. The lead characters in this book are the shy Mole, the clever Ratty, Badger, and the conceited, intrepid and zealous Toad. These animals talk and act like humans, but also possess the characteristics of their respective species.

Grahame wrote these stories for his son Alastair, a reckless and selfish boy who was nevertheless his father's favourite. In the character of Toad, Grahame has infused these aspects of Alastair's nature. Toad's arrogance, Mole's gullibility and Rat's intelligence make the story enjoyable.

Grahame was a contemporary of Barrie and was equally smitten by the image of Pan. Just like Barrie, in his private life, Grahame was the typical Edwardian man-child, fascinated by the idea of Peter Pan-esque agelessness. *The Wind in the Willows* was at once influenced by the contrasting emotions of faith and fear. While the story was cast in the escapist mould of losing oneself in the freedom of childhood, the fear that industrialisation would put an end to rural life as well as the boundless faith the society had in nature added yet another dimension to the tale. The motorcar in the story is a

humorous depiction of the apprehensions that not only Grahame but the whole society had towards industrialisation and the inevitable changes and modernisation it would engender.

About 15 years before *The Wind in the Willows*, Grahame had published a small collection of short stories called *Pagan Papers*, which also involved the character of Pan and depicted the struggle of Londoners to escape from the industrialised world that had distanced itself from nature. Grahame devised a means of escaping from the sordid reality into the joys of nature, which he proffered to his readers. Thus, his books came to be a true representation of the circumstances of his period. His books *The Golden Age* and *Dream Days* were set in the 1890s. Grahame's pathbreaking treatise on childhood in both these books received much acclaim. The success of *The Wind in the Willows* followed in the wake of the laurels earned by both these books.

A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* was published around 1920. The storm of the war had settled, and there was a widespread desire to enjoy life in the post-war world. The sun was setting on both Victorian and Edwardian ideals of childhood. Against this backdrop, Milne devised a fantasy world worthy of the legacy of *Wonderland* and *Neverland*, and created one of the most popular children's characters of all time. The two *Winnie the Pooh* books are about a young boy named Christopher Robin. Milne named the characters after his son and the young lad's stuffed teddy bear. Christopher's teddy bear is the main character of this story. Milne had had a happy childhood. As a young man, he was enamoured by *Peter Pan* and *The Wind in the Willows*, and he looked up to Barrie and Grahame. However, Milne's experiences and

intentions behind his writing were quite different from theirs. Barrie and Grahame's writings served as a vent for their private sorrows, to overcome which they weaved a wish-fulfilling fantasy world of childhood dreams. In the tale of Pooh however, the predominant tone reflects not unfulfilled desires but Milne's satisfaction with life. Unlike Barrie and Grahame, he did not set out to seek his identity in childhood fancies. Peter Pan, Rat, Mole and Badger were characters born out of Barrie and Grahame's sorrows and disappointments. But the characters in Pooh were not similarly related to Milne on a psychological level. Yet, while writing for the post-war generation, his longing for the golden period before the war compelled him to draw upon the fantasy worlds created by Barrie and Grahame in describing the simple joys of Pooh's pleasant little world.

Adults who read Pooh's stories found simply the joys of reliving their childhood. These stories were meant for purely innocent entertainment of children.

The ideas of childhood briefly described in Milne's two poetry collections — *When We Were Very Young* and *Now We Are Six* — are fully fleshed out in the fantasy world of Winnie the Pooh. In this world, just like in Wonderland and Neverland, the little boy Christopher Robin rules the roost. He is omniscient in this world, and his toys are his companions. The characters of these toy companions embody the various characteristics and moods of young children — the cowardly Piglet, the bouncy Tigger, and self-centred, loving, innocent, greedy Pooh all show different shades of a child's mind. Constantly eating honey (or "hunny") and confused about the actions of

adults, Pooh is an embodiment of every child's psyche. Through his characters, Milne underlines the endearing silliness of young children. In Wonderland, Alice tries to find her own identity; in contrast, the toys in Milne's Hundred Acres Wood have forgotten their identity. Pooh knocks at the door of his own house and wonders why no one is opening the door.

"What a long time whoever lives here is answering this door." And he knocked again. "But Pooh," said Piglet, "it's your own house!" "Oh!" said Pooh. "So it is," he said. "Well, let's go in."

This book is full of fun and merriment, jokes and pranks. Milne uses the medium of fantasy in the book to criticise the artificiality and pretentiousness of the adult world. In Pooh's carefree world, the only thing that the characters fear is growing up and leaving the children's world behind, an eventuality from which there would be no escape. This fear is palpable in the last scene of *The House at Pooh Corner*. Once Christopher Robin starts going to school, his world of toys begins to crumble. Taking leave of the toys symbolises taking leave of childhood, and with this farewell, Milne knowing or unknowingly took leave of the fantasy genre as well. This book earned Milne and his son a great deal of popularity, but it came at a heavy cost. This popularity proved damaging to the happy relationship between father and son, and to Christopher Milne's future life. Both realised belatedly that being suspended in any phase of life is possible only in fantasy. Once hailed as a veritable psychologist of young minds, by the end of his life Milne was subjected to utter misapprehension by critics as well as

his own son. With Milne's heart-rending experience, the golden age of children's literary writing came to a tragic end.

This literary trend was disrupted by Edith Nesbit, who is known as the pioneer of modern children's literature. She broke the mould of writing about imaginary worlds and sought to give young readers a taste of the world in its raw reality, and to teach them to accept and overcome the inevitable bitter truths of human life. Her thoughts are conveyed to young readers in simple but powerful words. In her famous books *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* and *The Would Be Goods*, she depicts the ordinary struggles of a middleclass family named Bastable. *The Railway Children* and *Five Children* were also among her immensely popular books. Her unique style of writing directly or indirectly influenced many future writers. Of these, a name that certainly merits mention is J. K. Rowling.

Even as a child, Rowling was fond of writing fantasy fiction. Her childhood was troubled by her mother's illness and her own differences of opinion with her father and their eventual estrangement. She has herself admitted that the all-knowing bookworm Hermione in the Harry Potter series has shades of the eleven-year-old Rowling. In 1990, while travelling by train from London to Manchester, she was struck by the idea of a story about a small child in a school of wizardry. She then thought of the name Harry, and all the other characters and events started taking shape in her mind. While she was writing the book, Rowling's mother passed away. Saddened by the loss of her mother, she vented her grief in the book through Harry's sorrows.



Rowling paints an extremely realistic picture of human nature, human mind and its emotions, and the complexity of human relations. Thus, her books are not merely entertaining thrillers and fantasy novels but transcend the boundaries of the genre, becoming a philosophical critique of human ethos. Rowling's style of writing is extremely powerful; her readers maintain that the joy of reading the books is only partly recreated in watching the movies based on them. Take for example Dumbledore's statement in the third book, "it's not our abilities that show who we truly are, it's our choices", or Voldemort's speech on the nature of power in the last book, or the final poignant message that death is ultimately defeated if we continue to love and trust the people we've lost. Through her writings, Rowling has carved out a significant niche for children's literature in the 21st century.

Finally, the currently popular children's books such as Famous Five also deserve a mention. These books give a new twist to the old fairy tale format, which is perhaps the reason for their continued demand among young readers.

Nevertheless, with her rich writing style, J. K. Rowling has captivated young and old readers alike, firmly establishing the significance of children's literature in the 21st century in the gamut of mainstream literature.