

Example of article review on children's literature and how it grew

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This article by Sheila Egoff traces the development of children's literature over time, beginning with the Middle Ages, when there was actually no literature specifically aimed at children as a targeted audience. Because, as Egoff explained, many children were not expected to survive beyond infancy, there seemed little purpose in writing especially for that group who for the most part were not even taught to read and write. What few works for children have survived are books about "manners and instruction." Other than those, Egoff assumes children that could read had to make do with books such as romances and fables and the like that were written for an adult audience. Then, in the era of the Puritans, they discovered that children liked to read books about other children, so children's books appeared, although the child characters in them "were made to express adult values in every aspect of their carefully controlled lives and deaths." Egoff considers that the Puritan's approach created a "well-intentioned straitjacket" for later writers of children's books.

Over the next 150 years or so, the religious tone of children's literature became less obvious and there was a greater variety in terms of scope and themes, though the overall view was that such books needed merely to teach children morality and acceptable behaviour, although works such as "Goody Two Shoes (1765)" were an exception. The first book breaking that didactic mould came in 1839 (Holiday House by Catherine Sinclair).

Change came with the later Victorian era, when "childhood" was recognized as a separate state. Writers of the time incorporated in their works "the doctrine of perception" and "the doctrine of good breeding." Though most children's writers continued to be moralists, plots in the books became

exciting and characters more interesting. Although some of those Victorian stories have become “ classics”, the invention of the rotary press encouraged mass production of cheap, sensationalistic books and comics, known as “ penny dreadfuls.”

The works of the Edwardians, increased the contrast between children and adults, producing such classics as “ The Golden Age”, “ The Wind in the Willows” and “ Peter Pan.” In those tales, childhood was given its own character and made to endure as long as possible. That era of writing endured beyond the First World War and into the 1930’s.

In contrast, following World War II, children became viewed as a stage in the preparation for adulthood, and were endowed in the books of the time with characteristics such as “ self-reliance, generosity, friendship, imagination, integrity” although keeping them firmly in their place as children. Characters behaving as adults were criticized for their “ mature” attitudes.

Social changes in the 1950’s and 1960’s were reflected in the children’s books of the time. Adults dealt more openly and frankly with children and children’s rights became an issue. Children’s books were published in greater numbers than ever before, in an era when in many circles children were being considered more adult and to be maturing faster, though much of the “ wealth” of books published were said to be of mediocre quality. In the same era, the so-called “ problem novels” became popular, with subjects like drugs, divorce and sex as central themes. By the end of the 1960’s and into the 1970’s, children’s literature seemed more directed at “ adult” children and was in what Egroff referred to as echoing “ the confusion and energy inherent in Yeats’s lines in The Second Coming.”

Works Cited:

Egoff, Sheila. "Children's Literature and How it Grew". (1981[?]).