LITERARY CHILDHOODS: GROWING UP IN BRITISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Literary Childhoods is a series of essays edited by Šárka Bubíková which are adumbrated under one theme (childhood and coming of age) and its reflection in British and American literature. The book consists of ten chapters, whose authors show a wide range of interests. Most of the chapters examine childhood and its representation in children's literature; however, three of them focus on novels for adults and discuss how the image of a child might perform a symbolic function and how the adult characters learn to cope with the loss of their childhood and innocence or how the concept of a child can be used as a device for the construction of a novel.

The topics of the individual chapters are presented in the introduction, in which the editor also points out the current growth of interest in the phenomenon of childhood in cultural and literary studies. She admits that the essays cannot provide a comprehensive image of all the aspects of childhood and growing up; however, they do provide some idea of the changes that childhood has undergone over two centuries in two countries (the UK and the USA) and how they are reflected in literature.

Šárka Bubíková is not only the editor of this multi-author monograph, but also the author and co-author of four chapters, which together bring quite a wide range of topics focusing on childhood and literature written for children. That is why these essays can be a very useful source of information for everybody who is interested in children's literature written in English. In the first chapter, "Concepts and Experiences of Childhood," Bubíková explains how society has changed its attitudes to children and to the process of their growing up and upbringing. She describes the religious, cultural, and philosophical influences that shaped the concept of childhood over several centuries. As the individual headings of the subchapters suggest, it is possible to identify three main concepts: pre-modern childhood, childhood in the age of industrialization, and childhood

in postmodern society. Although Bubíková shows slightly more interest in the American reality, the image of childhood that is presented also holds true for children growing up in Britain.

In another two chapters (Chapter 7 and Chapter 9), Bubíková provides literary examples of her description of childhood in chapter 1. In Chapter 7, "Growing Up and the Quest for Identity," Bubíková explains that the image of the child represents a metaphor of newness and that forgetting one's biological parent and finding one's spiritual parent instead is a recurrent theme in American literature. This process is, however, complicated by some cultural and racial aspects described by Mona Chang, the first Chinese-American novelist, in *Mona in the Promised Land*. This novel is identified as an excellent example of the popularity of the Bildungsroman genre nowadays. The essay also illustrates how this novel addresses issues of ethnicity in American culture and explains why "going ethnic" has become so fashionable.

In Chapter 9, "Growing Up Postmodern," Bubíková looks at the versatile range of images of childhood in American literature which have appeared as responses to American reality. Her focus is, however, on the representation of children in a postmodern multicultural society. First she provides Nathan Glazer's theory of multiculturalism as a background for her interpretation of *The Crown of Columbus* by Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich. She explores the character of postmodern childhood, which can be considered synonymous with childhood in a post-industrial society because children have become "independent consumers and participants in a separate semiautonomous culture" (134). The essay also examines how the novel exemplifies a typical element of multiculturalism: the revision of history (the story of Columbus). Another theme Bubíková identifies in the novel is the blending of cultures, which is demonstrated by the immersion of the main character in diverse cultural backgrounds. A child character plays a symbolic role in the novel because it can be considered a metaphor for cultural confluence.

Chapter 6, "Becoming Little Women," explores the autobiographical features in the novel Little Women, by Louisa May Alcott. It also describes the position and life of women in the 19th century. Štráchalová and Bubílková suggest that the title of the novel stems from the idea that girls were the seeds of future women. The transition from childhood to womanhood is seen as a struggle towards self-improvement. The focus is on the development of the narrator Jo, who has to overcome the rebellious nature of her character. Štráchalová and Bubíková consider the character of the mother Marmee an enlightened educator

and point out the unique qualities of this novel, which does not abound in sentimentality and preaching, unlike other novels written by Alcott's contemporaries.

Two chapters (Chapter 2 and Chapter 5) deal with very popular works of children's literature, Jungle Book and Harry Potter, however, they try to bring new and fresh views. Especially Chapter 2, "'My Heart is Heavy with the Things That I Do Not Understand': Initiation and Identity in Kipling's Mowgli Stories" by Patricie Ráčková shows an interesting analysis of Mowgli's Stories. This essay presents Mowgli's situation in the whole story as a problem of split identity and isolation and provides evidence of this statement. Mowgli's story is also interpreted on the basis of Hannah Arendt's work Life of the Mind. According to Arendt, *thinking* "inevitably implies double identity, its kernel being a dialog" (37) between oneself and oneself. Taking this approach into consideration, Ráčková understands Mowgli's monologues as an example of his double identity and an illustration of Arendt's concept of the *thinking self.*

In Chapter 5, "The Magic of the Real/the Real of the Magic in Harry Potter" Libora Oates-Indruchová aims to prove that the Harry Potter story is only seemingly set in a fantasy world. The structure and the themes indicate that Harry Potter represents the Bildungsroman genre. The essay examines elements typical of a moral story of growing up and points out its political commitment when the reader is required to take part in solving moral dilemmas.

In Chapter 3, "Growing up in Jane Gardam's Novels," Milada Franková examines aptly Jane Gardam's ability to respond to changing views on the topic of children's upbringing and education, especially how she managed to reflect the reaction against stiff Victorian mores and values and the changing attitudes to this issue in the 1960s, when the young protagonists fought against the limitations imposed on their freedom by their parents. This well-written essay analyzes three novels by Jane Gardam: *Bilgewater*, *God on the Roc*ks, and *Robinson's Daughter*, in which the years of growing up and maturity are viewed as a period during which a bright child negotiates with adult authority. The novels, which show how the mind of the child protagonist reflects and explores her surroundings, can be considered as a kind of Bildungsroman. Franková provides some examples of this genre and demonstrates how the theme of childhood and growing up was tackled in literature both in older and contemporary novels.

Although Petr Chalupecký's essay in Chapter 4, "Freedom, Spontainety [sic], Imagination and the Loss of Innocence – the Theme of Childhood in Ian McEwan's Fiction" deals with McEwan's novels written predominantly (with the exception of *The Daydreamer*) for adults, it brings such thought-provoking

analyses of the image of childhood that it deserves its place in this book. Chalupecký identifies social dysfunction as the common denominator of the first longer fictions. *The Cement Garden* centers on a dysfunctional family and shows that when children gain independence from parental authority they start acting spontaneously in an act of opposition to their father's tyrannical discipline. Chalupecký points out that the detached uninvolved narrative strategy (Jack's voice) enhances the dreamlike atmosphere and that the novel could be read as a variant of a psychological story of childhood and adolescence.

Chalupecký argues that the theme of the loss of a child in the novel *The Child in Time* means a physical loss as well as a metaphorical loss because adults cannot retain their childlike innocence, spontaneity, and curiosity. *The Daydreamer*, the only longer work written for children, is linked to McEwan's earlier works by its celebration of childhood as a time of freedom and anarchy. At the same time it also shares some themes that appear in *Atonement*, as both the novels have child protagonists who possess excessive imagination. Briony in *Atonement* is a very sensitive and imaginative child and when she can see that the traditional order she knows from her fairy-tale-like fictional world is being destroyed, she tries to restore it. Chalupecký points out that McEwan finds some similarity between spontaneous childhood and the process of writing, and in Briony's decision "to write an atonement" (61) he sees McEwan's personal "atonement to silence the strengthening voices of his critics" (61).

Another essay examines novels which were not written for children, but in which a child is a very attentive observer of the situation caused by the terrorist attacks. It is Chapter 10, "Motif of Childhood in the "9/11" Genre", which analyzes works in which the child characters' perception is important because, as it is stated, children try to make sense of the world of adults and thus they make "the familiar and everyday strange" (149). The child's imagination is responsible for the reversal of the roles of parent and child. This shift may suggest that there is a similarity between the behavior of children and that of an attacked state that strictly monitors everything that provokes people's imagination and thus fear. When Ewa Kowal interprets *Windows on the World* by Frédéric Beibeder, she points out that the fathers failed to play their roles and that children frequently live in a fantasy world because of comics, computer games etc. That is why they can believe that the plane crash that they observe from the top of the North Tower on 9/11 cannot be real.

The essay pays attention to some more novels dealing with the events of 9/11, in which children are a useful vehicle for thoughts: *Extremely Loud and*

Incredibly Close by Jonathan Sefran Foer, *Dear Zoe* by Philip Beard, and a metatextual graphic novel by Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of the Tower* (presenting the tragedy of 9/11 as an analogy to the Holocaust). Kowal realizes that addressing the 9/11 tragedy directly means taking risks for the authors and that is why she considers their strategy of choosing child narrators, who are known to be unreliable, as a kind of insurance against this risk.

Chapter 8, "Killing of the (Inner) Child, Auto-American Biography and American Sublime in Joseph Heller's *Something Happened*," focuses on the significance of the Romantic Child image for the construction of the plot of Heller's novel *Something Happened*. Zofia Kolbuszewska explains how it relates to the figures of the narrator's historicized children. In the essay there are references to the concept of the Romantic child, to Freudian theory, and to Peter Brook's approach to narrative based on his reading of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which makes the reading of this chapter quite difficult. The essay also discusses how Heller used a child figure as a device that moved his narrative forward and how the novel and its representation of the child are related to Heller's creation of America's representation of itself.

Overall, this multi-author monograph offers a highly valuable source of different approaches to literature. It makes readers realize how child protagonists can be used to move the action of the story forward and can provide interesting comments on society. The essays dealing with books written for children can also generate an interest in children's literature (which has been neglected in the past), as the authors of these essays showed that good books, though written for child readers, deal with themes that can enrich adult readers too.

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