



THE HISTORY OF CHILDREN'S FANTASY IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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The fantasy genre written for children has a rich and long history in English literature, reflecting changing attitudes toward childhood, imagination, education, and storytelling. From oral folklore to complex secondary worlds, children's fantasy has evolved into one of the most influential literary genres. Although it is often perceived merely as a form of entertainment, children's fantasy has always embodied deep cultural, moral, and philosophical meanings, shaping young readers' understanding of the world and of themselves.

The roots of children's fantasy lie in oral storytelling traditions—myths, legends, folktales, and fairy tales. In the early stages of English culture, children and adults listened to the same stories, which frequently featured fairies, giants, witches, and talking animals. These narratives were initially passed down orally from generation to generation and were later recorded in written form. Elements of fantasy symbolically expressed fear, desire, moral values, and social order. During this period, imagination was not valued as an independent concept but rather as a tool for moral instruction.

Until the eighteenth century, literature written specifically for children was almost nonexistent, and fantasy stories were often strongly didactic in nature. Magical punishments and rewards served to reinforce obedience, honesty, and humility. However, during the Enlightenment and Romantic periods, perceptions of childhood began to change, and imagination came to be recognized as a crucial element of a child's intellectual and emotional development. This shift laid the foundation for the emergence of modern children's fantasy literature.

The nineteenth century marked a significant turning point in the history of children's fantasy in English literature. Childhood began to be viewed as a distinct and protected stage of life, and literature was expected not only to educate but also to delight. One of the most revolutionary works of this era was *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. Rejecting traditional moral instruction, the novel introduced a new style based on nonsense, absurdity, and wordplay. Wonderland operates according to dreamlike logic, questioning authority, language, and rational thinking. Carroll demonstrated that fantasy could stimulate not only imagination but also intellectual curiosity.

Another important figure of the nineteenth century was George MacDonald, who combined fairy-tale structures with spiritual and philosophical themes. His works showed that fantasy worlds could possess deep emotional and symbolic meaning. MacDonald's view of fantasy as a serious literary genre rather than mere escapism greatly influenced later writers.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, children's fantasy increasingly focused on adventure and escapism. Social changes such as industrialization and urbanization intensified the need for magical worlds that offered children an escape from everyday reality. Fantasy settings became spaces of freedom, danger, and wonder. J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*



presents the idea of eternal childhood through the depiction of Neverland, a place where growing up is impossible. The story highlights both the joy of childhood and the inevitability of maturity.

At the same time, Edith Nesbit made a significant contribution to children's fantasy by introducing magical events into ordinary domestic settings. Her works allowed children to imagine that magic could enter their own lives, establishing a narrative model that later became widely used in the genre.

The mid-twentieth century is often regarded as the "golden age" of children's fantasy. During this period, authors created fully developed fantasy worlds with their own histories, rules, and moral systems. One of the leading figures of this era was C. S. Lewis, whose *The Chronicles of Narnia* combine mythological creatures, an epic struggle between good and evil, and rich symbolic meanings. Lewis demonstrated that fantasy could carry profound significance for both children and adults.

Another major figure of this period was J. R. R. Tolkien. Although *The Hobbit* was written for children, it is grounded in a complex mythological and linguistic framework. Tolkien emphasized the importance of internal consistency and detailed world-building in fantasy, leaving a lasting impact on the development of the genre as a whole.

By the late twentieth century, children's fantasy began to address more complex emotional and psychological issues. Writers increasingly explored themes such as fear, loss, identity, and moral ambiguity. This shift is particularly evident in the *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling. While the series begins with a lighthearted tone, it gradually engages with serious themes including death, power, discrimination, and responsibility.

Today, English-language children's fantasy remains a dynamic and evolving genre. Although its forms and themes continue to change, its core purpose remains the same: to nurture imagination, reveal emotional truths, and help young readers make sense of the world. The journey from oral fairy tales to intricate fantasy worlds confirms the enduring importance of children's fantasy for humanity.

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