

THE IMAGE OF CHILDHOOD IN THE XIX CENTURY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

Berdiboeva Khushnoza

ABSTRACT

This article examines the portrayal of childhood in 19th-century English literature from social, psychological, and cultural perspectives. Excluding the works of Charlotte Bronte and Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist, it analyzes the depictions of childhood in the works of Thomas Hardy, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and William Wordsworth. The study explores the social issues of the Victorian era, attitudes toward childhood, and the symbolic significance of child characters. Through these portrayals, authors convey social critique and psychological insights.

Key words: *Childhood images, 19th-century English literature, Victorian era, social critique, psychological analysis, symbolic meaning, Thomas Hardy, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, William Wordsworth.*

ОБРАЗ ДЕТСТВА В АНГЛИЙСКОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЕ XIX ВЕКА

АННОТАЦИЯ

Статья посвящена анализу образа детства в английской литературе XIX века с социальной, психологической и культурной точек зрения. Исключая произведения Шарлотты Бронте и «Оливера Твиста» Чарльза Диккенса, исследуются работы таких авторов, как Томас Харди, Элизабет Гаскелл, Джордж Элиот и Уильям Вордсворт. В статье раскрываются социальные проблемы викторианской эпохи, отношение к детству и символическое значение детских образов. Через образы детей авторы выражают социальную критику и психологические аспекты своего мировоззрения.

Ключевые слова: *Образы детства, английская литература XIX века, викторианская эпоха, социальная критика, психологический анализ, символическое значение, Томас Харди, Элизабет Гаскелл, Джордж Элиот, Уильям Вордсворт*

XIX ASR INGLIZ ADABIYOTIDA BOLALIK TASVIRI

ANNOTATSIYA

Ushbu maqola XIX asr ingliz adabiyotidagi bolalik obrazlarini ijtimoiy, psixologik va madaniy nuqtai nazardan tahlil qiladi. Sharlotta Bronte va Charlz

Dikensning “Oliver Twist” asaridan tashqari, Tomas Hardi, Elizabeth Gaskell, Jorj Eliot va Uilyam Uordsvort kabi yozuvchilarning asarlarida bolalik qanday tasvirlangani o‘rganiladi. Maqola Viktoriya davri ijtimoiy muammolari, bolalikka munosabat va adabiyotdagi ramziy ma’nomlarni ochib beradi. Bolalik obrazlari orqali mualliflarning ijtimoiy tanqid va psixologik dunyoqarashi ko‘rsatiladi.

Kalit so‘zlar: *Bolalik obrazlari, XIX asr ingliz adabiyoti, Viktoriya davri, ijtimoiy tanqid, psixologik tahlil, ramziy ma’no, Tomas Hardi, Elizabeth Gaskell, Jorj Eliot, Uilyam Uordsvort.*

INTRODUCTION

19th-century English literature stands out for its deep exploration of social, moral, and psychological themes. During this period, the image of childhood became a central topic, reflecting not only personal experiences but also the broader changes and conflicts within society. The Victorian era (1837–1901) was marked by the Industrial Revolution, urbanization, and growing class divisions, which reshaped attitudes toward childhood. While the Romantic period (late 18th to early 19th century) portrayed childhood as a symbol of purity, harmony with nature, and divine inspiration, the Victorian era often viewed it through the lens of social issues such as poverty, orphanhood, child labor, and inequalities in education.

Childhood images in literature served various purposes: they exposed societal injustices, explored psychological development, or depicted childhood as a fleeting state of innocence. This article analyzes how childhood is portrayed in the works of authors other than Charlotte Brontë and Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*, specifically focusing on Thomas Hardy, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and William Wordsworth. The goal is to examine the role of childhood images in social critique, psychological depth, and symbolic meaning. The article highlights the multifaceted portrayal of childhood in Victorian literature and discusses its lasting influence on modern literary studies.

Historical and Social Context

The Victorian era (1837–1901) was a time of significant social and economic transformation in England. The Industrial Revolution accelerated urbanization, fundamentally altering the lives of the working class. These changes profoundly affected how childhood was perceived and experienced. In the early stages of industrialization, children were often employed in harsh factory conditions. Although the Factory Acts of 1833 and 1847 introduced some restrictions on child labor, poverty and social inequality forced many children into orphanages or street life. During this period, childhood was frequently seen as an economic resource: in

wealthy families, children received education and upbringing, but in poor families, they were often expected to contribute to household income.

Victorian moral values idealized childhood as a state of purity and innocence, but this ideal was largely reserved for middle- and upper-class children. For working-class children, childhood was brief and filled with hardships. The education system also reflected class disparities: private schools were available for the wealthy, while the poor had access to limited church-run schools or no education at all. These contradictions were mirrored in literature through childhood images. The Romantic idealization of childhood (e.g., William Wordsworth's vision of childhood as harmonious with nature) gradually gave way to realism, which depicted childhood in the context of social problems and psychological struggles.

In literature, childhood images emerged as a response to societal changes. For instance, Elizabeth Gaskell's works highlighted the struggles of children in industrial cities, while Thomas Hardy portrayed the tragic consequences of class barriers on childhood. Beyond reflecting social issues, childhood also served as a vehicle for authors to express philosophical and psychological ideas. Thus, childhood images in Victorian literature represent a unique synthesis of social reality and literary imagination.

Analysis: Images of Childhood

The portrayal of childhood in 19th-century English literature was closely tied to the diverse literary movements and unique perspectives of individual authors. Below, the childhood images in the works of four authors—Thomas Hardy, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and William Wordsworth—are analyzed. Each author depicts childhood in a distinct social and psychological context, illustrating the diversity of this theme in Victorian literature.

1. Thomas Hardy: The Tragic Portrayal of Childhood in *Jude the Obscure*
Thomas Hardy's 1895 novel *Jude the Obscure* presents childhood through the lens of class barriers and tragic fate. The character Little Father Time stands far from the traditional image of childhood as a time of purity and joy. His unnatural seriousness and pessimistic view of life reflect Hardy's critical stance on the moral and social constraints of Victorian society. Little Father Time carries a sense of responsibility and despair beyond his years, leading to a tragic end. Through this character, Hardy illustrates the burdens society places on children—poverty, lack of education, and social injustice. Childhood here is not a joyful period but a fragile stage exposed to life's harsh realities.

2. Elizabeth Gaskell: Working-Class Children in North and South and Mary Barton Elizabeth Gaskell's novels, particularly North and South (1855) and Mary Barton (1848), depict the harsh lives of working-class children during the Industrial Revolution. In Mary Barton, children from poor families face hunger, illness, and early labor. Gaskell portrays childhood as a victim of social injustice but also as a symbol of human compassion and hope. For example, in North and South, Margaret Hale witnesses the struggles of working-class children, highlighting their fight for survival. Gaskell's childhood images serve as a call for social reform, urging readers to address societal inequalities. In her works, childhood is both a personal experience and a symbol of class struggle.

3. George Eliot: Psychological Development in The Mill on the Floss George Eliot's 1860 novel The Mill on the Floss explores childhood through the lens of psychological development and social constraints. The character Maggie Tulliver's childhood is filled with internal conflicts and external pressures. As a young girl, Maggie is portrayed as free-spirited, creative, and imaginative, but societal gender and class norms restrict her individuality. Eliot presents childhood as a formative stage of personality, often complicated by unjust family and social expectations. Through Maggie, Eliot depicts the fleeting purity of childhood and the painful transition to adulthood. This character embodies a blend of psychological depth and social critique.

4. William Wordsworth: Romantic Childhood in The Prelude William Wordsworth's 1850 poetic work The Prelude reflects the Romantic portrayal of childhood. Wordsworth idealizes childhood as a time of harmony with nature, divine inspiration, and spiritual purity. In the poem, childhood is depicted as the starting point of self-awareness and creative consciousness. Wordsworth's approach, distinct from the realism of later Victorian works, is optimistic and philosophical. His childhood images are tied to the grandeur of nature and the limitless potential of the human spirit. While distinct, these images laid the groundwork for later authors' socially critical approaches.

Symbolic and Psychological Interpretation of Childhood Images

Childhood images in 19th-century English literature not only reflected social issues but were also enriched with symbolic and psychological meanings. Often portrayed as a symbol of purity, innocence, or hope, childhood was used by Victorian authors to explore complex psychological and philosophical questions. Through childhood images, authors analyzed human nature's contradictions, societal constraints, and the process of personal growth.

In William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, childhood is a central symbol of Romantic philosophy. For Wordsworth, childhood is the time when humans are closest to nature and divine inspiration, representing spiritual purity and creative potential. However, this idealized view contrasts with the realistic portrayals of later authors. For example, in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, Little Father Time symbolizes despair and tragedy. His unnatural seriousness and pessimistic outlook reflect Hardy's meditations on human fate and societal injustice. Little Father Time challenges the traditional joyful image of childhood, embodying the psychological burdens imposed by society.

In George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, childhood is depicted as a complex stage of psychological development. Maggie Tulliver's childhood is marked by internal conflicts—her desire for freedom clashes with societal restrictions. Eliot portrays childhood as a formative period, often painful due to family and social pressures. Through Maggie, Eliot offers a deep psychological analysis, presenting childhood as both a transient phase and a critical stage in the transition to adulthood.

In Elizabeth Gaskell's works, such as *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, childhood serves as a symbolic tool in the fight against social injustice. While her child characters are often victims of poverty and illness, they also represent human compassion and hope. These images evoke empathy in readers, serving as a call for social reform. Although Gaskell's approach is less psychologically deep, the symbolic power of her childhood images lies in their focus on social change.

Overall, childhood images in 19th-century English literature are multifaceted, allowing authors to explore societal contradictions, human psychology, and philosophical questions. Childhood is not only a personal experience but also a mirror reflecting society's moral and social state.

CONCLUSION

The image of childhood in 19th-century English literature deeply reflects the social, cultural, and psychological landscape of the Victorian era. From William Wordsworth's Romantic idealization to the realistic and critical approaches of Thomas Hardy, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot, childhood was portrayed in diverse contexts. Through these images, authors exposed social issues such as poverty, class disparities, educational inequalities, and gender constraints. At the same time, childhood served as a symbol of psychological development, human purity, and conflict with society.

Wordsworth linked childhood to nature and divine inspiration, while Hardy portrayed it through the lens of tragic fate and social injustice. Gaskell used

childhood as a symbolic call for social reform, and Eliot explored its psychological depth and personal struggles. This diversity underscores the richness of childhood images in 19th-century English literature. These portrayals remain relevant today, serving as a valuable resource for understanding human experiences and discussing social issues. The childhood images of Victorian literature are not only a reflection of their time but also an embodiment of timeless human questions about justice, freedom, and personal growth.

REFERENCES

1. Hardy, T. (1895). *Jude the Obscure*. London: Osgood, McIlvaine & Co. Routledge.
2. Gaskell, E. (1848). *Mary Barton*. London: Chapman and Hall.
3. Gaskell, E. (1855). *North and South*. London: Chapman and Hall.
4. Eliot, G. (1860). *The Mill on the Floss*. Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons.
5. Wordsworth, W. (1850). *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind*. London: Edward Moxon.
6. Coveney, P. (1967). *The Image of Childhood: The Individual and Society: A Study of the Theme in English Literature*. London: Penguin Books.
7. Shuttleworth, S. (2010). *The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science, and Medicine, 1840–1900*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
8. Reynolds, J. (2014). *Children's Literature: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.