THE EVOLUTION OF CHILD CHARACTERS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE: FROM MEDIEVAL SYMBOLS TO PSYCHOLOGICAL COMPLEXITY

Tokhirova Dilrabo Muzaffar qizi,

Uzbekistan state world languages university, department of science,

PhD Scientific Supervisor — Candidate of Philological Sciences, Associate Professor,

Mukhammedova Nilufar Eliboyevna.

Introduction

The representation of children in English literature has undergone a profound transformation over the centuries, evolving from simple allegorical figures to complex psychological entities that reflect both individual human experience and broader societal concerns. This evolution mirrors changing cultural attitudes toward childhood itself, shifting from medieval perceptions of children as miniature adults or spiritual symbols to contemporary understanding of childhood as a distinct developmental phase with its own psychological complexity.

The literary child serves multiple functions within narrative structures: as a lens through which authors examine social issues, as a vehicle for exploring universal themes of innocence and experience, and as a mirror reflecting the anxieties and hopes of different historical periods. From Chaucer's martyred children who embody Christian purity to contemporary protagonists grappling with trauma and identity, child characters have consistently occupied a unique position in English literature—simultaneously vulnerable and powerful, innocent and knowing, simple and profound.

This transformation is not merely aesthetic but represents fundamental shifts in psychological understanding, educational philosophy, and social consciousness. The emergence of psychoanalytic theory, developmental psychology, and trauma studies has provided new frameworks for understanding childhood experience, which authors have incorporated into increasingly sophisticated literary portrayals.

The significance of studying child characters extends beyond literary criticism to encompass cultural studies, psychology, and social history. These characters serve as cultural artifacts that reveal prevailing attitudes toward childhood, family structures, education, and social justice across different historical periods. They also demonstrate how literature both reflects and shapes societal understanding of child development, trauma, resilience, and agency.

Research Objective

To document the chronological development of child characterization in English literature, identifying key transitional periods and catalytic works;

To analyze the archetypal patterns that emerge across different literary periods, applying Jungian archetypal theory to understand recurring symbolic representations;

To examine the integration of psychological theories—particularly psychoanalytic, developmental, and trauma theories—into literary characterization;

Materials and Methods

This qualitative study employs a historical-analytical approach, examining child characters across 1,050 years of English literature (from medieval mystery plays to contemporary fiction) through an interdisciplinary framework that integrates Jungian archetypal criticism, Freudian psychoanalytic theory, developmental psychology (Piaget, Erikson, Vygotsky), attachment theory (Bowlby), object relations theory (Klein, Winnicott), and contemporary trauma studies (Caruth, Herman). The analysis combines chronological examination of character evolution across five major literary periods with comparative analysis of archetypal patterns and psychological complexity in selected primary texts including works by Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens, Brontë, Golding, McEwan, and contemporary authors.

Research findings

In Medieval literature (450–1500), children were depicted as symbols of innocence and religious devotion. Their inner worlds remained unexplored—they existed solely to represent spiritual ideals. For example, in Chaucer's "The Prioress's Tale," the martyred child embodies Christian purity, while in the York mystery play "The Massacre of the Innocents," the infants slaughtered by Herod's hand point to Christ's own innocence.

During the Renaissance period (1500–1660), children emerged as vibrant, emotionally rich characters who served as mirrors reflecting society's tragedies and ailments. In Shakespeare's "King John," Prince Arthur stands out as a figure marked by both his purity and his suffering, while in "Macbeth" and "Richard III," the young princes are portrayed as victims of political conspiracies who nonetheless carry dreams and aspirations in their hearts.

The 18th century (1701–1800) marked the first time children took center stage in literary works. Child characters were interpreted differently across the various literary movements that emerged during this period—didactic, sentimental, pre-romantic, and realistic. For instance, Sarah Fielding's "The Governess" offered life lessons to young girls, while Thomas Day's "Sandford and Merton" promoted humanity through the friendship between rich and poor children. William Blake's "Songs of Innocence" celebrated childhood as a reflection of paradise, and Maria Edgeworth's "The Parent's Assistant" guided children toward honesty within the context of everyday life. In this way, children became the moral and educational center, serving as instruments for social reform.

The Victorian Era (1837–1901). During this period, children stepped out of allegory to become living individuals with complex inner worlds. They were portrayed struggling against societal pressures, class divisions, and overwhelming responsibilities. In Dickens' "Oliver Twist," the orphaned Oliver exposes poverty and legal cruelty, while in Brontë's "Jane Eyre," childhood cruelties are woven seamlessly with Jane's inner world. Thus, child characters became the center of psychological exploration and a weapon for critiquing society.

The 20th Century (1900–1999). Children were no longer idealized during this era. They emerged as characters battling inner rebellion, loneliness, and alienation. Golding's "Lord of the Flies" reveals humanity's dark side through children who turn savage on an island, while Barry Hines' "A Kestrel for a Knave" uses a hawk to symbolize the freedom in Billy's heart. Ian McEwan's "The Cement Garden" shows the psychological breakdown of orphaned children, Pullman's "Northern Lights" follows Lyra's

journey of coming-of-age through adventure, and Haddon’s “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time” opens up Christopher’s unique perceptual world. Child characters thus became tools for social criticism and revealing hidden layers of human psychology.

Throughout the centuries, child characters in English literature have taken various forms. These portrayals aren't mere coincidence—they’re manifestations of archetypes deeply embedded in culture and psyche. As Jung taught, archetypes live in humanity's memory and appear in similar forms across different cultures. Children in English literature are depicted through these very symbols.

The Innocent Child archetype represents childhood's natural purity, pure heart, and distance from evil. This image symbolizes simplicity and sincerity in the face of a complex world. For instance, in J.M. Barrie’s “Peter Pan,” Peter refuses to grow up, creating a world of eternal childhood. In C.S. Lewis’ “The Chronicles of Narnia,” Lucy embodies pure faith and kindness.

The Divine Child archetype represents not just innocence, but high spirituality and supernatural powers. In Pullman’s “His Dark Materials” trilogy, children stand against cosmic forces, creating new moral standards.

Next comes the Hero Child—shaped through the process of growing up, facing trials, and understanding truth. Harry Potter is a brilliant example of a modern hero: he fights for his friends and the wizarding world. Dickens’ “David Copperfield” finds his independent path through life’s harsh trials. The hero child is a complex character who takes on responsibility in both fairy tales and life dramas.

But literature shows not only love and courage, but also abandonment and pain. Here emerges the Abandoned Child archetype—a character who grows up without love despite having living parents. For example, in Jacqueline Wilson’s “Hetty Feather,” Hetty grows up in the cold environment of a children's home, searching for genuine affection throughout her life.

A related archetype is the Orphan Child—a character cut off from family but striving to find their true self. “Oliver Twist,” “Jane Eyre,” and “Harry Potter” go through trials to achieve spiritual strength and independence.

Sometimes children refuse to submit to society’s rules. This is the Rebel Child archetype, standing against the unjust rules of the adult world. Roald Dahl’s “Matilda” uses intelligence to fight against oppressors, while Pullman's Lyra fights injustice despite her loneliness. Eoin Colfer’s “Artemis Fowl” breaks societal rules, rejecting traditional notions of the “innocent child.”

The Visionary Child archetype sees truth in magical and extraordinary ways, discovering reality through imagination and inner voice. L. Carroll’s “Alice” exposes the absurdity of the adult world, while Lucy Pevensie opens pathways to miraculous worlds through faith. Simon in W. Golding’s “Lord of the Flies” emerges as the only child who senses humanity's inner darkness.

Finally, literature confronts us with the evil child archetype. This image connects childhood not with innocence, but with the dark sides of human nature. In W. Golding’s work, Jack’s character rules through violence, while in Doris Lessing’s “The Fifth Child,” Ben becomes an evil force as a result of familial coldness. J.K. Rowling's Draco Malfoy embodies pride and hatred. This shows that children aren't always pure—they can also express society’s cruelty and decline.

Thus, child characters in English literature transition from one archetype to another, encompassing the entire human experience from innocence to evil. Each archetype is portrayed in harmony with its era's society, mentality, and cultural needs.

Child characters in English literature aren’t mere decoration—they're the heart and voice of the work. Sometimes they guide, sometimes they disrupt order, thereby revealing or questioning societal values. A child's perspective brings a fresh and sincere view to the adult world. For this reason, child characters don't just drive the plot—they give it symbolism, tone, and profound meaning.

Child protagonists appear in two forms: as main or secondary characters. The main protagonist serves as a “mirror” showing events. For instance, in Charlotte Brontë’s “Jane Eyre,” the protagonist's childhood suffering provides the foundation for the author's feminist views. Secondary characters don’t drive the plot but enrich the emotional backdrop. In Dickens’ “David Copperfield,” though Emily isn’t central to events, she illuminates the main character’s decisions and evokes reader sympathy.

In conclusion, child characters in English literature evolved from simple symbols to complex psychological figures. Through this process, they appeared in various archetypes—from innocence to rebellion, from simplicity to cleverness. As a result, child protagonists became an important theoretical foundation for future analyses.

The third chapter, titled “Theoretical Foundations of Child Character Psychology,” emphasizes child character psychoanalysis, forming an integrative-conceptual foundation from psychological theories related to child psychology, emotional connections with surroundings, cognitive processes, and environmental perception.

Child characters in English literature moved from being simple symbolic or moral representations to psychologically complex individuals with inner contradictions and genuine emotions. Through literary psychological techniques, writers portray children not as passive plot decorations, but as complex individuals in constant cognitive and emotional development. Authors like Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë deepened the psychological dimensions of child characters, masterfully revealing their inner experiences and struggles against societal injustice. As Valerie Sanders notes, Victorian-era children's psychological realism closely connects with society's growing attention to emotional authenticity.

Maria Nikolajeva emphasizes that storytelling from children's perspectives requires cognitive complexity, demanding authors imitate developing perception and limited understanding. This process clearly manifests in Lewis Carroll’s “Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,” where the protagonist's unstable mental state becomes a symbol of childhood consciousness's changeable and uncertain nature. Unlike superficial characters in simple fairy tales and classical literature, psychologically enriched child characters express fear, anxiety, and inner voice. Perry Nodelman interprets this phenomenon as a cultural shift toward accepting children not as objects, but as independent subjects.

Overall, the psychological interpretation of child characters in English literature is based on deep illumination of children's inner worlds. This process encompasses subconscious experiences, psychological trauma, emotional separation, and cognitive processes. Consequently, authors

believably and artistically present children's world perception, identity formation, and societal relationships through literary means.

Freud's psychoanalytic theories hold significant importance in analyzing child characters in English literature. The Oedipus complex explains how children develop strong affection for their mothers while feeling competitive toward fathers. This appears in Charles Dickens' "Great Expectations" through Pip's character—his attachment to Estella and hidden anger toward Joe express this complex. According to repression theory, children push painful memories into the subconscious. In Philippa Pearce's "Tom's Midnight Garden," Tom escapes memories of loneliness and neglect by indulging in imaginary time travel. The conflict between death instinct (Thanatos) and life instinct (Eros) reflects in Colin's character in Frances Burnett's "The Secret Garden." He initially accepts death as fate, then later strives to live under the garden's influence. Defense mechanism theory manifests in Mary Lennox's character: she displaces anger onto servants, sometimes regresses to childish petulance, and denies her parents' death. This explains her attempts to overcome psychological trauma from her loveless childhood. Dream theory expresses subconscious desires and anxieties through symbols. In Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," Alice's fantastical dream world is a metaphor for repressed desires and childhood psychological instability.

Melanie Klein's Object Relations Theory explains how emotional experiences with mothers in childhood form as "good" and "bad" objects in the child's inner world. This theory is clearly visible in Charles Dickens' "Bleak House" through Esther Summerson's character. Separated from her mother at an early age, Esther searches and yearns for her, creating two contradictory images of her mother: loving yet simultaneously unloving. This situation recalls Klein's "paranoid-schizoid position"—perceiving the world only through "good" or "bad" aspects. Later, when Esther recognizes her biological mother Lady Dedlock, she strives to understand and forgive her. This process expresses the transition to the "depressive position" in psychological development, where the child learns to accept objects as whole and complex.

In Donald Winnicott's theory, the concept of the "good enough mother" holds central importance in a child's psychological development. According to him, a mother's initial care is essential for the child to feel secure and form their "true self." If the mother responds appropriately to the child's needs, the child establishes healthy relationships with the external world; otherwise, they develop a "false self" and hide their genuine emotions.

Winnicott also introduced the concepts of "transitional objects" and transitional space. These objects (soft toys, blankets, etc.) serve as psychological comfort during the child's separation from the mother. In literature, this theory is clearly visible in Mark Haddon's "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" through Christopher Boone's character. The 15-year-old autistic Christopher suffers psychological distress due to his mother's absence and his father's protective lies, leading to the formation of his "false self." Nevertheless, Christopher strives to independently organize his life, representing the development of his "true self." His fascination with mathematics, routines, and patterns serves as a literary reflection of Winnicott's transitional objects theory.

Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory shows children's thinking develops through four stages: sensorimotor (0–2), preoperational (2–7), concrete operational (7–11), and formal operational (12+). At each stage, children master world comprehension, cause-and-effect understanding, and communication abilities. In "The Cement Garden," the development of four orphaned children

corresponds to these stages: the youngest, Tom (6 years), is in the preoperational stage, expressing emotions through egocentric role-play; Jack and Sue (13 years) have just emerged from the concrete operational stage, beginning logical thinking but still far from complex abstract reasoning; the eldest, Julie (17 years), is in the formal operational stage, understanding complex situations and considering others' emotions. Thus, each child character reflects Piaget's theory through age-appropriate psychological behaviors.

According to Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory, childhood has four main stages: trust vs. mistrust (0–1.5 years), autonomy vs. shame (1.5–3 years), initiative vs. guilt (3–6 years), and industry vs. inferiority (6–12 years). At each stage, children form their inner state through relationships with their surrounding world. For example, between ages 2–12, children learn usefulness through work and demonstrating their abilities; if these needs aren't met, they may feel inadequate. In "David Copperfield," David faces humiliation at school but develops himself through reading and writing, later demonstrating initiative and industriousness through his writing aspirations. Thus, encouragement and recognition of achievements during this stage are crucial for forming a healthy personal identity.

Lev Vygotsky's social development theory emphasizes that children's cognitive development forms through interpersonal communication and cultural environment. The concept of the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD) explains children's development through tasks they cannot complete independently but can accomplish with help from adults or more skilled peers. This theory effectively applies to analyzing child characters in English literature: In Jacqueline Wilson's "The Illustrated Mum," Dolphin learns independent decision-making and understanding social roles with help from her sister and friends; in David Almond's "Skellig," Michael expands his worldview and cognitive scope through interaction with Mina and meeting Skellig.

Trauma theory is important in contemporary literary studies for analyzing psychological wounds and their artistic expression. Cathy Caruth views trauma as an event that transcends time and language boundaries, cannot be fully expressed in words, and returns to consciousness through delayed memory, manifesting in literary works through symbols, metaphors, dreams, or unusual behaviors. For example, in Penelope Farmer's "Charlotte Sometimes," Melanie's time confusion and self-unrecognition reflect psychological bewilderment resulting from trauma. Judith Herman views trauma in social context, explaining it through a three-stage recovery process: safety restoration, remembrance and mourning, and integration as personal life experience. In Ian McEwan's "Atonement," Briony Tallis attempts to overcome trauma caused by wrong decisions through Herman's recovery stages. Thus, Caruth and Herman's theories reveal how trauma manifests subjectively and socially in literary works.

John Bowlby's attachment theory emphasizes that children's early emotional relationships—primarily with parents or caregivers—greatly influence their emotional and psychological development. Consistent care and affection form secure attachment, while instability and neglect lead to anxious or disorganized behaviors. Nina Bawden's "Carrie's War" demonstrates this through Carrie and her brother Nick's relationship: separated from parents during World War II and placed in unfamiliar environments, the children develop compensatory attachment through Carrie, who provides protection and guidance to Nick, while Nick depends on her.

Simon Baron-Cohen's Theory of Mind studies children's ability to understand that others have their own thoughts, desires, and emotions, and to predict their actions. Cohen describes this ability's gradual

development: at 0–9 months, infants learn to follow human gaze; at 9–14 months, joint attention emerges (child and adult look at something simultaneously); by 18 months, children understand others' actions are purposeful, based on intentions; around age 4, they can understand that others may have incorrect beliefs. Through these stages, children develop abilities to understand others, recognize their emotions, and adapt in relationships. In "The Secret Garden," Colin Craven's development demonstrates this: initially very egocentric, thinking only of himself and not sensing others' emotions. After meeting Mary Lennox, he gradually learns to understand others' intentions and feelings. Mary helps Colin think independently and boldly, not just through simple comfort. As a result, Colin begins to understand others' inner psychological states, his health and relationships improve, and he learns to value others.

Conclusion

This comprehensive analysis of child characters in English literature reveals a remarkable transformation that parallels broader shifts in cultural understanding, psychological knowledge, and social consciousness. The journey from medieval symbolic representations to contemporary psychological complexity reflects not merely literary evolution, but fundamental changes in how society perceives, understands, and values childhood experience.