

# THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

## Exploring Wordsworth's Romantic Image of Childhood in the Early 19th Century American Children's Literature with Respect to Wordsworth's Major Poems

Marzieh Keshavarz

Ph.D. Student, Department of Literature and Languages  
Texas A&M University-Commerce, USA

### Abstract:

*This study investigates three short stories which demonstrate the extent to which children's literature was influenced by romantic thoughts. Additionally, this article reflects on Wordsworth's image of childhood in the light of a state of an innocent mind. In fact, the main concern of the discussion focuses on the promotion of the Romantic image of childhood with respect to Wordsworth as a representative of the Romantic Movement who emphasizes the importance of the aesthetic and delightful aspects of children's education. Therefore, special attention is given to the Romantic image of childhood in order to provide a context for a better understanding of Romantic traces in American Children's Literature.*

**Keywords:** Wordsworth, children's literature, romanticism, romantic values, the image of childhood, proximity to nature and god, delightful education

### 1. Introduction

This paper investigates three American short stories of the early 19th century which demonstrate the extent to which children's literature was influenced by European romantic thoughts especially Wordsworth. In addition, reviewers were 'sanguine and receptive to Wordsworth's poetics and politics' (Transatlantic Romanticism 446). Therefore, this article basically reflects on Wordsworth's image of childhood in the light of a state of an innocent mind. In fact, the main concern of the discussion focuses on the promotion of the Romantic image of childhood with respect to Wordsworth as a representative of the European Romantic Movement who emphasizes the importance of the aesthetic and delightful aspects of children's education. Additionally, before the 19th-century children were seldom viewed as having a separate identity from adults. In fact, the 18th century witnessed the development of American children's literature as a flourishing genre and, therefore, various types of children's books developed throughout the whole century towards the 19th century. Along with this sort of progress, Romanticism as a new intellectual movement in Europe came to existence with the help of a group of poets, and in a short time achieved to its peak in different countries, especially in England, and consequently expanded to the other side of the Atlantic, America. Bennet and Manning claim that 'when literacy studies separate British from American national literatures and read each in relation to nationalism, Romanticism was a British and European movement which was represented in America only through imported books . . . .' (189). Additionally, it is said that Romanticism was introduced to America by Wordsworth in 1800 when 'the editor, Joseph Dennie, moved to Philadelphia and started a Port Folio to create an American taste for Wordsworth poetry, reprinting so many selections from Lyrical Ballads that Philadelphia demanded its own edition of the book by 1802 . . . .' (Transatlantic Romanticism 446).

Considering American children's literature, Thacker and Webb assert that 'the image of the Romantic child has been a key point of reference for the birth of children's literature since the beginning of the 19th century' (13). Besides, they confirm that 'whether in England or America, it is necessary to see the Children's literature that arose out of ideas first expressed through Romanticism in terms of narrative approach as well as subject matter' (16). In fact, it was in the mid -18th century that Romantic writers, notably Wordsworth, sought a literature to 'reconstruct the child's subjectivity as an ordered, legible, normative and moralized text in its own right' (Richardson 141). Accordingly, they caused children to be seen as especially close to God and nature which formed one of the most vital aspects of the romantic period and remained influential for generations through celebrating an idealized childhood: 'Childhood was thus idealized by those who were concerned with retrieving a consciousness of the sublime of recapturing knowledge and feeling of those truths unknown and unspoken' (Thacker and Webb 20).

The Romantic Movement gave special attention to imagination in contrast to reason, and accordingly, children's storytellers tried to mix delight and amusement to their instructions as John Locke, the philosopher of 18th century, mentions: 'I would have their lives made as agreeable to them, as may be, in a pleasant enjoyment of whatsoever might innocently delight them' (114). Accordingly, children use the imaginative faculty rather than reason to learn new lessons. Establishing a pedagogy of imagination helps children apprehend transcendental images and, then, combine them with real-life experiences because children are 'most prone to an imaginative and visual conception of the universe' (Brantley 149). In this regard, Wordsworth as the main figure of the Romantic era paved the way for such delightful instruction in

19th-century children's literature. Wordsworth, himself was aware of the impact of his Romantic ideas on the American readers as he once mentioned in a letter to Henry Reeds, his American editor, that 'he considers his U.S audiences to be among the ideal readers of his Preface:

It is gratifying to one whose aim as an author has been to reach the hearts of his fellow-creatures of all ranks and in all stations to find that he has succeeded in any quarter; and still more must he be gratified that he was pleased in a distant countrymen of simple habits and cultivated taste, who are at the same time wildly acquainted with literature.' (Transatlantic Romanticism 446)

In addition, Thacker and Webb believe that 'the influence of Romantic thought is not expressed purely, but it is subject to the heterogeneous nature of both the development of education and the nature of literature itself' (14). On the other hand, Romantic literary figures turn their back on the strict moral lessons of children's literature and try to perish the exultation of childhood through 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' (Wordsworth 5). However, the moral theme is still provided by these writers but they actually have shaped it in a completely new way and by the omission of direct moral instructions, the tone of their works appeared in a new and more attractive form. Additionally, the most important characteristic of Romantic literature is the appreciation of nature which can affect children's emotions more effectively as they are nearer to God than adults: 'The sun illuminates only the eye of the men, but shines into the eye and heart of the child' (Emerson 6). As a result, the celebration of imagination became the center of attention by Romantic figures. Among them, Wordsworth as a major English Romantic poet effectively launched this movement by manifesting the image of childhood and its connection with God and nature in his works. In fact, his reverence for children's innocent state of mind led him toward the celebration of the beauty of nature as a religious response to his inner desire for delightful tranquility.

In order to make the complexities of moral and religious instructions more understandable to children, American storytellers appealed to the Romantic conception of childhood and connected their instructions to the beauties of nature, not only to make instructions more tangible but also to remind children of their innocent state of mind. Thacker and Webb assert that 'the pairing of stories and Nature implies a direct connection with children' (18). In this regard, *Winter* (1807) by the American writer, Samuel Wood, is a good example in which the narrator of the story describes the beauties of nature in the coldest season of the year to emphasize the permanent aesthetic aspects of nature: 'Yet even this season is not void of its beauties and blessings. The new-fallen snow caps the mountains, and covers the valleys with a white and beautiful vesture . . .' (2). The story, then, continues with the description of a 'dazzling splendor of a rising sun, on the trees and bushes, after a night of rain and freezing, when every branch appears like a shining crystal – a prospect grand indeed!' (3)

The charming portrait of nature in the story which mesmerizes one's eyes is best felt by children through the 'works of the imagination clothed in delight' (Locke 221). Additionally, this is a reminder of Wordsworth's celebration of nature in his *Prelude* as he considers nature the embodiment of the divine spirit. In other words, Wordsworth spiritualizes the nature in order to glorify the Romantic image of childhood that is considered to be a 'state of heightened sensitivity to all things spiritual' while he was 'careful to recommend religious tracts for children' (Thacker and Webb 17-18). This religious experience had a major impact on the educational aspect of 19th-century children's literature. In fact, the Romantic Movement placed a new emphasis on the emotional apprehension of the aesthetic sublimity and beauty of nature in literature, because as England and Fasick in their book *Child View* mention, 'the consideration should be given not only to the entertainment value of the story but to its emotional and aesthetic appeal.' (90)

As a result, the cult of worshipping nature came into being as spiritual support for the man. That is why childhood becomes the central and sacred stage of life for Wordsworth and other romantic figures as they believed 'children as listeners or readers possessed an unspoken understanding of the sublime meaning at the heart of the imaginative process' (Thacker and Webb 16). The underlying message of pondering the manifestation of God's sublimity in nature is obvious in *Winter* as a reminder to children to be aware of the existence of God, the creator of the eye-catching scenery of nature. However, the story ends with a reminder of being thankful to God for his blessings as the last instruction:

Be thankful, my child, that it is  
Not your lot,  
To wander an orphan and poor,  
A father; and mother, and home  
Yet have got,  
And yet deserv'd them no more.

The poem continues by encouraging children not to forget their prayers to the Almighty God who has bestowed them so many blessings:

Be thankful, my child, and forget  
Not to pray  
Your thanks to the Father above,  
Who gives you so many more  
Blessings than they,  
And crowns your whole life  
With his love. (15)

Hence, this story crystallizes many of the characteristics of the romantic concepts of childhood as children are directly connected to their immediate nature in order to gain their instructions with the joy of delightful sightseeing. Nonetheless,

this sort of connection of children to nature matters most to Wordsworth which can be considered as a start-up for the next literary works under the influence of romanticism.

A close and insightful reading of Wordsworth's literary works show that Wordsworth's children are equally aware of the heaven to which they belong. Besides, Wordsworth's considerable care for the power of imagination helps him in making an ideal image of childhood with the emphasis on its proximity to God and nature which obviously reflects on the short stories of early 19th century. In this respect, *A Discourse to Children* (1802) by Moses Hemenway, another American writer, is a good example of depicting moral codes in order to motivate children's interests toward a heavenly territory. Here, the narrator uses the idealized concept of childhood in order to make a close relationship between Children and God and, therefore, remind them of their 'divine pre-existence'. Jesus Christ is, also, expressed as a heavenly figure who cares for children and wants them to come to him since they 'belong to the kingdom of Heaven' (4). This is a reminiscence of Wordsworth's *Ode: Intimation to Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* in which he idealizes childhood by attributing a heavenly pre-existent life to it:

But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home:  
Heaven lies about us in our infancy! (68-70)

The speaker of the *Discourse*, then, promises children a place Christ is preparing for them to seek salvation from him. Consequently, through the grace and merit of Christ, which 'he purchased with his precious blood,' children will receive eternal happiness. Therefore, they should not even 'delay one day or moment' to come to a 'full and hearty resolution to hear the voice of Christ in his world...' (13). However, the narrator warns children not to deviate from the Lord's commands because children as well as adults, can be sinners and cast out of the Lord's delightful domain unless they are forgiven and reconciled to Him (4-6). That is why Thacker and Webb claim that the emphasis on religion called for a literature that 'fulfilled a need to address the innate sinfulness of children, and provided a literature on instruction and improvement' (16). Additionally, Maclean in his book, *John Locke and English literature of 18th century*, points to those moral principles of the child as 'a wanting in its mind at birth' which is necessary to supply the child with (25).

The Christian interpretation of this story and allusions to the Bible represent the Romantic notion of human development from the loss of innocence toward the restoration of the heavenly pleasure. However, the notion of repentance and promise of felicity is repeated all throughout the *Discourse* and ends by reminding children of the heavenly bliss to lessen the tension of sin and repentance: 'He will bless you with the pardon of all your sins and a right to all privileges of the children of God' (21). This is, in fact, a 'desire to protect innocence or to control wayward thoughts; to balance education and enjoyment; and to preserve childlike qualities into adult life (which) is familiar in the most contemporary of context' (England and Fasick 14). Besides, this characteristic of romantic children is evident in the endeavor to restore the holy pre-existent state in Wordsworth's *Ode*:

Shades of the prison-house begin to close  
Upon the growing Boy,  
But He beholds the light, and whence it flows,  
He sees it in his joy; (71-74)

Nevertheless, the emphasis on the glorification of nature as the manifestation of God continues all throughout the Romantic period as a tangible tool of religious instruction which is mixed with the beauties and attractions of nature. In *Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth pictures the beauties of nature as it seemed to him in his childhood. He gives life to nature and worships the spirit of nature as a sacred entity while praising its power, beauty, and holiness. Therefore, he regards nature as his instructor who deserves worshipping:

And what perceive; well pleased to recognize  
In nature and the language of the sense  
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse  
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
Of all my moral being. (109-113)

Besides, in his *Ode*, Wordsworth calls nature as a 'Nurse' that protects him: 'The homely Nurse doth all she can/to make her Foster child, her Inmate Man' (82-83). The same notion of worshipping nature as the manifestation of its creator finds its way into children's literature of the 19th century. *Garden Amusement* (1816) is an example of an American short story which uses nature as an instructor for children since the narrator mentions that he enjoys walking in the garden with little Henry and his siblings, Jane and Ann, while wishing to expand their knowledge and improve their imaginative faculty through the emphasis on the glorification of nature by analyzing the nature in order to celebrate the glory of its creator. This sort of describing 'the natural world as you see it, and invest it with your own spirituality, emotion, and imagination' is the 'commandments' of the Romantic poets (*Transatlantic Romanticism* 44). Therefore, the narrator starts by telling children that everything in nature is full of life and, then, gives them some information about the forms, shapes and colors of the plants to draw their attention to the fact that 'the Almighty Maker makes each preserve its own distinct nature and properties' (8). He asserts that those are the hallmarks of the presence of God, 'the Almighty author' in nature which makes us truly say: 'O Lord! How manifold are thy works, in wisdom has thou made them all; the earth is full of riches' (9). Edward Young also points to the same notion when he says, 'all the parts of the earth, the great skies, the sun and stars, presents an image of Deity:

... Nature is the glass reflecting God  
As, by the sea, reflected in the Sun.' (qt. in *The Imagination as a Means of Grace* 71)

Besides, as Thacker and Webb say, 'Children respond to the didactic book of the day, like the boy in the prelude:

All things are put to question, he must live  
 Knowing that he grows wiser every day  
 Or not live at all . . . (Book V 323-325)' (18).

The story, then, shifts from religious instruction to moral conduct by mentioning the vine tree that seems to 'lie low toward the ground, as if it were of a humble nature.' The speaker points out that just like the tree that throws its branches upon what is near it to be supported, children should rely on the kind God 'who is the protector and supports all who put their trust in him!' (12) The story, then, moves on by describing the beauties and the sophisticated creation of the earthworm, the butterfly, the bee, the snail, and the robin only to make children focus on the power and wisdom of the Almighty God. For instance, the speaker points to Robin's wonderful instinct in making its artistic nest to prove 'the great kindness of their Maker in furnishing them with such a principle' (21). Needless to say, the storyteller of *Garden Amusement* appeals to the Romantic idealization of children in order to instruct them as they are closer to God and, therefore, closer to the truth by calling imagination to the help of reason which is the essence of romanticism. Thacker and Webb believe that 'Romantic adherence to a natural connection between children and higher truth opened the way for a new means of communicating through fiction' (16). Accordingly, childhood is associated with a set of Romantic attitudes as 'it is impossible to consider Romanticism without addressing the centrality of childhood and the development of a literature especially for a child audience' (16). Besides, the religious and moral way of thinking about children's literature was combined with an inviting life, copious of delightful moments.

## 2. Conclusion

This article sheds light on the influence of Wordsworth as a major Romantic figure of transatlantic Romanticism on American Children's literature. In fact, he was one of the popular English poets in America at his time because his 'call to pens is forward-pointing, and it is easy to see how early Americans would have been inspired by it' (*Transatlantic Romanticism* 446). Besides, special attention was given to the Romantic image of childhood in order to provide a context for a better understanding of Romantic traces in American Children's Literature. Accordingly, this article tried to demonstrate the key features of romanticism and its thematic characteristics on the productions of children's literature in early 19th century America through a close reading of selected short stories that were set within the context of the Romantic Movement. Then, the discussion enlightened the 'Romantic's exaltation of the power of imagination' that made American writers 'reinterpret the theme of childhood' in the late 18th and early 19th century, as Romantic literary figures believed that 'vision and imagination are most exuberant during the period of childhood' which is considered as 'a period of joy, peace, and security' (Brantley 149). The romantic image of the idealized children has remained in children's literature to the present time since the 'assumption of the innocence of childhood predominates as an underlying source of emotional power in much of the children's literature' (Thacker and Webb 41). Nonetheless, the legacy of the romantic concept of childhood got to its climax in America in the second half of the 19th century and it is hoped the approaches suggested in this article will lead readers to find equally relevant examples with respect to Romantic values.

## 3. References

- i. Bennet, E. T. & Manning, S. (2012). *Transatlantic literary studies, 1660-1830*. Cambridge University Press.
- ii. Brantley, & Richard E. (1974). *Locke, Wesley, and the method of English romanticism*. University Press of Florida, Gainesville.
- iii. Emerson, R. W. (1998). 'Nature' in Baym et al. (eds) *Norton anthology of American literature*. Volume I. New York. W.W. Norton.
- iv. England, C. & Fasick, A. M. (1987). *Child view*. Colorado, Littleton. Libraries Unlimited.
- v. Hemmenway, D.D. & Moses. (1802). *A discourse to children. Also the conversion and death of Joseph: an affecting story, founded on fact. and a New Year's gift for youth*. Charleston, [Mass.], Etheridge, MWA Copy, America's Historical Imprints.
- vi. Lock, J. (1989). *Some thoughts concerning education*. Ed. John W. & Jean S.Y. Oxford. Clarendon Press.
- vii. Maclean, K. (1989). *John Locke and English literature of eighteenth century*. New York. Russell & Russell. INC.
- viii. Newman, L., Pace, J., & Woodyard, C. K. (2006). *Transatlantic romanticism: an anthology of British, American, and Canadian literature, 1767-1867*. Pearson Education, Inc., pp. 445-446.
- ix. Richardson, A. (1994). *Literature, education and romanticism: reading as a social practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- x. Robinson, J. C. (1987). *Radical literary education, a classroom experiment with Wordsworth's 'Ode'*. The University of Wisconsin Press.
- xi. Thacker, D. C. & Webb, J. (2002). *Introducing children's literature from romanticism to postmodernism*. London & New York.
- xii. Tuveson, E. L. (2002). *The imagination as a means of grace: Locke and the aesthetics of romanticism*. London and New York.
- xiii. Wood, S. W. (1807). *New-York: MWA Copy. America's Historical Imprints*.
- xiv. Wood, S.W. (1816). *Garden amusements, for improving the minds of little children*. Samuel W. & Sons. MWA Copy, America's Historical Imprints,
- xv. Wordsworth, W. (1948). *The prelude, selected poems, and sonnet and the 1800 preface to lyrical ballads*. Ed. Carlos Baker. Rinehart & Co., PNC. Toronto.