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## THE DEPICTION OF CHILDHOOD IN ENGLISH FAIRY TALES AND FOLKLORE

©*Alieva M.*, ORCID: 0000-0002-8842-8882, SPIN-code: 7019-8546, International University of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, raminaalieva2605@gmail.com

©*Muratova A.*, ORCID: 0009-0005-9807-0959, SPIN-code: 4454-9585, International University of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, adina-muratova@mail.ru

## ИЗОБРАЖЕНИЕ ДЕТСТВА В АНГЛИЙСКИХ СКАЗКАХ И ФОЛЬКЛОРЕ

©*Алиева М. А.*, ORCID: 0000-0002-8842-8882, SPIN-код: 7019-8546, Международный университет Кыргызстана, г. Бишкек, Кыргызстан, raminaalieva2605@gmail.com

©*Муратова А. А.*, ORCID: 0009-0005-9807-0959, SPIN-код: 4454-9585, Международный университет Кыргызстана, adina-muratova@mail.ru

*Abstract.* This article explores the depiction of childhood in English fairy tales and folklore, analyzing key aspects and symbolism associated with the image of the child. The study examines how cultural perceptions of childhood, upbringing, and the social role of the child are conveyed through fairy tale plots and characters. It identifies the main archetypes and motifs present in English folklore and their influence on the perception of childhood in the English-speaking world. The article also discusses the significance of these motifs in shaping national identity and instilling values in the younger generation.

*Аннотация.* В статье рассматривается изображение детства в английских сказках и фольклоре, анализируются ключевые аспекты и символика, связанная с образом ребенка. В исследовании рассматривается, как культурные представления о детстве, воспитании и социальной роли ребенка передаются через сюжеты и персонажей сказок. Выявляются основные архетипы и мотивы, присутствующие в английском фольклоре, и их влияние на восприятие детства в англоязычном мире. В статье также обсуждается значение этих мотивов в формировании национальной идентичности и привитии ценностей молодому поколению.

*Keywords:* childhood, English fairy tales, folklore, image of the child, archetypes, cultural perceptions, national identity, upbringing, symbolism, English-speaking world.

*Ключевые слова:* детство, английские сказки, фольклор, образ ребенка, архетипы, культурные представления, национальная идентичность, воспитание, символика, англоязычный мир.

The concept of childhood has long been a subject of fascination, both in scholarly discourse and in the cultural narratives of societies. English fairy tales and folklore, in particular, offer a rich tapestry through which the evolving understanding of childhood can be examined. These stories, passed down through generations, not only entertain but also reflect the values, fears, and aspirations of the society that created them. The depiction of childhood in these narratives provides insight into how children were perceived, their roles in society, and the expectations placed upon them [4-7].

Historically, the notion of childhood in English culture has undergone significant transformations. Philippe Ariès, in his seminal work “Centuries of Childhood”, argues that the

concept of childhood as a distinct phase of life is a relatively modern development, emerging in the Western world during the Renaissance. Prior to this, children were often viewed as miniature adults, expected to take on responsibilities and roles similar to those of their elders. This perspective is evident in many early English fairy tales, where child protagonists often navigate complex moral dilemmas, take on heroic roles, or even face perilous challenges that require wisdom beyond their years [1-3].

Fairy tales such as “Jack and the Beanstalk” and “Hansel and Gretel” exemplify the dual nature of childhood as portrayed in English folklore. On one hand, these tales celebrate the resilience, courage, and resourcefulness of children. Jack's cleverness in outwitting the giant or Hansel and Gretel's determination to survive in the face of adversity highlight a romanticized view of childhood innocence coupled with inherent strength. On the other hand, these stories also underscore the vulnerability of children, often placing them in situations of danger or abandonment that reflect societal anxieties about the fragility youth.

The depiction of childhood in English fairy tales is also closely linked to the moral and didactic purposes of these stories. Many tales were designed to impart lessons to young audiences, using child characters as both the subject and object of moral instruction. For example, the cautionary elements in tales like “Little Red Riding Hood” or “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” serve to reinforce societal norms and expectations of behavior. These stories emphasize obedience, honesty, and the importance of adhering to societal rules, reflecting the broader cultural attitudes towards childhood as a time for moral and social conditioning [8].

Moreover, the role of the supernatural in these tales often blurs the line between the real and the imaginary, creating a narrative space where childhood can be both idealized and problematized. The presence of magical elements such as talking animals, enchanted forests, and benevolent or malevolent fairies provides a backdrop against which the innocence and imagination of children are both celebrated and tested. In this context, childhood is depicted not only as a period of growth and learning but also as a time of wonder, where the boundaries of reality are fluid and the potential for transformation is ever-present.

In examining the depiction of childhood in English fairy tales and folklore, it is essential to consider the historical and cultural contexts in which these stories were created and disseminated. The narratives offer a window into the societal values of the time, revealing how childhood was understood, constructed, and idealized. By analyzing these tales, we can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural and moral frameworks that have shaped, and continue to shape, the concept of childhood in English-speaking societies [9].

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to examine how childhood is depicted in English fairy tales and folklore. The research is structured in three phases:

Phase 1: Literature Review

— A comprehensive review of existing literature on the themes of childhood in English fairy tales and folklore;

— Identification of key theories and frameworks that have been used to analyze the concept of childhood in literary texts;

Phase 2: Text Selection

— Selection of a representative sample of English fairy tales and folklore. This includes texts from various periods, such as the works of the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault (translated into English), and English folk stories compiled by Joseph Jacobs;

— The selection criteria will include the popularity of the tales, the presence of child characters, and the role of childhood in the narrative;

Phase 3: Data Analysis

— Analysis of the selected texts using thematic coding to identify recurring themes, symbols, and motifs related to childhood;

— Comparative analysis across different texts to explore how childhood is portrayed in various contexts within English folklore;

The data for this study comprises a collection of English fairy tales and folklore. The following steps outline the data collection process:

**Compilation of Texts:**

— A digital corpus of selected English fairy tales and folklore will be compiled using public domain resources such as Project Gutenberg and the Sacred Texts archive;

— Key texts include “Jack and the Beanstalk”, “Little Red Riding Hood”, “Hansel and Gretel”, and “Tom Thumb”.

**Metadata Documentation:** Each text will be accompanied by metadata, including the title, author (if known), publication date, and source. A sample table of metadata is provided below:

<i>Title</i>	<i>Author</i>	<i>Publication Date</i>	<i>Source</i>
Jack and the Beanstalk	Anonymous	1890	Project Gutenberg
Little Red Riding Hood	Charles Perrault	1697	Sacred Texts
Hansel and Gretel	Brothers Grimm	1812	Project Gutenberg
Tom Thumb	Anonymous	1621	Sacred Texts

The analysis will involve a detailed examination of the depiction of childhood in each selected text. The following steps outline the analysis process:

**Thematic Coding:**

— Identification of key themes related to childhood, such as innocence, vulnerability, and adventure;

— Coding of textual elements that represent these themes using qualitative data analysis software like NVivo.

*Example of Thematic Coding Table*

<i>Text Title</i>	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Example Text</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
Jack and the Beanstalk	Innocence	"A poor boy who sold his cow for magic beans."	Represents the naïve nature of childhood.
Hansel and Gretel	Vulnerability	"The children were lost in the woods, afraid and alone."	Highlights the dangers faced by children.

**Comparative Analysis:**

— Comparison of how different texts portray similar themes. For example, examining how the theme of vulnerability is depicted differently in “Hansel and Gretel” versus “Tom Thumb”.

— Analysis of cultural and historical influences on these depictions.

*Example Comparative Analysis Table:*

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Hansel and Gretel</i>	<i>Tom Thumb</i>
Vulnerability	Children abandoned by their parents	A tiny boy navigating a dangerous world
Adventure	Children outsmarting the witch	Tom’s journey through various challenges

To support the findings, visual aids such as charts and diagrams will be created:

#### Thematic Map:

— A diagram showing the relationship between different themes related to childhood and how they are interconnected in the selected texts.

#### Timeline of Texts:

— A timeline showing the publication dates of the selected texts, highlighting significant historical events that may have influenced the portrayal of childhood.

This methodological framework provides a comprehensive approach to exploring the depiction of childhood in English fairy tales and folklore. By combining thematic analysis with comparative and historical perspectives, the study aims to offer new insights into the cultural significance of childhood in these narratives.

*Innocence and Purity.* The theme of innocence and purity is pervasive in English fairy tales, where children are often depicted as embodiments of untainted virtue. This portrayal serves several purposes. First, it establishes a contrast between the child and the more corrupt or dangerous adult world. The child's innocence is often juxtaposed against the malevolence of other characters, creating a narrative tension that drives the story forward.

In “Little Red Riding Hood”, for instance, Red Riding Hood's innocence is not just a character trait; it is a narrative device that propels the plot. The wolf, who symbolizes the dangers lurking in the adult world, preys on her naivety. The repeated emphasis on her “littleness” and “innocence” is crucial because it not only defines her character but also heightens the sense of vulnerability. This vulnerability is essential to the story's moral, which warns against blind trust and emphasizes the need for caution.

**Significance:** The depiction of innocence and purity in such tales reflects societal views that see children as inherently good and uncorrupted, a blank slate untouched by the moral complexities of adult life. This idealization of childhood purity can be seen as a reflection of adult nostalgia for a lost innocence and a desire to protect children from the world's harsh realities [10].

*Growth and Learning.* Fairy tales often frame childhood as a time of growth, learning, and moral development. The journey of the child character is typically one of self-discovery, where they must navigate challenges, learn valuable lessons, and emerge wiser and more capable.

In “Jack and the Beanstalk”, Jack starts as a poor and naive boy, unaware of the consequences of his actions when he trades his family's cow for magic beans. However, as the story progresses, Jack's character evolves. He learns to take risks, face danger, and ultimately outsmart the giant. This transformation from a naive child to a resourceful hero mirrors the process of maturation that is central to many fairy tales.

**Significance:** The theme of growth and learning underscores the belief that childhood is a formative period where crucial life lessons are learned. These tales often serve as didactic tools, teaching young listeners or readers about the virtues of courage, intelligence, and perseverance. The narrative arc of the child character often symbolizes the transition from innocence to experience, reflecting societal expectations for children to grow into responsible and competent adults.

*Vulnerability and Protection.* The depiction of children as vulnerable beings in need of protection is another recurring theme. In many tales, this vulnerability is highlighted by the presence of dangers that the child cannot face alone. The need for protection often becomes a central narrative element, where the success or failure of protective figures (whether parents, guardians, or magical beings) plays a critical role in the story's outcome.

In “Hansel and Gretel”, the children's vulnerability is starkly portrayed through their abandonment by their parents and their subsequent capture by the witch. The narrative emphasizes their helplessness, particularly when they are lured by the witch's gingerbread house, a symbol of

deceptive safety. However, the tale also subverts this vulnerability by showing the children ultimately outsmarting the witch, thereby reclaiming some agency [12].

**Significance:** This theme reflects societal concerns about the safety and well-being of children, who are seen as needing guidance and protection in a world full of potential threats. The stories often carry a dual message: they warn of the dangers that children face but also offer hope by showing that even the most vulnerable can find ways to protect themselves.

*The Child as a Moral Example.* In many fairy tales, children are not just passive recipients of the story's moral; they are active participants who embody the virtues the tale seeks to impart. These children often serve as moral exemplars, whose actions provide lessons in honesty, bravery, kindness, and other virtues.

“The Boy Who Cried Wolf” is a classic example where the child's behavior is central to the moral lesson. The boy's repeated dishonesty leads to his downfall, serving as a warning to others about the consequences of lying. The tale is simple yet powerful, using the child's actions to illustrate a universal truth.

**Significance:** The use of children as moral examples in fairy tales reflects the idea that children, through their actions and experiences, can teach valuable lessons to both their peers and adults. This reinforces the notion that childhood is a time for moral education, where stories play a crucial role in shaping the values and behaviors of young audiences.

Child characters in English fairy tales are carefully crafted to represent various archetypes that encapsulate the cultural attitudes towards children. These archetypes not only reflect societal values but also serve as vehicles for imparting moral lessons to both young readers and adults. Below, we explore the most significant archetypes identified in English fairy tales, delving into their characteristics and the roles they play in these narratives.

*The Hero.* The hero archetype is one of the most prominent in English fairy tales. Child heroes are depicted as brave and resourceful, often overcoming seemingly insurmountable challenges. Despite their young age, these characters embody qualities that are traditionally associated with adult heroes, such as courage, determination, and a strong moral compass. The hero's journey is a central theme in many tales, where the child protagonist grows and develops through their trials.

**Characteristics:**

— **Courageous:** The hero is often depicted as unafraid to face danger, even when the odds are against them. Their bravery is a key trait that sets them apart from other characters.

— **Resourceful:** Child heroes are quick-thinking and able to come up with solutions to complex problems, often using their wits rather than physical strength to succeed.

— **Determined:** Persistence is a hallmark of the hero archetype. Even when faced with setbacks, the hero continues to strive towards their goal.

**Example:**

— Jack from “Jack and the Beanstalk”: Jack is a quintessential hero who, despite his small stature and humble beginnings, manages to outsmart a giant. His journey up the beanstalk symbolizes his ascent from boyhood to heroism. By defeating the giant and securing treasure for his family, Jack demonstrates that even the smallest and weakest can achieve greatness through courage and cleverness.

The victim archetype is used to highlight the vulnerability and innocence of children in a harsh and often unjust world. These characters often suffer at the hands of others, be it through neglect, cruelty, or the perils of their environment. The tales that feature victim archetypes are usually more somber, focusing on the darker aspects of childhood, such as loss, poverty, and societal failure.

Characteristics:

— Innocent: Victim characters are portrayed as pure and untainted by the world's evils, which makes their suffering all the more poignant.

— Vulnerable: These characters often lack the means to defend themselves against the dangers they face, highlighting the need for protection and care.

— Sympathetic: The tales are crafted in a way that elicits empathy from the reader, making the victim's plight a central emotional focus of the story.

Example:

— The Little Match Girl: This tale is a stark portrayal of societal neglect. The young girl, who tries to sell matches on a cold winter night, is ignored by the passersby and eventually succumbs to the cold. Her tragic end serves as a powerful commentary on the failure of society to protect its most vulnerable members. The Little Match Girl's innocence and helplessness make her a poignant symbol of neglected and forgotten children.

The trickster archetype is characterized by cunning, cleverness, and a playful disregard for the rules. Child tricksters use their wit to navigate a world that is often hostile to them, outsmarting those who are physically stronger or more powerful. This archetype celebrates the intelligence and creativity of children, showing that mental agility can triumph over brute force.

Characteristics:

— Clever: Trickster characters are highly intelligent and often use their smarts to outwit adults or enemies who underestimate them.

— Mischievous: These characters enjoy bending the rules and often engage in playful or harmless deceit, though their actions usually lead to positive outcomes.

— Resourceful: Like heroes, tricksters are resourceful, but their solutions to problems are often unconventional and humorous.

Example: Tom Thumb: Tom Thumb's tiny size makes him an unlikely hero, but his quick thinking and cleverness allow him to escape numerous dangers. Whether he's navigating through the belly of a cow or tricking giants, Tom Thumb's adventures highlight the idea that even the smallest individuals can be formidable opponents if they use their intelligence wisely. His mischievous nature adds a layer of humor to the stories, making him a beloved character in English folklore.

Table 1

DETAILED CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILD ARCHETYPES IN ENGLISH FAIRY TALES

<i>Archetype</i>	<i>Example Tales</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Detailed Examples</i>
The Hero	"Jack and the Beanstalk"	Courageous, Resourceful, Determined	Jack's victory over the giant, securing treasure for his family.
The Victim	"The Little Match Girl"	Innocent, Vulnerable, Sympathetic	The tragic death of the Little Match Girl as a commentary on societal neglect.
The Trickster	"Tom Thumb"	Clever, Mischievous, Resourceful	Tom Thumb outwitting adults and escaping from perilous situations using his intelligence.

These archetypes not only reflect the individual qualities attributed to children but also provide insight into the societal values and cultural narratives of the time. The hero archetype encourages bravery and determination, essential virtues for young audiences. The victim archetype serves as a critique of societal failures and highlights the need for compassion and care for the vulnerable. The trickster archetype celebrates creativity and intelligence, emphasizing that even those who seem powerless can find ways to overcome their challenges.

These tales have endured precisely because they resonate with the universal experiences of childhood-facing challenges, seeking protection, and outwitting difficulties through cleverness. By examining these archetypes, we gain a deeper understanding of how childhood is constructed and valued in English culture, and how these narratives continue to influence contemporary views on children and their roles in society.

#### *Use of Diminutives*

Diminutives are linguistic forms that express a smaller size or endearment, and they are frequently used in English fairy tales to emphasize the smallness, innocence, and vulnerability of child characters. This linguistic device serves to reinforce the idea of children as delicate beings who require protection from the dangers of the world.

Example: The story of "Little Red Riding Hood" is a prime example of how diminutives are employed to shape the reader's perception of the protagonist. The use of the word "little" in the title and throughout the text continually reminds the reader of the character's youth and vulnerability. This diminutive form not only highlights her physical smallness but also emphasizes her innocence and the potential danger she faces in the forest. The repetition of "little" contributes to the tension in the story, as it underscores the disparity between the innocent child and the threatening world she navigates [10].

#### *Simple Syntax and Repetition*

Simple syntax and repetition are key linguistic features in fairy tales, making them easily accessible to young readers and listeners. These features help to reinforce the story's moral and key narrative points. The straightforward language mirrors the innocence and uncomplexity of childhood, allowing children to grasp the story's lessons more readily.

Example: In the tale of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears", the repetition of phrases such as "too hot", "too cold", and "just right" not only makes the story memorable but also reflects a childlike perspective on the world. This repetitive structure is a common technique in fairy tales, aiding in the retention of the story and making the moral easier to understand. The simplicity of the language and the rhythmic repetition mirror the thought processes of young children, who often perceive the world in binary terms (e.g., hot vs. cold, big vs. small).

Descriptive adjectives play a crucial role in shaping the reader's or listener's perception of child characters in fairy tales. These adjectives are carefully chosen to evoke specific emotions, such as sympathy, admiration, or concern. The use of adjectives like "innocent", "brave", and "helpless" allows the storyteller to guide the audience's emotional response and reinforce the moral of the Tale [11].

Example: In "Hansel and Gretel", the children are repeatedly described using adjectives such as "helpless" and "innocent". These descriptors heighten the reader's emotional investment in the characters, especially during moments of peril. When the children are captured by the witch, their helplessness evokes sympathy and concern from the audience. However, as the story progresses and they outwit the witch, the shift to adjectives like "brave" highlights their growth and resilience. This transformation from helpless to resourceful underscores the moral that even the most vulnerable can find strength in adversity. These linguistic features—diminutives, simple syntax, repetition, and descriptive adjectives—are not just stylistic choices; they are integral to the way childhood is portrayed in English fairy tales. They shape how characters are perceived and help convey the themes and morals that these stories are designed to impart.

#### *Discussion*

Childhood is a central theme in English fairy tales and folklore, offering a lens through which the cultural, moral, and social values of the time are reflected. These narratives often serve as a didactic tool, conveying lessons, morals, and cultural norms to young audiences. This article

examines how childhood is depicted in English fairy tales and folklore, exploring the roles, characteristics, and symbolic meanings associated with child characters in these stories [12].

In many English fairy tales, the child protagonist embodies innocence, purity, and vulnerability. These traits often position the child as a figure in need of protection, guidance, or rescue. For instance, in *Jack and the Beanstalk*, Jack is portrayed as a naive but courageous boy whose actions, though impulsive, lead to the triumph of good over evil. The story emphasizes the child's journey from innocence to experience, reflecting a broader societal belief in the importance of moral education during childhood.

Children in English folklore are frequently used as symbols of purity and hope, often representing the potential for renewal and change. For example, in *The Water-Babies* by Charles Kingsley, the child character, Tom, undergoes a transformation from a chimney sweep to a water-baby, symbolizing the purification and moral regeneration of the soul. Such stories suggest that childhood is not only a stage of life but also a state of grace that, once lost, can be reclaimed through innocence and moral rectitude.

Gender plays a significant role in the depiction of childhood in English fairy tales. Female child characters, such as in *Cinderella* or *Snow White*, are often portrayed as passive, obedient, and virtuous, reflecting the traditional gender norms of the time. These tales frequently emphasize the rewards of maintaining virtue and innocence, such as marriage or divine intervention, suggesting that these qualities are particularly valuable in female children. Conversely, male children in stories like *Puss in Boots* or *The Adventures of Tom Thumb* are depicted as clever, resourceful, and adventurous, highlighting different societal expectations for boys and girls. The depiction of childhood in English fairy tales and folklore is also deeply influenced by the social and cultural context in which these stories were created. During the Victorian era, for example, the idealization of childhood as a time of innocence became particularly pronounced, influenced by Romantic notions of the "noble child". This period saw the rise of stories that emphasized the moral purity and redemptive qualities of children, as well as the dangers of losing one's innocence.

The portrayal of childhood in English fairy tales and folklore reflects broader societal values and cultural norms, particularly concerning morality, gender, and the idealization of youth. These stories offer insights into the ways in which childhood was understood and valued in different historical periods, serving not only as entertainment but also as a means of imparting important lessons to young audiences. The enduring popularity of these tales speaks to the universal themes they address and their continued relevance in contemporary discussions about childhood and culture [13].

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the depiction of childhood in English fairy tales and folklore reflects a complex interplay of cultural, moral, and societal values. These narratives not only entertain but also serve as a medium for imparting lessons and cultural norms to younger generations. The portrayal of children in these stories varies from innocent and virtuous beings to mischievous and adventurous characters, highlighting the multifaceted nature of childhood as perceived in English culture.

The analysis of selected tales, such as *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *Hansel and Gretel*, reveals recurring themes of bravery, resourcefulness, and moral dilemmas. These themes underscore the expectation for children to navigate a world filled with both peril and opportunity, a reflection of the societal belief in the importance of developing independence and moral integrity from a young age. As pointed out by Zipes (2006), these stories often place children in challenging situations where they must rely on their wit and courage to survive, thus reinforcing the notion that childhood is a critical period for moral and personal growth [3].



Furthermore, the symbolic representation of childhood in these tales often reflects broader societal concerns. For instance, the frequent appearance of evil figures, such as witches or wolves, can be interpreted as manifestations of societal fears or anxieties. As Warner argues, these characters not only serve as antagonists but also embody the dangers and uncertainties that children must face as they grow up [2]. This duality of childhood, as both a time of innocence and a period fraught with challenges, is a recurring motif in English folklore [2].

Moreover, the variations in these tales across different regions and time periods indicate the dynamic nature of folklore and its adaptability to changing social contexts. As noted by Tatar (2002), the evolution of these stories over time reflects shifts in cultural attitudes towards childhood, morality, and education. For example, the increasingly didactic tone of later versions of these tales mirrors the growing emphasis on formal education and moral instruction in the 19th century [1].

In light of these findings, it is evident that English fairy tales and folklore offer a rich and nuanced portrayal of childhood, one that continues to resonate with audiences today. These narratives not only reflect the cultural values of the societies in which they were created but also provide insights into the universal aspects of childhood, such as the quest for identity, the confrontation with fear, and the journey towards maturity. Future research could further explore the cross-cultural comparisons of childhood depictions in folklore, which would contribute to a deeper understanding of how childhood is perceived and represented across different linguistic and cultural contexts.

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