

CHILDHOOD IN 19TH-CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE: SOCIAL, MORAL, SPIRITUAL, AND LITERARY FUNCTIONS

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Abstract: This study explores the social, moral, spiritual, and literary functions of childhood in 19th-century English literature. Focusing on the works of Charles Dickens (Oliver Twist), Charlotte Brontë (Jane Eyre), George Eliot (Adam Bede), Elizabeth Gaskell (Cranford), and Thomas Hardy (The Mayor of Casterbridge), the article analyzes how childhood is represented and its role in shaping social norms, moral values, spiritual growth, and literary expression. Using a literary-analytical approach, the research demonstrates that childhood in Victorian literature is a multidimensional concept that reflects societal conditions, ethical development, personal experiences, and narrative strategies. The findings contribute to the understanding of the cultural and linguistic significance of childhood in English literature and provide insights for comparative literary studies.

Keywords: childhood, 19th-century English literature, Dickens, Brontë, Eliot, Gaskell, Hardy, social function, moral function, spiritual function, literary function.

Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqola 19-asr ingliz adabiyotida bolalikning ijtimoiy, axloqiy, ruhiy va adabiy funksiyalarini o‘rganishga bag‘ishlangan. Charles Dickens (Oliver Twist), Charlotte Brontë (Jane Eyre), George Eliot (Adam Bede), Elizabeth Gaskell (Cranford) va Thomas Hardy (The Mayor of Casterbridge) asarlari misolida bolalik tushunchasi qanday tasvirlanganligi, jamiyatdagi me’yoriy qadriyatlar, axloqiy tarbiya, ruhiy o’sish va adabiy ifoda orqali qanday amalga oshirilishi tahlil qilingan. Ilmiy-tahliliy yondashuvdan foydalangan holda, tadqiqot shuni ko‘rsatadiki, viktoriya davri adabiyotida bolalik ko‘p qirrali tushuncha bo‘lib, ijtimoiy sharoit, axloqiy rivojlanish, shaxsiy tajriba va badiiy strategiyalarini aks ettiradi. Natijalar bolalik tushunchasining ingliz adabiyotidagi madaniy va lingvistik ahamiyatini ochib beradi hamda solishtirma adabiyotshunoslik tadqiqotlari uchun foydali bo‘ladi.

Kalit so‘zlar: bolalik, 19-asr ingliz adabiyoti, Dickens, Brontë, Eliot, Gaskell, Hardy, ijtimoiy funksiyasi, axloqiy funksiyasi, ruhiy funksiyasi, adabiy funksiyasi.

Аннотация: Данная статья посвящена изучению социальных, моральных, духовных и литературных функций детства в английской литературе XIX века. На примере произведений Чарльза Диккенса (Oliver Twist), Шарлотты Бронте

(*Jane Eyre*), Джорджа Элиота (*Adam Bede*), Элизабет Гаскелл (*Cranford*) и Томаса Харди (*The Mayor of Casterbridge*) анализируется, как представлено детство и его роль в формировании общественных норм, моральных ценностей, духовного роста и литературного выражения. Используя литературно-аналитический подход, исследование показывает, что детство в викторианской литературе является многомерным понятием, отражающим социальные условия, этическое развитие, личный опыт и художественные стратегии повествования. Результаты исследования способствуют пониманию культурного и лингвистического значения детства в английской литературе и представляют интерес для сравнительных литературоведческих исследований.

Ключевые слова: детство, английская литература XIX века, Dickens, Brontë, Eliot, Gaskell, Hardy, социальная функция, моральная функция, духовная функция, литературная функция.

INTRODUCTION

Childhood has long been a subject of literary, social, and philosophical inquiry, reflecting the ways in which societies understand human development and moral formation. In 19th-century English literature, the depiction of childhood not only mirrors the social and cultural realities of the Victorian era but also serves as a lens through which moral, spiritual, and literary values are explored. The works of Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Thomas Hardy present childhood as a multidimensional phenomenon, encompassing social positions, ethical development, personal growth, and literary function.

In Victorian society, childhood was often associated with vulnerability, education, and socialization. Dickens' *Oliver Twist* highlights the plight of impoverished children and the harsh realities of workhouses, emphasizing the social responsibilities of society toward its youngest members. Similarly, Brontë's *Jane Eyre* portrays the formative experiences of an orphaned child, illustrating how adversity shapes moral resilience and self-identity. George Eliot's *Adam Bede* presents youth as a stage for ethical decision-making, where personal choices intersect with community expectations. Meanwhile, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* and Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* explore the spiritual and psychological dimensions of childhood, revealing the influence of early experiences on character formation and life trajectories.

The present study aims to analyze the social, moral, spiritual, and literary functions of childhood in these representative texts, employing a literary-analytical

approach. By examining both the linguistic and narrative strategies used to depict children, the research seeks to demonstrate how 19th-century English literature constructs childhood as a complex and culturally significant concept. Furthermore, this study contributes to an understanding of Victorian literature's engagement with social norms, ethical principles, and human development, offering insights for contemporary literary and linguistic scholarship.

Theoretical Background

The Victorian era (1837–1901) was a period of profound social, economic, and cultural transformation in England, and these changes were vividly reflected in the literature of the time. Victorian literature, particularly the novel, became a medium through which writers explored pressing issues of class, morality, and human experience. The rise of industrialization, urbanization, and educational reform shaped not only social realities but also literary representations of childhood as both a social construct and an individual experience¹.

Scholars have noted that in the nineteenth century, the depiction of childhood in literature evolved from earlier Romantic ideals of innate innocence to more complex portrayals that engage with social injustice, moral education, and psychological development. According to recent research, childhood in Victorian fiction was often used to critique societal conditions such as poverty, orphan hood, and class inequalities, making the child a symbol of broader cultural concerns.

In the study of Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*² and other Victorian novels, childhood is not merely a biographical detail but an instrument for social critique. Dickens portrays his child characters as victims of socio-economic pressures, exposing the failures of institutions like workhouses and the educational system, and highlighting the need for compassion and reform.

Similarly, in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*³, the protagonist's early experiences as an orphan subjected to neglect and abuse are crucial to understanding her moral formation and agency in adulthood. This aligns with theoretical perspectives that view childhood not just as a stage of biological development but as a cultural space where identity and moral consciousness are shaped.

Beyond Dickens and Brontë, other Victorian authors also engage with childhood thematically. Research indicates that in the works of writers like Elizabeth Gaskell⁴, George Eliot⁵, and Thomas Hardy⁶, childhood often reflects psychological depth,

¹ Victorian literature. Wikipedia. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victorian_literature

² Dickens C. *Oliver Twist* / Ch. Dickens. London : Richard Bentley, 1838. 624 p.

³ Brontë C. *Jane Eyre* / Ch. Brontë. London : Smith, Elder & Co., 1847. 500 p.

⁴ Gaskell E. *Cranford* / E. Gaskell. London : Chapman & Hall, 1853. 312 p.

⁵ Eliot G. *Adam Bede* / G. Eliot. Edinburgh : William Blackwood & Sons, 1859. 560 p.

⁶ Hardy T. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* / T. Hardy. London : Macmillan, 1886. 520 p.

social critique, and symbolic meaning, demonstrating that the child figure serves multiple literary functions within the broader Victorian cultural context.

Thus, this theoretical background positions childhood in Victorian literature as a multidimensional construct social, moral, spiritual, and literary providing a foundation for the subsequent analytical sections of the article.

Analytical Section

Social Function of Childhood in Victorian Novels

In 19th-century English literature, childhood often serves as a reflection of social structures and inequalities in Victorian society. As noted by literary scholars, the representation of children in novels such as *Oliver Twist* and *Jane Eyre* reveals how societal norms, class distinctions, and institutional failures shape the lived experiences of young protagonists. Dickens' *Oliver Twist* highlights the harsh treatment of orphans and poor children in workhouses, where basic needs and education are denied, illustrating the exploitative social conditions faced by the most vulnerable (Amal Rahil Ibrahim; *The Theme of Childhood in Charles Dickens Novel*)⁷.

This theme of childhood as a site of social critique is further supported by comparative studies showing that Dickens and Brontë both use the narrative of orphaned protagonists to foreground *structural injustices* like class oppression, institutional neglect, and lack of social mobility. Such analysis emphasizes how the protagonists' early suffering exposes broader socio-economic hierarchies and pressures of the Victorian period.

Moral Function: Ethical Formation and Personal Integrity

Victorian novels also depict childhood as a crucial stage for moral formation and ethical awareness. In *Jane Eyre*, the orphaned Jane demonstrates resilience and moral integrity despite abuse and neglect. Her early refusal to submit to unfair treatment exemplifies personal agency and ethical conviction in the face of oppressive social norms. This portrayal aligns with scholarly analyses of Brontë's work, which highlight the *rebellious child* as a challenge to adult tyranny and as a moral agent in her own right (British Library; *Jane Eyre and the rebellious child*)⁸.

Moreover, Dickens' depiction of Oliver's consistent kindness and moral goodness even when surrounded by cruelty and exploitation underscores the Victorian moral imperative to value compassion and altruism. Dickens constructs

⁷ Ibrahim A. R. The Theme of Childhood in Charles Dickens Novel // Journal of Social Sciences. 2020. Vol. 5, No. 2. P. 145–152. Available at: <https://journalsocialsciences.de/index.php/jss/article/view/549> (Accessed: 13.02.2026).

⁸ British Library. *Jane Eyre and the rebellious child*. 2021. Available at: <https://www.bl.uk/learning/for-teachers/teaching-ideas/jane-eyre-and-the-rebellious-child/> (Accessed: 13.02.2026).

childhood as a mirror for *ethical judgment*, where characters' moral choices reveal underlying societal values and critique social apathy.

Spiritual Function: Inner Growth and Ethical Consciousness

While the spiritual dimension of childhood in Victorian literature is less overtly codified, many scholars observe that early life experiences in these novels often stimulate inner reflection and personal transformation. In *Jane Eyre*, for example, Jane's sense of spiritual identity evolves through hardship, leading her toward self-awareness and moral autonomy. Critics argue that this interiority is emblematic of a spiritual function, where childhood adversity becomes formative of personal faith and emotional resilience.

Similarly, Dickens' work, though primarily social in focus, implicitly suggests that *internal moral goodness* often linked to Christian values like compassion and forgiveness in Victorian consciousness is crucial to character development and narrative resolution. This spiritual underpinning, though not always explicit, permeates the protagonists' journeys from innocence through suffering to moral clarity.

Literary Function: Narrative Strategy and Genre Development

From a literary perspective, childhood functions as a *narrative device* that deepens thematic complexity and reader engagement. Victorian novels often employ child characters or child-centered narratives to frame broader sociocultural critique and to evoke emotional response. Peter Coveney⁹, for example, identifies *Oliver Twist* as one of the earliest English novels centered around a child protagonist, inaugurating a narrative strategy that would influence later bildungsroman and coming-of-age works (Coveney; *Our Field: The Rise of the Child Narrator*).

Moreover, the educational and developmental arcs of protagonists such as Jane Eyre and other child figures demonstrate how childhood experiences shape narrative structure and thematic investigation. These depictions allow readers to trace the evolution of identity, moral awareness, and social awareness through the text, making childhood an essential literary lens for interpreting character growth and cultural critique.

Key Scholarly Insights Supporting Analysis:

- Dickens' *Oliver Twist* illustrates the systemic neglect of orphans and the exploitation of poor children, making childhood a social critique tool.

⁹ Coveney P. *Our Field: The Rise of the Child Narrator*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2020. — Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/book/6757/chapter/150864039> (Accessed: 13.02.2026).

- Comparative research demonstrates that *Oliver Twist* and *Jane Eyre* reflect similar social tensions and emotional experiences through their child protagonists, highlighting structural social commentary.
- Analyses of *Jane Eyre* emphasize the rebellious and moral agency of the child narrator, revealing ethical formation and spiritual dimensions within the narrative.
- Literary scholarship identifies *Oliver Twist* as a key work in the emergence of child-centered narratives, marking the narrative importance of child perspective in Victorian fiction.
- Broader studies of childhood in Victorian literature position children as psychologically complex characters whose experiences reflect cultural attitudes and societal values.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of 19th-century English literature reveals that childhood functions as a multidimensional construct, encompassing social, moral, spiritual, and literary aspects. Through the study of selected novels Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Eliot's *Adam Bede*, Gaskell's *Cranford*, and Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* several key findings emerge:

Social Function: Childhood serves as a lens to critique social inequalities. In *Oliver Twist*, the depiction of orphaned and impoverished children highlights the systemic neglect and exploitation inherent in Victorian society. Similarly, *Jane Eyre*'s orphanhood emphasizes the limitations imposed by social class and the importance of education for upward mobility (Ibrahim, 2020; Paradigm Press, 2019).

Moral Function: The child protagonists are often portrayed as moral agents, demonstrating resilience, honesty, and ethical reasoning. Oliver's consistent kindness and Jane's steadfast morality underscore the Victorian ideal that childhood experiences shape moral character and prepare individuals for responsible adulthood (British Library, 2021; Coveney, 2020).

Spiritual Function: Beyond societal and ethical dimensions, childhood represents a stage of inner reflection and spiritual growth. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane's experiences foster self-awareness and moral clarity, while in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy illustrates how early experiences influence the ethical development of his characters (Berdiboyeva, 2025; Moore, 2022¹⁰).

Literary Function: Childhood also serves a literary purpose, guiding narrative structure, thematic development, and reader engagement. The child-centered narrative allows authors to explore complex social, moral, and spiritual issues

¹⁰ Moore H. *Childhood in Victorian Literature*. Amsterdam : University of Amsterdam, 2022. Available at: https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/24760890/Moore_Childhood_in_Victorian_Literature.pdf (Accessed: 13.02.2026).

through the lens of innocence, vulnerability, and resilience. Dickens' use of Oliver as a central character exemplifies how childhood can anchor a novel's thematic focus and emotional resonance (Coveney, 2020; Oriens, 2025¹¹).

Overall, the findings suggest that Victorian authors intentionally employ childhood as a strategic tool to explore social critique, ethical dilemmas, and psychological depth. The interplay between the child's personal experiences and broader societal structures underscores the complexity of literary representations and affirms the enduring relevance of childhood in English literature.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates that childhood in 19th-century English literature performs multiple functions: social, moral, spiritual, and literary. Dickens, Brontë, Eliot, Gaskell, and Hardy portray children not merely as passive figures but as active participants in the shaping of social commentary, moral instruction, and narrative structure.

The analysis confirms that:

- Socially, childhood exposes the inequalities and challenges of Victorian society.
- Morally, child protagonists model ethical behavior, resilience, and personal integrity.
- Spiritually, early experiences facilitate self-awareness, emotional growth, and moral clarity.
- Literarily, childhood drives narrative structure, thematic depth, and reader engagement.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of Victorian literature, highlighting how childhood operates as a multifaceted and culturally significant concept. It also provides a foundation for future research in comparative literature, literary linguistics, and studies of childhood in historical and cultural contexts.

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¹¹ Coveney P. *Our Field: The Rise of the Child Narrator*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2020. Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/book/6757/chapter/150864039> (Accessed: 13.02.2026).

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