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## THE COUNTRYSIDE OF KENT; INNATE REBELLION OF THE CHILD SPIRIT

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### ABSTRACT

A common point is remarkable between Edith Nesbit and Richmal Crompton, two women writers who are inspired by the landscape of Kent, England. Under the influence of the vast and limitless landscape of Kent, these women writers reveal how awful the boundaries of childhood. In their children novels, both Nesbit and Crompton create child characters who live to reach beyond the limits, impossibilities and immobilities of their childishness. Inspiring a full sense of freedom, the spectacular scenery of Kent leads Crompton to write her first William story following her move to Kent. William Brown, the main character of the 38 book series fight against the darkness and limitedness of childhood with a sheer force of innate rebellion of the child spirit. On the other hand, Nesbit moves to Kentish countryside following the loss of her husband Hubert Bland and writes stories about childhood fears and hopes. When these two women writers move to Kent, the voices of the Kentish countryside reach the depth of their heart, remind their experiences going back to childhood. Their return to their childhood motivates them to create a writerly voice depicting brave child characters' needed freedom to take care of their lives. In this sense, this study focuses on the influence of Kentish countryside on the writing of Edith Nesbit and Richmal Crompton and discusses the way they write about children who live and behave to deny any kind of boundaries imposed on them.

**Keywords:** Boundary, Childhood, Edith Nesbith, Landscape, Richmal Crompton.

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## KENT KIRSALI; ÇOCUK RUHUNUN ÖZGÜN İSYANI

### ÖZET

İngiltere'nin Kent kırsalından ilham alan iki kadın yazar Edith Nesbith ve Richmal Crompton arasında ortak bir nokta oldukça dikkat çekicidir. Sonsuz ve sınırsız Kent kırsalının etkisiyle, bu kadın yazarlar çocukluğun sınırlarının ne kadar korkunç olduğundan bahsederler. Hem Edith Nesbit hem de Richmal Compton romanlarında çocukluğun sınırlarını, imkansızlıklarını, hareketsizliklerini aşmak isteyen çocuk karakterler yaratırlar. Özgürlük ilhamı veren Kent manzarası, Richmal Cromton'u, Kent'e taşınmasının hemen ardından ilk William hikayesini yazmaya iter. 38 kitaplık serinin ana karakteri William Brown, ruhunda doğuştan getirdiği güçlü asilik ile çocukluğun karanlığı ve sınırları ile savaşmaktadır. Diğer yandan, Edith Nesbit kocası Hubert Bland'in ölümünü takiben Kent'e yerleşir ve çocukluk korkularını ve umutlarını anlatan çocuk romanları yazmaya başlar. Bu iki kadın yazar Kent'e yerleşince, Kent kırsalının sesleri kalplerinin derinliklerine kadar ulaşır, onları kendi çocukluklarına götürür. Kendi çocuklarına dönmek, Edith Nesbit and Richmal Crompton'ı yaşamlarının kontrollerini almak için uğraşan cesur çocuk karakterlerin ihtiyaç duyduğu özgürlüğü tanımlayan bir yazar sesi yaratmak için motive eder. Bu bağlamda bu çalışma İngiltere'de bulunan Kent kırsalının Edith Nesbit ve Richmal Crompton yazarlarının çocuk kitaplarına etkisini ve çocuk karakterlerin kendilerine dayatılan sınırlardan kurtulmak için nasıl yaşadığını ve davrandığını tartışacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Çocukluk, Edith Nesbith, Kırsal, Richmal Crompton.

### INTRODUCTION

This study is going to examine the approaches to the childhood of Kentish authors Edith Nesbit and Richmal Crampton. It will focus on the relationship between the child characters and the setting of countryside of Edith Nesbit's *Railway Children* and Richmal Crampton's *Just William*. Both Nesbit and Crampton live most of their life in Kent which provides scenes and memories for their books. I believe that both Nesbith and Crampton are inspired by the countryside of Kent so they create child characters who live to reach beyond the limits, boundaries, impossibilities and immobilities of childhood. The vast and limitless landscape of Kent reminds these women writers of how awful the boundaries of childhood. What sets their children's novels apart from the writers that precede them is that they do away with the didacticism and sentimentalism prevalent in Victorian literature.

They create imaginative, creative, adventurous, free and strong-willed child characters.

Before going deep into the the child characters and exploring how they experience the limitlessness in the scenes reminding Kentish countryside, it seems necessary to require to focus on some important points of Nesbit and Crampton's biography which is a slight indication of how Kentish countryside becomes a source of inspiration for their writing. In her "The Experience of Archives: Richmal Crompton and Others", Jane McVeigh asserts that Richmal Crompton was born in 1890 in Bury and her early life passes in Bury, Lancashire. She becomes a student at Royal Holloway, and then a Classics teacher at ST Elphins School in Warrington, where she had been a pupil. Following the death of her father, Richmal then follows her sister and mother to live in Bromley, Kent in 1917 (273-278). She lived in Kent until her death. She published her first book *Just William* in 1922 even though she publishes them in a magazine as short stories beginning from 1919. Her eleven-year-old, humorous child character William Brown and his adventures delight adults and the children and she continues to write about him until the 1960s. Crompton writes William stories after she moves to Kent and the setting of William's adventures is a middle-class life in the countryside with all descriptions like Kent and its surrounding. "After tea William set off again down the road. The setting sun had turned the sky to gold. There was a soft haze over all countryside. The clear bird songs filled all the air, and the hedgerows were bursting into summer" (Crompton, 161).

Edith Nesbit was born in London in 1858. When she was four her father who runs an agricultural college dies. She shares her childhood with her sister half-sister and three brothers. In 1871, Edith Nesbit with her mother, sisters and brothers settled at Kent. This becomes the start of Edith Nesbit's love of Kent and its countryside. Nesbit describes these years as "a source of happy memories and influences" which has an immense influence on Nesbit's child characters (Briggs, 67- 88). She returns to London when she gets married to Hubert Bland in 1876. She continues to enjoy her holidays in Kent even though she lives in London. However, she returns to her beloved Kentish countryside following the death of her husband in 1914.

According to my research, Nesbit and Crampton share some similar life experiences in their early childhood and adulthood. Their childhood and early adulthood say about the characters they bring to life in their books. They write about the world they know and miss. Both Nesbit and Crampton come from families whose

members are educated and even bookish. In particular, their fathers are educated and intelligent persons. While Nesbit's father is a teacher and runs a London agricultural college, Crompton's father works as a Classics Master at Bury Grammar School. That is to mean, father of both women writers instilled in them an insatiable appetite for knowledge and writing. As such, they begin writing at her early ages and improve their writing. As women who experience Kentish countryside, they write as if they know how it feels to take adventures in and around Kentish gardens, investigate secret passageways around the nature and walking down the railway tracks that crossed the backfield.

Edith Nesbit's *The Railway Children* tells the story of three children Roberta, Peter and Phyllis. Following the falling of their father into prison unexpectedly, they move with their mother from "pretty life in their Red Villa" to a small cottage in the countryside, Three Chimneys, and a railway becomes the centre of their new life (Nesbit, 7). Their comfortable, middle-class life ends and their new life is very different. As their mother is now busy writing in her room to earn money, the children are alone in their loneliness and fill their lives with full of adventures. They discover a mass of coal at the station, bring it home but the station master catches them. They develop a habit of watching the train pass by. A game leads them to a dark tunnel and they rescue a dog, Jim from the tunnel. They make friend an Old Gentleman who runs the railway and this gentleman help to prove their father's innocence and make him get back home.

*Just William* tells the story of rebellious boy William Brown. Richmal Crompton writes humorous adventures of mischievous William from 1919 to the 1960s. Just William is the first one of her 38 short story collections. William's adventures include his gang of rebels called "Outlaws"; namely Ginger, Henry, Douglas and Violet Elizabeth. William embarks on countless adventures including trying to arrange a marriage for her sister, planning to sell Ginger's brothers as slaves to raise Money, takes a job as a boot boy as step one in his grand plan to run.

## DISCUSSION

The Victorian literary depiction of childhood takes roots from two notions. Under the influence of Romantics such as Blake and Wordsworth, children are described as naturally innocent. On the other hand, in terms of religious influences, they are thought of as naturally sinful and in need of discipline. Therefore, most nineteenth century novels mainly portray how the children should be instructed, trained and disciplined to make them fit into life and to make them good adults of the future.

Contrary to a certain cultural and religious understanding of childhood, Edith Nesbit and Richmal Crompton describe childhood as a state of light and freedom that blinks and enlighten the adults' way even though it stays far beyond. For them, childhood should be lived in freedom to be able to give valuable feedback for adulthood. As parallel to this way of thinking about childhood, Edith Nesbit once writes: "when I was a little child I used to pray fervently, tearfully, when I should be grown up I might never forget What I thought, felt and suffered then" (Briggs, 128). When Richmal Crompton and Edith Nesbit move to Kent, the voices and scenes of the Kentish countryside reach the depth of their heart. Their personal childhood experiences go all the way back to childhood are replayed. They juxtapose the spectacular scenery of the Kentish countryside which inspires freedom with the lived experience of the limitedness of many children. As such, they create child characters who deny any kind of boundaries that their childhood imposes on them.

In *The Railway Children*, Nesbit sheds light on the change in the perspective of children as they try to overcome most of the practical difficulties. It is through their adventure at a nearby railroad station the children learn to amuse themselves outside their home and experience their freedom beyond the borders of the home. In the same way, Richmal Crompton describes how rebellious eleven-years-old boy William Brown pushes the boundaries of his childhood limits in her *Just William* collections.

Nesbit and Crompton both draw attention to the value of childhood home in their novels as they know that the behaviours and the psychology of the child are closely linked with the spaces in which they live. In his well-known book, *The Poetics of Space*, the philosopher and phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard defines the house as a space of happiness as it is the place the child lives and mould his sense of space and his/her psyche. In chapter of 2 of *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard deepens his research of the value of the house and defines it as a dream space: an embodiment of dreams, a resting place for daydreaming (74). In other words, the house shelters daydreamers, the house protects the dreamer. Nesbit and Crompton also define the house as a safe place of daydreaming which builds creativity for a child. In both novels, the house is a shelter, a place of daydreaming. It is the protective place that reinforces the children from outside. It is a secure and comfortable place. In *The Railway Children*, the smaller country house Bobbie, Phyllis and Peter have to move with their mother is a protective and cocooning place for them. The house becomes a real shelter and defence against numerous difficulties.

In Richmal Crompton's novel, William Brown's house is in a small unidentified village. William dreams and makes careful preparations for his adventures in his bedroom. Both houses of the both novels are in touch with nature and take roots from nature. The books describe a scenery that has both deep spreading roots and long arms dispread through the sky.

Although the home space stretches between outside and inside protecting the children from outside dangers, something happens that turn the balance between outside and inside upside down in both novels. In *The Railway Children*, when the father of the children goes away and can not come and their mother shuts herself in her room, the attention of the children turns into the outside world. Before that, there were certain hours when the division between home and street, outside and inside, the daylight and the darkness of night were clear. In these times, following the coming of their father, playing outside ends, doors are closed, the lights of the house are turned on and everybody is ready for dinner. However, following the going away of their father, Nesbit's railway children recognize that the wall of the house expected to protect them and the curtains expected to shadow them are all permeable. Their father and mother are not permanently present. In the countryside, they are alone in their loneliness. In *Just William*, there was a clear tension between his father and William. What Mr Brown requires from William is unquestionable obedience and respecting adults. He continuously receives specific instructions" and his father "warns him not to talk too much, walk around (Crompton, 18). However, William rejects these kinds of restrictions, limiting conditions and words. For Mr Brown, it is impossible to run the home and William without obedience. However, William continuously disobeys and his disobedience merely expresses his own desires. In William's case, when the tension between his father and him reaches breaking point, William turns to the outside world to set up a place to take adventures and amuse himself. William is not a bad rebellious boy, it is mainly his repressed imagination that forces him to expand the territories to be able to live his freedom. William's room is like a diary in which William keeps a daily record of all his naughty plans and experiences. As such his naughtiness is a response to his desire to escape from the house.

The child characters of both Nesbit and Crompton recognize that the house is an obstacle to discover the outside world even though it was once a shelter. In nature or the countryside children are not under the pressure of fear or discipline they experience at home. The setting of the countryside in two novels influences the way the child characters live their freedom. In *The Railway Children*, in their new

setting of countryside, Roberta, Peter and Phyllis get real experiences, make new friends. The countryside life allow them to live their own life by experiencing their freedom. As Nesbit describes in *The Railway Children*, it is where “all the delights of woods and fields and rocks and rivers had been open to them” (57). Therefore, Richmal Crompton defines the feelings of her character William Brown when he steals his elder brother’s bicycle and rides down the valley across the place of picnic where is forbidden to him.

...And William went on and on simply because he could not stop. His iron nerve had failed him. He had not even the presence of mind to fall off. He was quite lost. He had left the town behind him and did not know where he was going. But wherever he went was the centre of attraction....Some said he had escaped from an asylum, some that he was an advertisement of something. The children were inclined to think he was part of a circus. William himself had passed beyond despair. His face was white and set. His first panic had changed to a dull certainty that this would go on forever. He would never know how to stop. He supposed he would go right across England (29).

Along with the bicycle journey across the county, William is ultimately confronted by many spatial possibilities to connect with the world at large as the home does not, please him. The territory William wants to experience expands gradually and he imagines the whole as inside and outside.

In both novels, the child characters of both Nesbit and Crompton, around ten years old, begin to control their movements and explore their freedom from a turning point on. The scenes of the countryside, the books of Nesbit and Crompton provides, is the place where the children may themselves take action, runs along without any authority or any obedience. Each one is free to what he or she likes to do. The scenes that correspond to the feeling of freedom for the children are in fact memories of Kentish countryside both writers have.

## CONCLUSION

The 19th century could be defined as the Golden age of Children’s Literature. The theme of childhood dominate the novels Dicken’s *Oliver Twist*, David Copperfield, Lewis Carrol appears in England with his famous *Alice Adventures in Wonderland* (1895) among others. While Dickens mainly write about the living condition of children in Victorian England, Lewis Carrol draws a more imaginary world at the end of the century. At the beginning of the 20th century, the vision

of childhood begin to change and the writers like Nesbit and Crompton take on topics such as freedom fears dream and rebellion against the adult world. These subjects are omnipresent in the novels of Edith Nesbit and Richmal Crompton. They live at the crossroad of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Their writing indicates that they both have the vision of the childhood they experienced during their own childhood and the perspective that dominates the following century. However, they concentrate and write on a timeless and everlasting truth about childhood in their children novels. For both writers, children need freedom – the freedom to explore, imagine, create, take things apart and puts everything together. This freedom requires boundaries, of course, but providing them in the context of an environment that encourages exploration is important. Meeting a child's need for freedom within the boundaries minimizes the possibility of rebelliousness and stop them from acting the way in a starved of attention. Nesbit and Crompton describe the children as they explore and investigate the countryside. They juxtapose the innate rebellion of child spirit with Kentish countryside. Nesbit and Crompton lived most of their life in Kent and enjoyed the Kentish countryside. Therefore, *The Railway Children* and *Just William* provide scenes and attractions of Kent.

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