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Scenes of Ageing and Old Age in Children's Literature: An Overview of Selected Canonical Texts

Çocuk Edebiyatında Yaşlanma ve Yaşlılık Manzaraları: Seçilen Kanonik Metinlere Genel Bir Bakış

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Highlights:

- Childhood and old age are both socially and culturally constructed categories.
- European and Anglophone children's classics are characterized by the absence or limited presence of older characters.
- Older individuals typically appear as stereotypical or archetypal characters in the canonical texts of European and Anglophone children's literature.
- Children's classics are replete with portrayals of older individuals that may result in ageism.
- Children's literature should depict older individuals as productive and content members of society.

Abstract: Old age and ageing are either disregarded or underrepresented in much of the European and Anglophone classics of children's literature that have been recognised by global readership. Children's literature and old age generally appear to be polar opposites due to childhood's association with immaturity and innocence. Most children's classics end with child characters reaching adulthood, or old age is not presented as an important phase in life. When older people are present, they appear as archetypal or stereotypical characters most of the time. Consequently, canonical texts of children's literature are filled with wise old men who serve as friendly and helpful guides during children's quests, as well as ugly witches, old spinsters, and stepmothers who deliberately harm children. This study first questions the absence or limited presence of older characters in both European and Anglophone children's classics, and secondly delves into various representations of ageing and old age in selected examples, highlighting ageist discourses in the canonical texts of children's literature.

Keywords: Ageing, Old age, Children's literature, Ageism, European children's classics, Anglophone children's classics

Öne Çıkanlar:

- Çocukluk ve yaşlılık toplumsal ve kültürel olarak inşa edilmiş kavramlardır.
- Avrupa ve Anglofon çocuk edebiyatı klasikleri, yaşlı karakterlerin yokluğu veya sınırlı varlığı ile karakterizedir.
- Yaşlı bireyler, Avrupa ve Anglofon çocuk edebiyatının kanonik metinlerinde genellikle stereotipik veya arketipsel karakterler olarak tasvir edilmektedir.
- Çocuk edebiyatı klasikleri yaş ayrımcılığına sebep olabilecek yaşlı birey betimlemeleriyle doludur.
- Çocuk edebiyatı, yaşlı bireyleri toplumun üretken ve mutlu üyeleri olarak sunmalıdır.

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Öz: Yaşlılık ve yaşlanma, evrensel okuyucular tarafından kabul görmüş Avrupa ve Anglofon çocuk edebiyatı klasiklerinin çoğunda ya göz ardı edilmekte ya da yetersiz bir şekilde temsil edilmektedir. Çocukluk, toyluk ve masumiyet ile ilişkilendirildiğinden, çocuk edebiyatı ve yaşlılık genellikle birbirine zıt kavramlar olarak görülmektedir. Çocuk klasiklerinin çoğu, çocuk karakterlerin yetişkinliğe ulaşmasıyla sona erer ya da yaşlılık, yaşamın önemli bir dönemi olarak resmedilmez. Yaşlı bireylerin yer aldığı durumlarda ise, bu karakterler çoğunlukla arketipsel veya stereotipik figürler olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, çocuk edebiyatının kanonik metinlerinde, çocuklara maceralarında rehberlik eden yaşlı bilge adamlar ve çocuklara zarar verme amacı güden çirkin cadılar, evlenmemiş yaşlı kadınlar ve üvey anneler gibi karakterler sıklıkla yer almaktadır. Bu çalışma, ilk olarak hem Avrupa hem de Anglofon çocuk edebiyatının klasik metinlerindeki yaşlı karakterlerin yokluğunu ve sınırlı temsilini sorgular; ardından çocuk edebiyatının kanonik metinlerindeki yaş ayrımcılığına yol açan söylemleri vurgulayarak seçili örnekler üzerinden yaşlanma ve yaşlılığın çeşitli temsillerini inceler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yaşlanma, Yaşlılık, Çocuk Edebiyatı Yaş ayrımcılığı, Avrupa çocuk klasikleri, Anglofon çocuk klasikleri

Genişletilmiş Özet:

"Scenes of Ageing and Old Age in Children's Literature: An Overview of Selected Canonical Texts" başlıklı makale, yaşlılık ve çocuklukla ilişkilendirilen fikirlerin kültürel ve toplumsal bir durum olduğu düşüncesinden yola çıkarak çocuk edebiyatı klasiklerindeki yaşlı karakterler ve yaşlılık hakkında genel bir analiz sunar ve yaş ayrımcılığına sebep olabilecek temsillere dikkat çeker. Çalışma, çocuk edebiyatının klasik metinlerinin çocukların yaşlılık ve yaşlı insanlar hakkındaki görüşlerini şekillendirmede belirleyici bir rol oynadığını ve yaşlı insanlara davranış biçimlerini etkilediğini öne sürmektedir. Bu bağlamda, çalışma, öncelikle Anglofon çocuk edebiyatı olmak üzere Avrupa edebiyatının klasikleşmiş ve geniş bir okuyucu kitlesine ulaşmış eserlerinden örnekler sunmaktadır.

Çalışma ilk olarak çocuk edebiyatı ve çocukluk kavramının tarihsel gelişimini ele alır ve buna bağlı olarak yaşlılık kavramını tanımlar. Çocukluk ve yaşlılık kavramlarının toplumsal ve kültürel olarak inşa edilmiş olduğunu vurgular. Makale, daha sonra çocuk edebiyatında yaşlı karakterlerin azlığına ve sınırlı temsiline dikkat çeker. Çocuk edebiyatı, doğuşundan itibaren çocuğu masumiyetle ilişkilendirirken ve doğaya yakın konumlandırırken, yetişkinliği ve yaşlılığı olumsuz anlamda deneyimle, yozlaşmayla ve gelişmenin ve değişimin duraksamasıyla eş tutar. Bu sebeple, çocuk edebiyatı klasiklerinin büyük çoğunluğu daha çok genç karakterlerin psikolojik ve fizyolojik gelişimlerine odaklanarak çocukların yetişkinliğe ulaşmasıyla son bulurken, yaşlılık yaşamın önemli bir dönemi olarak genellikle göz ardı edilir.

Yaşlı karakterlerin sınırlı sayıda yer aldığı bazı eserlerde, bu karakterler genellikle oldukça pasif, hareketsiz ve etkisiz bir şekilde betimlenir. Yaşlı kadın karakterler, çoğunlukla evin içinde yemek yaparken, evi temizlerken, örgü örerken veya dikiş dikerken tasvir edilirler. Kırmızı Başlıklı Kız'ın büyükannesi gibi, çabuk kandırılabilen, şarkılar söyleyen ve kahkahalarıyla neşe saçan kadın karakterler çocuk edebiyatında sıkça karşılaşılan bir stereotiptir. Öte yandan, yaşlı erkek karakterler genellikle toplumda aktif bir rol oynayamadıkları ve üretimden ya da ekonomiden çekildikleri için agresif tavırlarıyla öne çıkarlar. Johanna Spyri'nin *Heidi* romanındaki topluma yabancılaşmış, somurtkan büyükbaba ya da Charles Dickens'ın yarattığı mutsuz Ebenezer Scrooge gibi karakterler, yaşlı erkek stereotiplerine örnek teşkil eder. Bu karakterler, yaşlılığın toplumdan uzaklaşma, üretkenliğin durması ve yalnızlık gibi negatif durumlarla ilişkilendirilmesinin bir sonucudur.

Bu tür temsiller, Margaret M. Gullette'in "düşüş" ya da "çöküş" anlatısı olarak tanımladığı olguyu oluşturur. Gullette, yaşlılığın genellikle toplumsal olarak bir düşüş, gerileme ve zayıflama süreci olarak algılandığını belirtir. Çocuklar bu tür temsillerle karşılaştıklarında, yaşlılar ve yaşlılık hakkında yanlış ve sınırlı bir bakış açısına sahip olabilirler. Bu da yaşlılık dönemi hakkında olumsuz ve dar bir anlayışın gelişmesine yol açar. Yaşlı karakterlerin gerek fiziksel gerekse davranışsal olarak çocuklara öykündükleri metinler ise çocukluk ve yetişkinlik arasındaki sınırları belirsizleştirse de aynı zamanda yaşlılık ve yaşlanma süreçlerini küçümseyerek, yaşlılık dönemini abartılı ve gerçeklikten kopuk bir şekilde temsil eder.

Makale, daha sonra çocuk edebiyatındaki arketipsel yaşlı karakterlerin temsiline odaklanır. Sözlü geleneğe dayanan arketiplerin çocuk edebiyatındaki yeri büyük olmuştur. Özellikle, çocuk edebiyatı, yaşlı bilge adam arketipleriyle doludur. Pasif ve agresif yaşlı erkek karakterlerden farklı olarak, yaşlı bilge adam bağımsızdır ve farklı dünyalar arasında özgürce hareket edebilir. Bu karakterler, genellikle çocuk kahramanlara ilham verir ve onlara rehberlik eder. *Hobbit*'te Gandalf, *Harry Potter* serisinde Dumbledore, *Alice Harikalar Diyarında*'da Mavi Tırtıl ve *Narnia* serisinde Profesör gibi karakterler, yaşlılık ve bilgeliği birleştirseler de bu temsiller sıklıkla idealize edilmiştir ve gerçek yaşlılık deneyiminden uzak bir resim çizer.

Çocuk edebiyatında kadın bilge karakterlere daha az rastlanır. Çocuklara yardım eden ve onları koruyan "peri anne" figürleri, genellikle bilgelikten ziyade korumacı ve şefkatli yapılarıyla ön plana çıkar. Bu figürler, genç karakterlere rehberlik etmektense, daha çok onlara fiziksel ve duygusal olarak destek sağlar. Kadın bilge karakterlerin temsilindeki bu sınırlamalar, toplumsal cinsiyetle de bağlantılı olarak, kadınların yaşlılıkları ile ilgili daha pasif ve koruyucu rollerle ilişkilendirilmelerinin bir yansımasıdır.

Bunlara ek olarak çocuk klasiklerindeki arketipsel kötü karakterler yaşlı olmasalar dahi büyük ölçüde yaşlılıkla ve yaşlılığın getirdiği fiziksel özelliklerle tasvir edilirler. Çocuk edebiyatında kötülük, kırışık ve somurtkan yüz ve sivri çenenin yanı sıra entelektüel derinlikten yoksunlukla ve kaba bir üslupla eş tutulur. Kadın karakterlerde bu temsiller daha da belirginleşir ve hem yaş ayrımcılığını hem de cinsiyetçiliği güçlendirir. Özellikle arketipsel yaşlı kadın karakterler, fiziksel özellikleriyle çürümeyi, tehlikeyi ve kötülüğü simgeler. Ataerkil toplum tarafından belirlenen güzellik standartlarına uymayan yaşlı kadın kötü doğasını maskelemek için büyüye başvurur. Bu tür karakterler genç kız ya da prenseslerin gençliklerini kıskanmalarından ötürü onların birincil düşmanıdır.

Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma çocuk kitaplarının -yaşlı karakterleri açıkça marjinalleştirmese bile- son derece önyargılı, yaş ayrımcısı ve cinsiyetçi olabildiğini göstermiştir. Çocuk edebiyatı, yaşlıları üzgün, hasta, yaşlılık durumundan şikayetçi ya da gençliği kıskanan bireyler olarak sunmak yerine, onları hâlâ üretken ve toplumun önemli bireyleri olarak tasvir etmelidir. Bu şekilde, çocuklar yaşlanmanın getirdiği zorluklarla çocuk kitaplarında tanışmalı ve yaşlılara saygı duymayı öğrenmelidir. Çocuk edebiyatı yaşlılığı bir son olarak değil, yaşamın bir aşaması olarak göstermeye özen göstermelidir.

Introduction

Although children's literature and age studies may seem to be separate fields, childhood, old age, and ageing are inherently ambiguous and closely related categories. Emerging from gerontology, the scope of age studies is broad, encompassing representations of old age as well as "theoretical reflections on age in general" (Joosen 2022, 3). Establishing a link between ageing, old age and children's literature is crucial, because "constructions of age take place on various levels" in children's literature: "in the way that characters of all ages are shaped, and in the way that young and adult readers are addressed" (Joosen 2022, 3). In this regard, analysing ageing and old age in children's literature requires defining and outlining the history of not only children's literature but also the concept of childhood. Defining children's literature is not possible without considering childhood in its historical and social context.

Even though the history of children's literature can be traced back to the ancient times when children were passive listeners of myths, epics, fairy tales and folk stories alongside adults, the birth of children's literature in the modern sense is relatively a new phenomenon. During medieval times as well as Renaissance period, children were regarded as a target audience and provided with didactic books and fables in both Latin and vernacular languages. Nevertheless, these texts often presented "maxims concerning the rules of etiquette" and they were "primarily works of instruction, rather than entertainment" (McMunn & McMunn 1972, 23). Even though the instructive function of literature for children was recognised, entertainment was not taken into consideration, and children were not treated as an audience that had needs and expectations of their own.

As Philippe Ariès writes in *Centuries of Childhood* (1960), the lack of children's literature in Middle Ages and earlier periods was an outcome of the concept of childhood that was not fully understood as a separate category. According to Ariès,

> *In Medieval society, the idea of childhood did not exist; this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society this awareness was lacking. (1962, 128)*

As Ariès articulates, "nothing in medieval dress distinguished the child from the adult" (1962, 50). Children were considered and thus represented, especially in medieval art and literature, as "essentially the same as adults, except that they were smaller and less experienced. A child's world was that of the adult in miniature" (McMunn and McMunn 1972, 21). Indeed, as Allen M. Barstow writes with reference to Ariès, "until the age of seven the infant was reared by his mother or by a mother-substitute. He was then sent to into the world of men" (1975, 42):

> *At about the age of seven, the little boy was sent by his father to be an apprentice in the house of a relative, a patron, or a prominent acquaintance. Here he performed domestic tasks and helped the head of the household in his trade. It was thus through practical experience and by direct contact with the adult world that he learned the art of living. (Barstow 1975, 43)*

According to Aries, then, it was only towards the end of the seventeenth century that the concept of childhood was recognised as a distinct category, and literary production for children accordingly became a necessity. Firstly, "Puritan authors realised how effective it could be in furthering their campaign to reform the personal piety of all individuals, adults and children alike" (Grenby 2008, 4). They used literature to instruct children about death, life after death, and the transience of material life. Nevertheless, Puritan children's literature, which was extremely morbid and terrifying in tone and content, still lacked entertainment and failed to acknowledge the child as different from adults, thus rendering these books far from children's literature that would emerge in the following centuries.

The concept of childhood in its modern sense largely came into existence in the eighteenth century, as Devrim Çetin Güven writes, "during the transition period from feudalism to capitalist modernity" (2019, 903) coinciding with the emergence of Enlightenment ideas. John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), followed by *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), for instance, marked a major breakthrough in the understanding of childhood. Locke's perception of the human mind as a blank slate, namely *tabula rasa,* not only foregrounded childhood as an important stage in human development but also underlined the importance of books for children. Locke's formulation of an ideal book for children, one that would "reward his pains in reading," and yet would not "fill his head with perfect useless trumpery, or lay the principles of vice and folly" (1779, 226) harmonized instruction and entertainment, thus laying the foundation for modern children's literature.

Almost a century later, Jean Jack Rousseau considered Locke's subject "still entirely fresh" and argued that "childhood is unknown" (1979, 33) in his seminal work *Émile, or On Education* (1762) where he combined the philosophy of education with the *bildungsroman* tradition. According to Rousseau, there is "a false idea of" childhood, which involves "seeking man in the

child without thinking of what he is before being a man" (1979, 33-34). Rousseau's statement was important for childhood studies, because it was a clear break from the perception of children as small men. Rousseau thus first recognised childhood as a separate category from adulthood, and then emphasized the importance of education for children. Rousseau's goal was to demonstrate that childhood was the most critical, and thus poignant phase in an individual's academic and moral development.

However, the meaning of childhood took a new direction and was redefined through the ideas of Romanticism and Victorian mannerism. Juxtaposed with the competitive and, thus, corrupt adult world that emerged with pervasive industrialization and urbanization, childhood became an epitome of innocence and purity. The idyllic child, or "the Apollonian child," as Chris Jenks calls it (1996, 73), was first formulated by Rousseau in *Émile* (73), but it was accentuated in the subsequent periods. The perception of the child as immature and spiritual not only sharpened the boundaries between childhood and adulthood and old age but also established a dichotomous relationship between them. Untouched by the various means of civilization, "the modern/Apollonian child", as termed by Güven (2019, 904), glorified childhood at the expense of its opposites – adulthood and old age. This dichotomy has also become significant for children's literature because it introduced the binaries of childhood and adulthood as well as childhood and old age as perpetual conflicts. As a result, as Chris Jenks writes, "childhood is to be understood as a social construct" (1996, 7). The meaning[s] we give to it "always relate[s] to a particular cultural setting" (Jenks 1996, 7) considerably varying through time and across societies.

The assumption that childhood is a social construct becomes a pivotal element in the field of age studies, because, such a premise similarly reveals the constructions of both adulthood and old age within societal and cultural norms. The *OED* defines ageing as "the process of growing old," "showing signs of advancing age," "becoming elderly or aged," and "giving the appearance of old age." It defines old age as "the later part of life; the period of life after youth and middle age." Although ageing is "frequently restricted to the later part of the life course," it also carries connotations of growing and maturing "to describe the ageing from childhood to some point in adulthood" (Johnson 2003, 3). As a result, as Paul Johnson contends, when a person begins to be considered "aged or elderly is a matter of social convention and legal and administrative definition" (2003, 3).

The United Nations defines an older person as "a person who is over 60 years of age" ("Older Persons"). There are also gerontological studies that consider the beginning of old age to be 65 while recognising other sub-categories such as young-old (65-74), middle-old (75-84), and oldest old (>85) (Zizza *et al*. 2009, 681). However, life expectancy, as well as the physical and mental well-being of older people, and older people's visibility in society, would undoubtedly vary across different societies and geographies. In places "where life expectancy is low," for instance, "people in their 50s may be considered older and this may be reflected in national policy" ("Older Persons"). Similarly, the living conditions of a 60-year-old individual in Sweden would significantly differ from those of a 60-year-old individual in an African country, and these differences would have a considerable impact on their quality of life.

As Margaret M. Gullette, who explores old age as a social and cultural concept, titles her seminal work, *Aged by Culture,* we are indeed aged by culture. While there is a biological and physical aspect to ageing, the ideas associated with old age are cultural constructs. Old age is a dynamic concept, and its meaning is never fixed and nor is it necessarily aligned with chronological ageing. Karen Sánchez-Eppler also affirms that old age can be lived, perceived,

and represented quite differently, even within the same societies, much like childhood, whose meaning changes based on "different genders, races, or class positions" (2011, 35). The assumption that people were considered old before they were 40 in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period, for instance, is a false belief which is "based on the low average life expectancy in that period, and on the implication that people looked older and were less strong and sturdy than the corresponding age group" (Sharar 1993, 313). As a matter of fact, 60 and 70 were considered the beginning of old age in the legal documents of these periods as today (Sharar 1993, 313). In this context, the ideas about old age that emerge in a society at a given time stem from the narratives constructed by that society. As Gullette sums up, "our age narratives become our virtual realities" (Gullette 2004, 11).

Children's literature, in relation to the dichotomous relationship between old age and childhood, emerges as one of the significant and powerful tools that shape societal perceptions of ageing. As Gullette points out, "we know more about how children learn gender. The gender they acquire is usually like that of one parent," and "ageing too could be seen as a continuum along which they glide, to eventually join the adult we" (2004, 12). In this regard, children encounter and learn "age norms" first in the family and later from all external stimuli:

> *the meanings of age and ageing are conveyed in large part through the moral and psychological implications of the narrative ideas we have been inserting into our heads, starting when we were very young indeed.* […] *Children collect contradictory age-tinged language and revelations about older ages and about getting older in general, often without guidance, from peers, from overhearing adults, from ill-informed educators, haphazard reading, or, more and more, via the mass media. (2004, 11)*

Aligned with the instructive function of literature, "the kind of prospective age narrative each of us internalizes in childhood can be foundational" (Gullette 2004, 16). The earliest readings can affect children's perception of ageing and old age, influence their interactions with older individuals, and also play a crucial role in shaping their understanding of how old age can and should be lived. As a result, children's literature – particularly classics, as timeless and universal cultural products that are repeatedly encountered – can ultimately play an essential role in shaping a society's long-term reflections on ageing. Vanessa Joosen, who examines the intersections of old age and childhood in her academic work, similarly points at the poignant role of literature for children:

> *Since children's literature plays an important role in the socialization of children, educators and literary scholars are interested in the ideological contexts that the books convey, including their age norms and construction of the ageing process. (Joosen 2019, 1)*

Ageing and old age, as Joosen suggests, are deeply ideological issues. They may carry meanings and normative ideas that extend beyond biological and chronological markers. Therefore, portrayal of elderly characters and old age must be carefully examined in children's literature, because literature plays an important role in the development of children into active and contributing members of society.

To this end, this study traces and explores portrayal of older individuals and representation of ageing in selected canonical works of children's literature, recognising both adulthood and childhood as socially constructed categories. Firstly, the article addresses a common point raised by the scholars in the fields of children's literature and age studies, which is the absence or limited

presence of the elderly in children's literature. It then continues with an examination of decline narratives that depict elderly characters as stereotypically passive figures. Lastly, the study explores the archetypal characterization of older individuals in children's literature with a specific focus on the ideological connotations of age archetypes. As these categories are examined, the article also highlights ageist discourses in children's literature.

This study does not offer a thorough analysis of a specific book, series, writer, or period. Instead, it aims to identify and trace recurring patterns of ageing and old age in the classical works of children's literature. The examples presented in this article are drawn from the canonical texts of both Anglophone and European children's literature, which have achieved universal fame and become classics through translations and adaptations. The genres explored in this study are diverse, encompassing a wide range of texts including fairy tales, nursery rhymes, eighteenth-century British children's literature, Victorian children's classics, works from various European countries, as well as twentieth-century children's literature that have earned a place in the canon. In this regard, the study both highlights the formulaic nature of children's classics and points to representations of implicit ageism that may foster biases and negative attitudes toward old age and older individuals.

Absence or Limited Presence of the Elderly

As Vanessa Joosen writes, "popular tales of the West […] tend to have younger protagonists" (2019, 1). Indeed, older individuals, and even middle-aged adults, are scarcely represented in European and Anglophone children's classics, largely due to the children-focused target audience. Maria Nikolajeva notes that while "adult readers […] seldom have problems reading about characters who are significantly younger or older" than themselves, for children, "difference in age between themselves and the characters may create insurmountable barriers" (2003, 7). She further asserts that "an age difference of two years may feel significant" for young readers (2003, 7), and according to empirical research, "children prefer to read about characters of their own age or some years older" (2003, 7). In works written for children, the emphasis is placed on child characters with whom the reader can easily identify. The identification and emotional connection between the child reader and the characters are crucial, as they help the reader engage with both the narrative and its moral, if present, simultaneously contributing to its other instructive and entertaining functions.

Maria Nikolajeva refers to adult or older characters in children's literature as "secondary," "backdrop," or "supporting" characters (2003, 114). These characters, having "no essential role in the plot," are often included "for the purpose of authenticity," or to "make the setting more familiar and believable" (Nikolajeva 2003, 113-114). Although there are children's books where adults serve as the main characters, or "interactions between children and adults" become an important subject (Joosen 2020, 6), child protagonists remain more popular among young readers.[1] In children's books, "reflections on the construction of adulthood in and through children's books remains secondary to their goal of exploring childhood agency" most of the time (Joosen 2020, 6).

In children's classics, the focus is often on coming-of-age as central theme. Coming-of-age narratives, a tradition rooted in Enlightenment ideas, depict not only the physiological but also psychological growth of younger characters. However, coming-of-age ultimately culminates in the transition of child characters into adulthood. Children's books that end with characters

[1] Hugh Lofting's *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* (1920), Annie M. G. Schmidt's *Minoes* (1970) are examples of children's literature with adults as main characters (Joosen, 2020, 76)

growing up lead to children's literature to overlook old age as an important stage of life in which learning, productivity, and development continue. As a result, both European and Anglofon children's classics, which typically revolve around child protagonists, are characterized by the absence or limited presence of older characters.

The absence or limited presence of the older individuals in children's literature is also closely tied to the dichotomy between childhood and adulthood. In the eighteenth century, when children's literature emerged in its modern form, children's books primarily served to prepare children for adulthood and the industrial, competitive world outside the protective boundaries of the nursery. In the early nineteenth century, Romanticism reinforced the dichotomy between childhood and adulthood/old age, as "the Romantics believed in the intrinsic goodness of children" (McCulloch 2011, 10). The Romantic poets suggested that the innocence of children and their closeness to nature were gradually lost as people aged. Consequently, "the adult world, for Romantics like Wordsworth, was regarded as 'the prison-house', where the self is stifled by learning and socialization processes" (McCulloch 2011, 12). Children's books, which are largely shaped and developed in line with these Romanticized ideas about childhood, thus present limited number of older people, prioritizing innocent children as their central subject. Such narratives typically aim to protect children from the effects of ageing. They either end with the approach of adulthood, or prevent children from entering adulthood in various ways to sanctify and preserve the innocence of childhood.

Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1862-1863), which is an example of children's literature from industrial nineteenth-century England, draws on this Romantic discourse. It tells the story of Tom, a child chimney sweeper, who transforms into a half-fish, half-human child after falling into a river while fleeing from the people who mistake him for a thief. Filled with biblical references, the underwater symbolizes a space between life and death, where the water babies represent dead children in Heaven. In terms of adulthood-childhood dichotomy, Kingsley freezes time for Tom, positioning him against exploitive older characters who represent the pragmatic and hypocritical aspects of the era.

Another famous example marked by this dichotomy is J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1911), where Peter flees the real world to settle in Neverland, so that he can remain a child. The novel presents a limited number of older characters, such as James Hook - the pirate, and Mr. Smee - an old Irish boatswain. James Hook's dirty and distressed clothes, his hook, and his facial features "hint towards age or unhealthiness" (Amberg 2020, 48). His "corpse-like and sinister" appearance is "a strong allusion to the grim reaper or death" especially when compared to the children, who "are dressed in leaves and animal fur connecting them to the surrounding nature and life" (Amberg 2020, 8). Likewise, Mrs. Smee, the boatswain, is an ambivalent character whose presence alone is enough to scare the children. In contrast, the children, especially Peter Pan, function as the antagonist of adulthood since they live as one with nature, symbolizing their purity and innocence. Peter's resistance to growing up, thus, can be interpreted as his rejection of the responsibilities and corruption that may accompany the adult world.

In C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), the first instalment of the *Narnia* series, the magical wardrobe works only for children as a door to the magical Narnia. The Professor, who is the only elderly character in the novel, is implied to have visited Narnia when he was a child. In Narnia, the children become heroes and heroines, tasked with saving the world from the corruption and tyranny of the adults. They eventually turn out to be just and equalitarian kings and queens. However, the children must return to the real world once they grow up, as Narnia is the realm of innocent children, much like Neverland. After the Pevensie children return

to the primary world, they find themselves as children again. Children's ageing is prevented through travels between worlds, where the flow of time is different. In short, these books revolve around the idea that children lose their innocence and purity after they reach adulthood. Therefore, to prevent children from ageing and entering the adult world, these narratives tend to freeze time, kill off children, or transfer them to other lands like Neverland, Narnia, or Heaven.

Ageing or Declining: Older People as Passive People

Phyliss W. Barnum writes that older people "appear less frequently than they should" in children's classics, and when they do appear, they "play an insignificant role" as passive, ineffective, and stereotypical grandparents or neighbours who do not necessarily contribute to the plot (1977a, 303). Child characters are usually eager to visit their grandparents, or spend summer holidays with them, and eat their homemade food. No matter how much lovable they are, such stereotypical older characters are typically inactive and immobile, and they tend to isolate themselves from the society. Barnum writes that

> *Apart from the social life with their grandchildren, however, old people almost never engage in social activities outside the home. They do not become involved in politics, belong to clubs, attend concerts or lectures. They are typically shown at home or visiting grandchildren. (1977b, 30)*

Gender also plays an important role in older characters' social engagement and outlook on life. Children's literature abounds with weak and gullible elderly women who are easily deceived. The stereotype of chubby, nurturing, and jolly old lady who cooks, cleans, tells stories, or sits on her rocking chair knitting and sewing is frequently seen in children's classics. While these older female characters may be passive outside the domestic sphere, they often radiate joy with their laughter.

Dan Donlan indicates that "the passive female is portrayed sympathetically" and that "the little old lady usually exhibits one or more characteristics that indicate her ineffectuality: eccentricity, befuddlement, and imperceptiveness" (1972, 604). Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother, for example, is a kind-hearted yet extremely gullible old lady who is notable for her immobility. She cannot even get out of her bed and she is fooled and eventually devoured by the evil wolf. The wolf's notorious impersonation of the grandmother, which is simultaneously funny and uncanny, reinforces humour, thus enhancing the effect of the gullible and passive lady stereotype. As Donlan writes, "equally eccentric is Mother Goose" (1972, 605). She rides through the air and carries her tales and nursery rhymes to children. Even though Mother Goose resembles witches with her cone hat and supernatural abilities, she ramains a funny and whimsical old lady.

In C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), Mrs. Beaver is also comparable to Mother Goose with her laughter. She is a precise example of nurturing, caring, loving, and talkative lady who is either cooking in the kitchen or sewing in front of her sewing machine. Although she is not an elderly character, she emerges as one of the few older figures in the *Narnia* series. While she is motherly, she is also marked by her irritatingly loud character and passivity associated with her role in the household.

Older male characters, however, may display differences in terms of their visibility in social life and their relationships with children. According to Simon de Beauvoir, old men lose their influence in society since they no longer contribute to the economy, which forces them to leave the public sphere and return to the domestic sphere. In *Coming of Age*, Beauvoir writes that

> *so long as the aged man retains some efficiency, he remains an integral part of the community and he is not distinguished from it – he is an elderly*

> *adult male. When he loses his powers, he takes on the appearance of another; he then becomes, and to a far more radical extent than a woman, a mere object. She is necessary to society whereas he is of no worth at all. (1972, 89)*

In line with Beauvoir's ideas, children's classics portray quite a few older men who are not only aggressive and authoritative but also resistant to showing any kind of affection. These characters are typically characterized by their preference for leading secluded lives. Although they are not necessarily villains or archetypally evil, they remain distant to children and society. In Swiss writer, Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* (1881), for instance, the grandfather is a loveless, aggressive, and grumpy man. He lives in the mountains in his hut and refuses to socialize. He even rejects living with his own granddaughter, Heidi. However, Heidi's amiable nature eventually transforms him into a gentler person. The grandfather's transformation is significant because it demonstrates childhood as a healing and rejuvenating force in the face of decadence that comes with ageing. The novel offers the energy and essential goodness of youth as a remedy to the soul and the body that decay as a result of old age. Older female characters in *Heidi*, on the contrary, are much more sociable. Peter's blind grandmother, Brigitta, is a kind, poor, and caring old lady unlike Heidi's grandfather. Klara's grandmother, Mrs. Sesemann, is a rich, educated, and intellectual woman who values the education of girls. Therefore, Spyri's *Heidi* affirms gender stereotypes in its portrayal of the elderly. Women can preserve their motherly and protective roles as they age, whereas men start to feel disconnected from society as they lose their economically and physically effective presence in the public sphere.

Likewise, the infamous protagonist of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Ebenezer Scrooge, is a cold and grumpy miser who resists socializing and celebrating Christmas. As a lonely man with no family or close friends, Scrooge indulges himself in material wealth. Although Scrooge has many defects in his character, his indifference to children stands out, reinforcing and highlighting the dichotomous relationship between children's innocence and adults' corruption. Based on Beauvoir's ideas, Scrooge can be said to have forsaken his humanity and moral precepts to demonstrate that he is economically active, strong, and an operative part of society. Nevertheless, as the ghost of his late business partner and the spirits of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Yet to Come visit him, Scrooge gradually changes for the better. Travels between different time periods help Scrooge realize the process of his moral corruption, which began when he became an adult. His nostalgic remembrance of his childhood that is long gone, plays an important role in his enlightenment and subsequent transformation. Scrooge eventually mends his relationship with his relatives, learns to celebrate Christmas, and starts to share his wealth with those in need. Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), which has become one of the classics of children's literature, portrays lovable and caring yet extremely passive older men and women. Charlie's maternal and paternal grandparents literally live and sleep in a single bed. While Charlie's grandparents are not emotionally distant or aggressive, they are inactive and associated with the house and the bed, symbolizing immobility.

As Joosen writes, children's books often tend to "pair a younger and an older character" who is "described as childlike" (2019, 3). In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Grandpa Joe and Charlie share such a bond. When Grandpa Joe learns that Charlie has found the golden ticket, he jumps out of the bed and starts to dance. The exaggerated depiction of the dance scene makes his character unrealistic and overly detached from the realities of old age. Grandpa Joe also accompanies Charlie during his visit to the factory as he still carries the spirit of youth. Joosen calls such representations "infantilization" which can be understood as "the equation of the elderly

with children" (2015, 129). However, as Joosen maintains, these representations are also "a form of ageism" and create "prejudice" against old age (2015, 129). Older characters who display physically and psychologically childlike behaviours celebrate childhood and its attributes while they simultaneously disparage old age and ageing.

There are also examples where there are strong emotional bonds and mutual love between children and older people who are not biologically related. In such cases, older people may often "appear as secondary characters" and function as "substitute parents" for children who have lost their own (Joosen 2019, 2). In L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), when two elderly siblings on the Canadian countryside decide to adopt a boy who can help them with farm work, they find themselves stuck with a girl, Anne Shirley. At first, they consider sending her away, thinking that she will be a burden. However, the Cuthbert siblings begin to love and treat Anne as if she were their own daughter as a result of Anne's cheerful nature. Anne brings energy and excitement to their lives, which have become rather mundane, slow, and hard due to their advanced age. A similar pattern is seen in Elanor H. Porter's *Pollyanna* (1913). Pollyanna's cheerful, innocent, and optimistic nature changes the perception of people in her community. Her famous glad game makes even the most cold-hearted, grumpy, and sick people find reasons to be happy.

As a result, older people, portrayed as passive, immobile, and unsociable, fail to emerge as individualistic characters in the canonical texts of children's classics. These characters usually turn out to be one-dimensional stereotypes. According to Phyliss W. Barnum, the portrayal of older people as "communicat[ing] rarely with other people" or "seldom hav[ing] a life outside the home" may give children "the impression that old age is an unpleasant stage of life and that the elderly are pariahs" (1977a, 303). Therefore, "the absence of a range of emotions for the aged" diminishes "their potential as interesting characters" (Barnum 1977a, 305). Such texts exemplify what Margaret M. Gullette calls "decline narrative" which presupposes that health and happiness decline once you grow old (Joosen 2024, 61). As Vanessa Joosen summarizes, "growing old is depicted" as a "ride downhill, with death looming at the bottom," and decline narrative "empowers youth at the expense of the elderly" (2015, 126). In contrast to the declining elderly, children are represented as having the potential to rejuvenate and enliven their surroundings and communities. While childhood functions as a transformative force in the face of hopelessness and exhaustion that may come with ageing, old age is marginalized through portrayal of passive and depressed characters.

Wise and Witch: Older Characters as Archetypes

Children's classics also owe greatly to archetypes found in mythological stories, fairy tales, and folktales in their portrayal of older people. For instance, there is a heavy reliance on the archetype of wise old men in the canonical works of children's literature. As Joosen writes, "wise old mentor is particularly pervasive," and he inspires or comes "to the aid of the child or adolescent protagonist" (2019, 3). Unlike passive and economically inactive older men, wise old men are independent and self-sufficient characters who can freely move between different fantasy realms. They often help children overcome challenges, solve problems, mature, change, and transform.

Wise old men, such as Gandalf from J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) and Dumbledore from the *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007), serve as guides as well as father figures for the child heroes. In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), the blue caterpillar, who functions as a wise old man, turns out to be the sanest person in Wonderland. He helps Alice come to terms with her unstable physicality and her questions about growing up. In the *Narnia* series (1950-1956), the Professor is also an old, serious, and simultaneously mysterious man. As his name suggests, he is

educated and intellectual. Although he remains in the primary world unlike other wise old men, the Professor is able to empathize with the Pevensie siblings and comforts them by saying that everything is possible, and there might actually be another world behind the wardrobe. Even though such wise old men give the optimistic impression that old age brings constructive wisdom, it should not be forgotten that this type of characters still present idealized images that may be detached from real-life experiences.

Wise old women are noticeably scarce in children's literature. Minerva McGonagall of *Harry Potter* may be one famous exception. Her first name, which is that of the Roman goddess of wisdom - the equivalent of Athena - reveals her as an intellectual woman. However, her cold and distant nature remains her most prominent characteristic. Fairy godmothers in fairy tales similarly help children. However, fairy godmothers are not necessarily old characters, and they are usually portrayed as the spirits of deceased mothers. Compared to the wise old man archetype, female mentors are much more passive and of secondary in importance, with their wisdom frequently overshadowed by their motherly affection.

In the case of villainy, children's literature often relies on physical features associated with old age as symbols of evil. Even when the characters are not actually old, villains in children's books are often depicted with exaggeratedly wrinkled, sullen faces, and pointy chins. The notorious Gargamel from the Belgian comic series *The Smurfs* (1959) embodies such archetypal physicality. Similarly, the vicious nature of Ebenezer Scrooge is emphasized in his sharp chin and nose. These evil and repulsive characters typically lack intellectual depth and tend to use vulgar and coarse language. Older villains are often portrayed as self-centred, selfish, and lonely individuals who view children as their worst enemies. Their animosity toward children and childhood is symbolic, as children represent qualities they lack, which are youth, hope, productivity, and an active role in the economy.

Compared to their male counterparts, "aged women are even more drastically underrepresented" in children's literature (Barnum 1977a, 305). Sylvia Henneberg draws attention to the sexist and ageist discourse in classical children's literature, arguing that "women in children's classics fare badly, but old women do even worse" (2010, 126). According to Henneberg;

> *in the absence of stories portraying viable ageing women, the distance between generations increases, creating a destructive gulf in which ageism and sexism freely reinforce and confirm each other, virtually unnoticed and unchecked. (2010, 126)*

The archetypal old witch, with her wrinkled face, gnarled hands, moles, and hunchback, physically manifests decay, danger, and envy, which are characteristics associated with evil womanhood. The archetypal old villainess turns to sorcery to conceal her physical features, which do not meet the patriarchal standards of female beauty. Magic, or witchcraft, in this sense, serves as a tool to mask the evil nature of the old woman. The young girl or princess often emerges as her rival and primary enemy. Therefore, the evil old woman—whether a witch or a stepmother—seeks to eliminate or replace the young girl by destroying her youth, beauty, and energy.

In *Sleeping Beauty*, sexism and ageism coexist. In one version of the tale, the twelfth fairy appears as an old woman in front of a spindle. This evil fairy's goal is to immobilize the young and beautiful princess by putting her to sleep with the spindle, which is an archetypal symbol of the passage of time. In this context, sleep becomes a symbolic representation of death, which is traditionally linked with old age. Similarly, in *Hansel and Gretel*, the villain is a cannibal old

witch who initially pretends to be a helpful old woman. However, her appearance serves as an indicator of her malicious nature. In one version, she is described as such: "Her sharp nose bent down to meet her bristly chin. Her face, all folds and wrinkles, looked like an old shrivelled pear; and she had only three teeth, two above and one below, all very long and narrow" (qtd. in Donlan 1972, 608). In the Brothers Grimm version, she is said to be "as old as the hills" supporting "herself on crutches," and coming "creeping out" like a snake (2013, 93). The witch's house of candy, cakes, and biscuits is a work of magic that lures children into her trap. Cannibalism is a significant motif here in relation to the dichotomy of old age and youth. By consuming children, the evil witch aims to absorb their youth, innocence, and beauty—assets she has already lost and now envies.

Modern children's literature continues to associate old women with archetypal villainy. In Roald Dahl's *The Witches* (1983), the witches embody archetypal physicality which is associated with evil as their claw-like fingers are hidden beneath gloves and their bald heads are concealed by wigs. Similarly, in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,* the White Witch embodies the witch archetype even though she is not explicitly old. Her whiteness—from head to toe—symbolizes her cold and unfeeling nature. She is the primary force behind the political corruption and the absence of love and trust in Narnia. Her antagonism pits her directly against the young heroes and heroines, who are destined to end her reign and restore peace to the land.

Conclusion

Even when children's books do not openly marginalize the elderly, "negative characteristics help produce or reinforce society's negative stereotypes about old age" (Barnum 1977b, 32). As illustrated in the examples, although the ages of older characters in children's books may vary, old age is often presented as a static and one-dimensional concept. Narratives featuring stereotypical, archetypal, or passive elderly characters can unintentionally foster the belief that older individuals are no longer active members of the society, or that their participation is no longer necessary. As a result, the canonical texts of European and Anglophone children's literature can be said to perpetuate ageist and sexist biases even in the portrayal of seemingly lovable older characters. These texts often fail to provide an accurate representation of the physical and psychological aspects of ageing. Therefore, the portrayal of older people in children's literature requires more thoughtful consideration to prevent the internalization of ageist and stereotypical viewpoints.

As a result, as Sandra McGuire writes, children's literature should present older people as "important and productive members of society" instead of showing them "sad, sick, depressed about their age and wishing only for the past" (Frick 2017). Children's books should emphasize empowering intergenerational relationships, where older characters play meaningful roles "leading more balanced, realistic lives" (Frick 2017). Illustrations in children's books should also be thoughtfully crafted, as recurring images can significantly influence children's perceptions of ageing, often associating physical traits of old age with concepts such as evil, danger, and abnormality. In this context, it is crucial for children's books to offer both positive and realistic portrayals of older people. Children should be introduced to the challenges of ageing and learn to respect the elderly. Furthermore, children's literature should present old age as another stage of life rather than an endpoint (Frick 2017). As Janet Frick notes, "in the past few decades, writers, illustrators and publishers of children's books have become more careful about avoiding ageism, as well as racism and sexism" (2017). Meanwhile, the interest of children's literature scholars in studies of age and ageing is gradually increasing. Therefore, further research, analysis, and critical

reading will be essential to evaluate the outcomes of these emerging trends in children's literature in the coming decades.

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