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**THE JOURNEY OF INDIVIDUALITY IN THE CHILDREN'S WORLD: *JUST WILLIAM* (1922) AND FILM ADAPTATIONS**

**ABSTRACT**

Children's literature has undergone substantial evolution from the medieval period to the present, consistently reflecting shifting cultural and philosophical perspectives. Traditionally, it either presents the child's world through an adult gaze or interprets the adult world from a child's viewpoint. The twentieth century marked a pivotal shift by establishing a literary space where child characters could express themselves with authentic voices. Within the framework of individuality, self-expression manifests in two primary ways: through the active assertion of one's identity or the passive acceptance of identities imposed by others. Each child, therefore, engages with and interprets the world through a uniquely personal lens. This study examines Richmal Crompton's *Just William* (1922), which exemplifies the notion of "constructed childhood" as perceived by adult characters, through the character of William—a child portrayed with both insight and intellectual acuity—the novel challenges prevailing adult conceptions of childhood. It serves as a reflective medium through which the adult world is invited to reconsider its attitudes toward children. Following the textual analysis of Crompton's novel, this study will also evaluate its various film adaptations released in 1940, 1947, 1976, 1994, and 2010.

**Keywords:** *Just William*, Children's Literature, Individuality, Adult World, Film Adaptation

**ÇOCUK DÜNYASINDA BİREYSELLİK YOLCULUĞU: *JUST WILLIAM* (1922) VE FİLM ADAPTASYONLARI**

**ÖZET**

Çocuk edebiyatı, Orta Çağ'dan günümüze dek kapsamlı bir dönüşüm geçirmiş olup, bu süreç boyunca değişen kültürel ve felsefi paradigmaları sürekli olarak yansıtmıştır. Geleneksel bağlamda, ya çocukluk dünyasını yetişkin bakışıyla sunmuş ya da yetişkinler dünyasını çocuğun perspektifinden yorumlamıştır. Ancak yirminci yüzyıl, çocuk karakterlerin özgün (otantik) bir şekilde kendilerini ifade edebilecekleri edebi bir alanın inşasıyla önemli bir kırılma noktası teşkil etmiştir. Bireysellik çerçevesinde kendilik kavramının tanımı, başlıca iki şekilde tezahür eder: bireyin kendi kimliğini aktif olarak ortaya koyması ya da dışsal otoriteler tarafından dayatılan kimlikleri pasif biçimde benimsemesi. Bu doğrultuda, her çocuk dünyayı kendine özgü bir bakış açısıyla algılar ve anlamlandırır. Bu çalışma, Richmal Crompton'ın *Just William* (1922) adlı eserini inceleyerek, yetişkin karakterlerin zihinlerinde şekillenen "kurgulanmış çocukluk" kavramını örnekendirerek ele almaktadır. William karakteri aracılığıyla—entelektüel farkındalık ve sezgisel derinlikle betimlenen bir çocuk olarak—roman, yetişkinlerin çocukluk olgusuna dair baskın varsayımlarına eleştirel bir bakış sunar. Eser, yetişkin dünyanın çocuklara yönelik tutumlarını yeniden düşünmeye davet eden yansıtıcı bir araç işlevi görmektedir. Bu çalışma, metinsel çözümlemenin ardından ayrıca Crompton'ın eserinin 1940, 1947, 1976, 1994 ve 2010 yıllarındaki film adaptasyonlarını inceleyecektir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** *Just William*, Çocuk Edebiyatı, Bireysellik, Yetişkin Dünyası, Film Adaptasyonu

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## Introduction

As a prominent author in children's literature, Richmal Crompton published *Just William* (1922) as a collection of short stories centred on her famous character, William Brown—an 11-year-old boy navigating various mis/adventures. A crucial distinction within this genre lies in the categorisation of children's literature as either *literature for children*, often featuring illustrations, or *literature about children*. The *Just William* series, spanning thirty-eight books, encompasses elements of both, albeit to varying degrees. While the books attract child readers through illustrations, humour, adventure, and an authentic portrayal of a child's perspective on adult life, they primarily address adult readers by employing wit and satire to critique societal norms and the expectations imposed on children by adults. Strikingly, the linguistic tone surpasses what a child might naturally use, suggesting that the narratives are adult recollections of childhood. Nonetheless, William's emotional tone convincingly captures the essence of childhood—curiosity, discovery, and playfulness. Crompton not only enables readers to view childhood through an adult lens but also encourages critical thinking against the adult world from a child's viewpoint. *Just William* has been adapted into films in 1940, 1947, 1976, 1994, and 2010. Each adaptation reflects the socio-historical context of its time, resulting in notable shifts in interpretation. This study first explores William's assertion of individuality in the book. It then briefly evaluates the film adaptations, classifying them into three groups: those of the 1940s, the 1976 version, and the combined 1994 and 2010 adaptations.

## The Perception of Childhood in History

Throughout history, the characterisation of childhood has been acknowledged through varying lenses. In medieval society, children were often viewed as inherently inferior to adults. A 15th-century Harleian manuscript exemplifies this, listing types of birds suitable for falconry based on social hierarchy: "An Eagle for an Emperor, a Gyrfalcon for a King, a Saker for a Knight [...] a Kestrel for a Knave" (Berners, 1881, p. 89), thereby positioning childhood at the lowest social tier. In the 17th century, John Locke introduced the idea of *tabula rasa*, describing children as blank slates who acquire knowledge only from external influences (Gianoutsos, 2006, p. 2). Rousseau, writing in the 18th century, warned of society's corrupting effect on children's innate innocence (1762, p. 1). By the 19th century, the doctrine of "Original Sin" was increasingly challenged. As discussed in *The Child Figure in English Literature*:

[...] the child is both weak and too irrational to comprehend his sinful condition and hence can only be convinced of the sinful nature of the world around him [...] The presence of the Original Sin dogma behind the child figure in children's literature became increasingly muted during the nineteenth century, and [...] it almost disappears." (Pattison, 1978, pp. 136-140)

Therefore, the theological weight placed on children diminished significantly during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As previously discussed, childhood has long been regarded as a stage to be shaped, interrupted, or overshadowed by the adult world, often perceived as inferior to adulthood. However, what is frequently overlooked is that childhood represents a vital phase in the development of self-awareness, marked by a profound capacity for discovery and understanding of the surrounding world. Furthermore, drawing upon Sigmund Freud's theories, the exploration of traumatic experiences in psychology necessitates a return to childhood, where the intricate interconnection between early life and adulthood becomes most evident. Turning to historical developments, once the burden traditionally placed on children is lifted, authors such as Charles Dickens—whose work transcends his Victorian context—portray child characters like Oliver in

*Oliver Twist* (1838) as active participants in shaping their own destinies, rather than mere victims of adult interests. Similarly, other youthful protagonists are depicted in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) in a way that presents their journey of challenging social conventions and asserting their individuality through wit and resilience. In doing so, Dickens makes a lasting contribution to the literary depiction of children's pursuit of individuality. This legacy lays the groundwork for twentieth-century children's literature to provide a space for young voices to emerge, as exemplified by the character William in the 1920s.

### Individuality, Childhood, and Foucault's "Discourse of Normality"

In the context of individuality, identity can be expressed through self-declaration or by conforming to socially constructed identities. The former enables individuals to express their authenticity; however, this pursuit may come at the cost of confronting societal expectations that demand conformity to communal norms. The latter approach, conversely, may lead to a psychological split, as the individual gets *stuck* between the authentic self and the socially performed self. It is important to emphasize that this dichotomy pertains to the adult world rather than the child's. Children require consistent attachment figures in their lives to meet their fundamental needs for love, care, and security. A child cannot simply detach from their parents, as these attachment figures are essential for survival from infancy through to adulthood. When emotionally healthy parents raise children, they are more likely to experience and express their authentic selves, as they are granted the personal space necessary to embark on the journey of individuality without sacrificing their sense of self. From a broader perspective, *what does it mean to be a child?* Historically, a child was often perceived as an empty signifier, filled with adult projections regardless of the child's actual age. However, the twentieth century introduced significant shifts in this perception, particularly in the aftermath of the world wars, leading to a growing recognition of children as individuals and an increasing acknowledgement of the *normality* of childhood rather than a mere social construct.

To comprehend the obstacles preventing children from experiencing their journey of self-development, it is useful to draw a parallel between the adult world's intentions—particularly its exertion of control and superiority over children—and Michel Foucault's interpretation of the Panopticon prison, which exemplifies power dynamics between authority and individuals. Referencing Foucault's discourse on "normality," Hans Bertens illustrates this concept through Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), set in a mental institution where, notably, many patients voluntarily commit themselves to the institution. As Bertens (2001) notes:

They [the patients] have had themselves committed because the outside world's insistence on 'normality' and its definition of normality has convinced them that they are abnormal and need treatment. They have [...] subjected themselves to the authority of the human sciences. They have, first of all, accepted and completely internalized a discourse about normality. (p. 152)

The patients in Kesey's novel internalize the imposed identity and voluntarily seek treatment, having uncritically accepted the dominant discourse of normality. Foucault (1980) asserts that power functions through its acceptance: "What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that [...] it [...] forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs throughout the whole social body" (p. 119). In the context of *Just William*, this Foucauldian framework—incorporating power, discourse, and the normalization of behaviour—helps frame the relationship between the adult world and the child's

world as one governed by a constructed discourse of “ab/normality.” Children, just like the patients in Kesey’s novel, are expected to submit to adult expectations; however, this is inherently at odds with the true nature of childhood. Children should not be controlled, monitored, or restricted as if imprisoned by their *guardian* parents. On the contrary, they require acceptance, security, and the experience of being heard and seen by their caregivers. It is essential to recognize that every child perceives and interacts with the world in a unique way. However, this intrinsic nature of childhood appears to have been forgotten, with adults prioritizing their own rules while neglecting the child’s innate curiosity and enthusiasm for exploring the world. If this *neglect* and *imprisoning* control become continuous and entrenched in a child’s world, the consequences may be profound and enduring. As Bessel A. Van der Kolk (2006) explains in *Trauma and the Body: A Sensorimotor Approach to Psychotherapy*, traumatized children may undergo emotional activation without the capacity to define, recognize or verbalize what they are experiencing, a difficulty that extends to identifying internal sensations, emotions, and physical states and ultimately leaves them disconnected from their needs and unable to address them effectively (p.21). This insight highlights, in turn, the cultural and psychological importance of literature that restores and asserts the voices and individuality of children.

In *Just William* (1922), Richmal Crompton critiques this notion of “constructed childhood” through her depiction of adult characters, while simultaneously portraying William as a child who exemplifies the very *nature* of childhood outlined above. William actively asserts his own identity, often in defiance of both familial and societal expectations, using his own reasoning and intellect to expose and *critique adult hypocrisy and dishonesty*. In a BBC interview, Crompton remarks that *Just William* was written for adults about children (McVeigh, 2019). The novel highlights the adult perception of children through William’s interactions with his adult environment, sharply criticizing the unfair treatment he endures due to the adult world’s failure to recognize his intentions. It may be argued that Crompton acts as an advocate for William’s individuality, or at the very least attempts to represent his *true* motives—particularly for the adult reader—demonstrating how deeply disappointed he feels when his efforts to assist his siblings are misunderstood or dismissed.

### **Familial and Social Surroundings of William Brown**

The novel vividly portrays how William is perceived by his family members—his father, mother, sister, and brother—as well as by his teachers and relatives, as abnormal, naughty, or even dangerous, while simultaneously revealing his true intentions in various situations. What often lands William in trouble is his innate curiosity and sense of wonder, qualities that should not be misinterpreted as naughtiness. Instead, they reflect the nature/normality of a child who is eager to experience life in all its dimensions. Nevertheless, William is expected to *obey* adult authority unquestioningly and is rarely allowed to explain himself, despite his ability to articulate clear and thoughtful justifications for his actions. This study contends that William asserts his individuality through his actions *against* the adults in his life—within his family, at school, and throughout his neighbourhood.

To begin with, William’s relationship with his father is portrayed as deeply problematic. His father expects complete obedience and for William to refrain from any behaviour deemed mischievous, thereby attempting to shape William’s identity through a hierarchical and authoritative familial structure. The father’s use of aggressive language underscores the

emotionally strained and dysfunctional nature of this father-son dyad, as exemplified in the scene where William unintentionally bumps into him:

William's father [...] picked himself up from the middle of a rhododendron bush and seized William by the back of his neck.

'You young ruffian,' he roared, 'what do you mean by charging into me like that?'

William gently disengaged himself.

'I wasn't chargin', Father,' he said, meekly. 'I was only jus' comin' in at the gate, same as other folks. I jus' wasn't looking jus' the way you were coming, but I can't look all ways at once, cause—'

'Be quiet!' roared William's father.

Like the rest of the family, he dreaded William's eloquence. (Crompton, 1922, pp. 15-16)

Generally speaking, physical touch between a parent and a child symbolizes emotional closeness and attachment. As explained in *Touch*, "[t]ouching can have strong effects on our bodies because, when the skin is touched, that stimulation is quickly transmitted to the brain, which in turn regulates our bodies" (Field, 2001, p. 77). In this context, the act of William being "seized [...] by the back of his neck" fails to soothe or provide comfort; instead, it emphasizes emotional detachment and reinforces the psychological distance between this father-son relationship. More than an expression of frustration, this act of being "seized by the neck" functions as a form of violence. This aggressive and dominating gesture undermines the bodily autonomy of the child and leaves him emotionally paralysed in a metaphorical sense. Therefore, the physical and emotional well-being of the child is simultaneously oppressed, reinforcing the powerlessness imposed by the parental figure. This father figure is presented as someone persistently irritated by his child's mere presence, functioning primarily as an oppressive force within the family dynamic. Daniel J. Siegel (2014) notes that when a parental figure becomes "the source of terror, we become fragmented" (p. 178), which highlights the psychological disruption caused by such interactions. The father's interruption in this instance is especially telling—it indicates not only his disinterest in genuinely engaging with William, despite posing a question, but also his broader tendency to *silence* and *suppress* the child. This dynamic exemplifies how a dysfunctional parent consistently invalidates the child's voice. In *Same World, Different Voices*, Ersoy Gümüş (2023) articulates: "since children's trust in relationships or more generally in people will be violated, the level of trauma which victims bear rises, and consequently even in their adulthood they suffer from psychological [...] problems" (p. 166). Thus, William's father, through verbal aggression and emotional detachment, enforces a repressive dynamic that may not only wound the child in the moment but potentially shape the psychological aspect of his adulthood. Gabor Maté further elaborates on the correlation between an angry parent and a repressed child:

Here is the issue of anger becomes confusing and raises many questions. How can we encourage people to be angry when we see that children suffer from their parents' outbursts? In many of the patient histories we have seen a similar patters: a raging parent, a repressed child. (2003, p. 269)

Throughout various stories in the novel, William's father consistently emerges as a furious and raging parent, especially through his verbal expressions, illustrating how William is continuously subjected to repression by the dominant authority figure within the family. Moreover, Crompton's use of the em dash "—" within the narrative can be interpreted as a subtle literary device that signifies adult interference in William's journey of self-discovery. It becomes evident that the father does not develop emotional closeness or empathy with his child; rather, he

pathologizes William's behaviour, declaring, "[...] insane [...] You ought to take him to a doctor and get his brain examined" (Crompton, 1922, p. 31). In the continuation of this scene, William responds:

William rose sadly and came slowly into the house.

'Good night, Mother,' he said; then he turned a mournful and reproachful eye upon his father.

'Good night, Father,' he said. 'Don't think about what you've done, I for—'

He stopped and decided, hastily but wisely, to retire with all possible speed. (Crompton, 1922, p. 33)

His words *strikingly* embody his resistance to his father's repression by appropriating the rhetorical style of the adult world—a realm in which adults typically perceive themselves as inherently superior and believe they possess the power to forgive the wrongdoings of their children. William, however, is acutely aware of the injustice he faces at the hands of his father and subtly suggests that it is, in fact, his father who requires forgiveness for his actions and words. Although he cannot challenge his father directly, William employs irony and *humour* to underscore the unfair treatment he endures, positioning himself as the one who is prepared to extend forgiveness.

In *Just William*, humour functions as a particularly significant metaphor—not to merely portray William's experiences as amusing, but rather to reveal a deeper connection between humour and the reconstruction of one's past through gaining control over the traumatic past. Freud (1928) articulates the psychological utility of humour in relation to trauma and reality:

The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the trauma of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than mere occasions for it to gain pleasure. This last feature is a quite essential element of humor. (p. 162)

According to Freud's theory, the ego seeks to protect the self from exposure to pain by asserting *control* over the traumatic aspects of reality. Rather than being overwhelmed, the ego attempts to transform pain into pleasure by framing the traumatic experience as a joke. In doing so, the individual is able to resist emotional collapse, opting instead to articulate past trauma through the lens of humour. In *Playful Memories: The Autofictional Turn in Post-Dictatorship Argentina*, Jordana Blejmar (2016) explores the connection between humour and narrative, emphasizing how traumatized artists—particularly those who were young victims of the dictatorship—"present themselves, in the words of Alain Badiou, as "creator bodies" rather than as merely "suffering figures," replacing the spectacle of victimhood for a more productive and affective memory" through the use of autofiction, parody, and humour (p. 5). Blejmar (2016) further notes that "the estrangement that some artists and authors feel towards the world [...] and their childhood experiences of violence have led them to represent that world in a playful and [...] even humorous way" (pp. 36-37), as "they use [humour] as a way to speak of their own (unspeakable) experiences of trauma" (p. 15). As previously mentioned, the linguistic tone is markedly beyond the words of a child, suggesting that William's childhood memories could be adult recollections of his early years. Drawing upon Freud's theory, it may be asserted that William employs parody and humour as mechanisms to take control over his traumatic childhood experiences, shaped by ill-equipped parents and dysfunctional family dynamics. His repeated use of the word "jolly", in various scenes, functions as a textual instrument, revealing his profound emotional longing to revisit and support his own childhood experiences—heartbreaking as they

may be—by interfering through the voice of the adult world, as in the line, “Don’t think about what you’ve done, I for—” (Crompton, 1922, p. 34). In light of both *Playful Memories* and *Just William*, the child character emerges as an artist/author, rewriting his childhood years through a remarkable capacity for storytelling, imaginative play, and humour. Despite being emotionally wounded by the adult world’s responses, William’s extraordinary wit and humour serve “as a way to speak of [his] own (unspeakable) experiences of [childhood] trauma” (Blejmar, 2016, p. 15).

Returning to the dynamics between William and the other members of his family, it becomes evident that the presence of the father figure oppresses William’s mother. Her voice is rarely heard, even by the reader. Typically, she functions as a protective figure, occasionally defending William against various accusations. However, she also sometimes joins in reprimanding him with severity. As a textual reference, an incident occurs during a church service, where William brings a frog hidden in his clothing; then, it escapes and causes a public uproar—particularly causing Ethel to scream—resulting in the profound and dramatic embarrassment of his mother. Following this incident, she expresses her shame to others by exclaiming: “I shall never look anyone in the face again [...] I think *everyone* was in church! And the way Ethel screamed! It was *awful!* I shall dream of it for nights. William, I don’t know how you *could!*” (Crompton, 1922, p. 262). As the most naïve and silent presence in William’s world, his mother still criticizes him and is overly concerned with what *the others* think. From the perspective of both parents, William fails to conform to the behavioural expectations they impose upon him. They do not acknowledge his individuality but instead perceive him merely as a child who ought to behave like other children.

In the scope of the communication between William and his siblings, William’s brother Robert treats him more like an enemy than a sibling. He often anticipates wrongdoing from William, often assuming the worst and accusing him without any clear reason. Having crossed into adulthood, Robert enacts this identity by dominating and humiliating his younger brother, just like their father does. In this way, Robert adopts a partial role as a surrogate father figure. When William attempts to ride Robert’s new bicycle and loses control, Robert angrily exclaims: “William comes along and spoils my whole life—and my bicycle” (Crompton, 1922, p. 62). On another occasion, Robert refuses to look after the baby. When their mother turns to William, Robert protests: “‘You surely don’t mean to say, mother,’ Robert was saying with the crushing superiority of eighteen, ‘that you’re going to trust that child to—William!’” (Crompton, 1922, p. 178). This quote illustrates how the mother accepts Robert’s refusal while simultaneously pressuring William into responsibility. William’s individuality is consistently undervalued in comparison to Robert’s, primarily because of his position as *a* child and, therefore, the least autonomous family member. Similarly, William’s sister Ethel shows little sympathy toward him. Although William can be mischievous and irritating, his actions are not driven by malice. In fact, when he attempts to assist Ethel in what he perceives as a romantic endeavour, his actions are misunderstood, as described in the narrative: “[...] his efforts to help on his only sister’s love affair had been painfully misunderstood” (Crompton, 1922, p. 31). The interactions among family members collectively demonstrate that William is treated as an outsider—*the other*—within his own household. This treatment reflects a broader commentary on how children are often misjudged and alienated by those who, ironically, should understand them most intimately. A similar dynamic can be illustrated through a real-case history in Lindsay C. Gibson’s *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents* (2015), in which a child named Natalie feels responsible for the emotional well-being of her mother and learns to be *seemingly* self-sufficient in the absence of emotional

support—yet, as Gibson notes, such “capable kids may seem like they can parent themselves, but they can’t. No child can. They just learn to cling to whatever emotional scraps they get because any connection is better than none at all” (pp. 22-23). Just like Natalie, William is not in the process of developing individuality; rather, he is already firmly rooted in his own sense of *self*. His excessive use of humour, mischief, and playfulness is not a sign of immaturity, but his unending resistance to perform his identity and individuality to which he clings tenaciously. However, like all children, William surely needs emotional support from his family members. As Gibson (2015) reminds the reader, “No child can [parent themselves]” (p. 23), William—as a child—still longs for an emotional bond and the sense of belonging within his family unit. His need does not derive from a lack of individuality, but rather from his awareness of his emotional needs on those around him.

Lastly, members of society and William’s teachers contribute not only to the external perception of William but also to his evolving judgment of them in return. While the dynamics within the family reveal how William is perceived by his relatives and how they interpret his behaviour, characters outside the familial circle reflect William’s critical stance toward the adult world. For example, when William’s teacher takes his balloon, the narrator notes: “William replied sadly that [they took his balloon]. He added that some people didn’t seem to think it was stealing to take other people’s things” (Crompton, 1922, p. 66). In such moments, he invites the reader to critique his family members’ judgmental behaviour toward him, while he himself offers an ironic critique of adult inconsistencies and hypocrisies. Crompton constructs William’s character through *humour*, blending narrative tone, comedic elements, and William’s *distinctive voice* and motivations. This multifaceted portrayal allows readers to enter William’s world and witness his individual journey while questioning and ultimately resisting the adult order imposed upon him.

Following an analysis of William’s relationships with those around him, the intensity of his voice signals a profound yearning for the recognition of his individuality. He begins to revolt by explicitly voicing his frustration with the expectations imposed by the adult world: “‘THE SORT OF THINGS I WANT TO DO THEY DON’T WANT ME TO DO, AN’ THE SORT OF THINGS I DON’T WANT TO DO THEY WANT ME TO DO.’ WILLIAM’S SCORN AND FURY WAS INDESCRIBABLE” (Crompton, 1922, pp. 141-142). His reaction to the adults’ disregard for his desires and the rigid expectations placed upon him marks a pivotal assertion of his right to resist the adult gaze—a gaze that attempts to reduce him to the status of a mere child rather than recognizing him as a unique individual. William’s voice functions as a retrospective critique, as though he is challenging a long-standing *misconception* of *childhood*. In *A Child’s World: A Social History of English Childhood, 1800–1914*, the Victorian perception of childhood is described as one in which: “[...] obedience was the prime virtue [...] children of all ranks and classes should obey [...] their elders, their superiors and their teachers were frequently asserted and rarely questioned” (Walvin, 1982, p. 47). Just William implicitly challenges this historical framework by highlighting the unquestioned authority of adults and their treatment of children. The adult world is assumed to be inherently correct in its decisions and guidance, yet William’s resistance calls for a more nuanced understanding of childhood—one that recognizes children’s individuality and emotional complexity, particularly through the lens of contemporary child psychology.

## The Film Adaptations

In the adaptations of *Just William*, five versions will be analysed within three categories: those from 1940 and 1947, 1976, and finally 1994 and 2010. In the adaptations of the 1940s, the character of William is portrayed as a disruptive force within the structured world of adults. He is frequently blamed for disturbances and bears witness to the pervasive hypocrisy within both his family and society. As noted in the BBC History article “20th Century Britain: The Woman's Hour”, the Education Act of 1944 “established the principle of free education for all from primary to secondary” (Murray, 2011). Despite this legislative progress, the 1940s adaptations reflect a society still shaped by gender and class inequality, particularly in the aftermath of World War II. These adaptations emphasize a prevailing social hierarchy in which children are positioned as a subordinate group under the authority of adults. William is acknowledged as the 'other' by the adult world, whereas “the Outlaws” represent an alternative society where he occupies a position of leadership among his peers. In conclusion, the 1940s adaptations present a view of childhood that is filtered through the adult gaze, portraying the children's world from the perspective of their superiors. The 1976 adaptation of *Just William* reflects issues of social class and inequality within the adult world through a distinctly humorous lens. William's family is portrayed as working-class, whereas the wealthier family of Elizabeth is subjected to satire—most notably in the scene where Elizabeth's mother fails to recognize her own daughter simply because her clothing has become soiled. Unlike earlier versions, the 1976 adaptation introduces a significant shift by foregrounding the children's perspective, allowing them to critique the adult world more directly. Class distinction is particularly emphasized in the episode “William and the Begging Letter,” in which Robert is humiliated by his future father-in-law following William's letter that highlights the family's modest financial situation. Similarly, in the episode “Sweet Little Girl in White,” Elizabeth's subversive behaviour towards the boys may be interpreted as a reference to the *second-wave feminism* movement. The BBC History article “20th Century Britain: The Woman's Hour” outlines key developments in women's rights during this era, noting that “In 1970 the first British conference of the Women's Liberation movement in Oxford resolved to press for employment legislation [...] in 1975 together with the Sex Discrimination Act” (Murray, 2011). These legislative and social advances reflect a broader cultural shift in attitudes toward previously silenced groups, particularly *women*. In this context, children—just like women—are depicted as overlooked and voiceless, denied recognition as individuals by both parents and society. The 1976 adaptation, therefore, marks a narrative and ideological transformation by presenting the adult world through the eyes of children. Just as women began to assert their voices publicly during this period, so too were *children* increasingly granted the narrative space to articulate their own experiences and perspectives.

In the last two adaptations, William's individuality is declared through his behaviour, speech, and interactions with the adult world. The 1994 adaptation, in particular, stands out as the most faithful representation of the original literary character. William's intelligence, quick wit, skill in verbal repartee, ability in struggle with adults, and his courage to express his opinions align closely with the William portrayed in the novel. In the episode “William and the Great Actor,” the theme of child labour is introduced through William's experiences. As explored in the article “In the Playtime of Others: Child Labor in the Early 20th Century,” various nineteenth-century laws aimed at protecting children are highlighted, such as “the Cotton Factories Regulation Act of 1819 (which set the minimum working age at nine and maximum working hours at 12)” and “the

Regulation of Child Labor Law of 1833 (which established paid inspectors to enforce the laws),” yet the article also notes that “people claimed that working from an early age bred habits of industriousness and gave children a head start toward success in adult life,” revealing the persistent societal belief in the value of child labour (1988). In the 1994 adaptation, William is portrayed as stepping into the adult world and confronting the socio-economic structures that demand children's labour. His *critical* perspective extends not only to the adult world but also to the broader consequences of industrialization. His intellectual maturity and communication skills enable him to engage meaningfully with adults in discussing social issues. In contrast, the 2010 adaptation portrays William as a wild, defiant, and rebellious character. This version of William demonstrates a deeply personal sense of autonomy, one that is not shaped by societal expectations or financial pressures. Rather, he constructs his worldview independently of adult influence. In the episode “The Sweet Little Girl in White,” for instance, when the teacher attempts to explain how babies are made, William rejects the discussion outright, asserting his disinterest in girls and dismissing them as annoying. Although this version of William appears to be the most individualistic among all adaptations, he lacks the critical engagement with adult norms found in both the novel and the 1994 version. His individualism is centred instead on gendered perception, particularly his belief in a boy-centric world. Meanwhile, Elizabeth is depicted as a decorative figure within her domestic setting, as seen from the perspective of her parents. Her attempt to assert agency by escaping the house is thwarted, and she is ultimately returned to her metaphorical prison. This contrast positions the boys as symbolic of *freedom*, while the girls are rendered *passive* objects of desire. The 2010 adaptation, therefore, places greater emphasis on William's *self-centeredness* than on his critical consciousness or individuality as envisioned in *Just William*.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of childhood evolves across different centuries, shaped by shifting social conditions within and beyond the family, as well as by changing gender dynamics. In the novel, Crompton presents William as an autonomous individual—capable of thinking, evaluating, deciding, and, most importantly, criticising the adult world. The narrative offers a mirror through which adult behaviours are examined from the child's point of view. Although it is a story about children, the novel is clearly written for an adult readership, encouraging readers to reconsider how children are perceived and treated. It reveals that truly raising a child is not about forcing them into socially constructed behaviour patterns, but about understanding the innate curiosity and wonder of *the child's mind*. Adults must open a space for children to develop their own individuality, rather than imposing limitations or suppressing their voices. The various adaptations of *Just William* interpret and emphasize different elements of the novel. The 1940s adaptations portray the child as a disruptive outsider within the adult world, viewing children primarily under the gaze and control of adult world. In contrast, the 1976 adaptation signals a paradigm shift by representing the adult world from the critical perspective of the child, thereby allowing William to criticise adult hypocrisy through changes in the politics of class and gender. The adaptations from 1994 and 2010 go further, engaging with the broader social challenges surrounding childhood and illustrating how children declare their individuality and claim freedom of speech. Crompton reinforces the central message of the novel by directly addressing the reader in a moment of responsibility for William: “But it was not “quite all right” with William. Reader, if you had been left, at the age of eleven, in sole charge of a sweet shop for a whole morning, would it have been “all right” with you? I trow not” (Crompton, 1922, p. 238). Through these words, the author

underscores that William is still a child, not yet prepared for adult responsibilities. However, this acknowledgement does not justify suppressing his emerging individuality. Rather, it affirms the need to *respect* and *nurture* the autonomy and authenticity of children, without disregarding their voices or potential.

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