

CHARACTERS IN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE AS ROLE MODELS, POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ASPECTS

Nasirova Gulnora Madaminovna

Doctor of philosophy (PhD), Philological sciences

Uzbekistan state university of world languages

ABSTRACT

This article deals with the issues based on analyzing both the positive and negative portrayals of literary characters and their impact on child development. Young readers' morals, attitudes, and behavior are greatly influenced by children's literature. These novels' characters frequently operate as role models, affecting kids' perceptions of morality, empathy, bravery, and social conventions. Through literary analysis and theoretical insights, the study highlights how characters in narrative texts can guide, challenge, or mislead young readers, depending on their traits and narrative functions.

Keywords: children’s literature, role models, character analysis, moral development, positive traits, negative influence, narrative texts, literary education

Literature has long served as a medium for moral education and the transmission of cultural values. In children’s literature, characters are often imbued with exaggerated traits that help distinguish right from wrong, bravery from cowardice, and kindness from cruelty. Such depictions make characters central figures in the development of young readers’ ethical and emotional worldviews. While many protagonists in children’s stories serve as idealized role models, others are complex or even negative characters who influence readers in less straightforward ways.

Children’s literature has long served as one of the earliest and most influential mediums through which cultural values, moral standards, and social norms are transmitted. Unlike adult literature, which often embraces ambiguity and complexity, children’s stories typically present simplified models of the world, offering young readers clear distinctions between right and wrong, good and evil, courage and cowardice. At the heart of these narratives are the characters—heroes,

heroines, sidekicks, and even villains—who provide both direct and indirect models for children to emulate or reject.

As children interact with literature, they do not simply absorb stories passively. Instead, they engage with the characters, develop emotional bonds, and often internalize the values, behaviors, and ideologies these characters represent. Characters such as Anne Shirley, Harry Potter, or Matilda Wormwood can become role models, shaping a child's aspirations, sense of justice, and understanding of identity. This modeling effect, often subconscious, underscores the profound educational power of children's literature. However, not all characters are constructed equally. While many offer positive messages—such as kindness, perseverance, or honesty—others may reinforce stereotypes, promote aggression, or glorify rebellion without consequences.

In recent years, scholars, educators, and parents have shown increasing concern about the dual impact of literary characters. Some argue that characters with negative traits may be misunderstood by children and encourage undesirable behavior, especially when the consequences of such actions are not made clear in the narrative. Others assert that exposure to a wide range of characters, including flawed or morally ambiguous ones, fosters critical thinking and emotional resilience in children.

Given these contrasting perspectives, this article seeks to explore the dual role of literary characters in shaping children's development. By examining theoretical frameworks and practical examples from well-known children's books, we aim to better understand how these characters function as both positive and negative role models—and how their influence can be harnessed effectively in both educational and home settings.

Children's literature as a pedagogical and cultural tool has been a significant focus of scholarly discourse for decades. Nodelman (2008) argues that children's books serve as both mirrors and windows—mirrors that reflect the child's own identity and windows that offer a view into others' lives. This dual function positions literary characters as powerful agents in shaping moral and social behavior.

According to Nikolajeva (2002), characters in children's narratives often embody ideological expectations that help shape children's understanding of the world. Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) provides a theoretical framework to explain how children internalize behaviors by observing role models in media, including literature. When children identify with characters, they are more likely to emulate their behaviors. This makes the depiction of positive attributes such as empathy, bravery, and honesty crucial. For instance, characters like Charlotte in "Charlotte's Web" exemplify altruism and wisdom, fostering prosocial behavior among young readers (Trites, 1997). Conversely, the representation of negative traits or morally ambiguous behaviors is a subject of debate. Hollindale (1997) notes that some children's books, while promoting certain values, simultaneously reinforce stereotypes or problematic power dynamics. For example, classic tales like "Peter Pan" or "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" have been critiqued for their colonial or gender-biased undertones (Zipes, 2009). Such portrayals may inadvertently normalize discriminatory ideologies if not critically contextualized. Contemporary scholars like Stephens (1992) and Lurie (2003) emphasize the importance of analyzing the implicit messages conveyed by child protagonists and antagonists. The rise of diverse and inclusive literature has brought attention to the need for characters that reflect varied cultural, racial, and gender identities. Bishop (1990) underscores the importance of "multicultural mirrors," advocating for characters that empower children from underrepresented backgrounds. Furthermore, studies in cognitive and developmental psychology suggest that children's understanding of character morality evolves with age (Kohlberg, 1981). Therefore, the impact of a literary character may differ depending on the reader's developmental stage. Younger children may interpret actions in black-and-white terms, while older readers are more capable of grasping complex moral dilemmas.

One of the most notable positive role models in children's literature is Lucy Pevensie from C.S. Lewis's 'The Chronicles of Narnia'. Her compassion, honesty, and unwavering faith in Aslan embody the moral virtues that children are

encouraged to emulate. Lucy's courage in the face of danger, particularly in 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe', models resilience and moral clarity.

Similarly, Anne Shirley from L.M. Montgomery's 'Anne of Green Gables' stands out for her imagination, intelligence, and emotional depth. Despite her struggles with adoption and belonging, Anne shows readers how to turn challenges into growth. Her academic ambition and genuine empathy make her a valuable model of self-improvement and kindness.

In contrast, characters like Dudley Dursley from J.K. Rowling's 'Harry Potter' series serve as negative role models. His selfishness, lack of empathy, and spoiled behavior highlight traits that lead to social and emotional isolation. Dudley's arc, however, subtly introduces redemption, showing that change is possible.

Contemporary children's literature often features complex characters who exhibit both positive and negative traits. For example, Matilda Wormwood from Roald Dahl's 'Matilda' is intelligent and brave, yet her methods of dealing with injustice include deception and subtle revenge. This complexity opens a discussion about moral ambiguity and the role of context in judging behavior.

Coraline from Neil Gaiman's 'Coraline' is another layered character. Her curiosity and independence drive the plot forward, but they also lead her into dangerous situations. Her ability to take responsibility and solve her problems ultimately frames her as a resilient hero.

Characters in children's books shape values through identification, admiration, and contrast. Positive role models often reinforce desirable traits such as kindness, perseverance, and honesty. However, not all influential characters promote moral clarity. Some display morally ambiguous behavior that, depending on the child's interpretive skills and guidance from adults, may either enrich their understanding or confuse ethical boundaries.

A growing body of research calls for the conscious integration of character education in literature curricula. Children need help decoding complex narratives and understanding characters' motives. Educators and parents must engage children in reflective discussions about characters' actions to maximize learning.

The cultural dimension is also essential. What is considered "positive" or "negative" varies across societies. For instance, characters like Pippi Longstocking are viewed differently in Western and Eastern cultures due to contrasting values on obedience and individuality.

Children's literature is a powerful tool for shaping young minds. Characters, as central agents in stories, significantly impact children's moral and emotional development. While positive role models reinforce virtuous behavior, even flawed or ambiguous characters can stimulate critical thinking and ethical growth if framed appropriately. Thus, it is essential for writers, educators, and parents to select, discuss, and contextualize literary characters carefully to ensure that children benefit fully from the rich moral landscape of fiction.

References:

1. Бандура А. Теория социального научения. – Москва: Педагогика, 1986.
2. Nikolajeva M. Aesthetic Approaches to Children's Literature: An Introduction. – Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2005.
3. Nodelman P. The Pleasures of Children's Literature. – New York: Longman, 1996.
4. Nikolajeva M. Reading for Learning: Cognitive Approaches to Children's Literature. – Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2014.
5. Hunt P. An Introduction to Children's Literature. – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
6. Rowling J.K. Harry Potter Series. – London: Bloomsbury, 1997–2007.
7. Dahl R. Matilda. – London: Jonathan Cape, 1988.
8. Seuss Dr. The Cat in the Hat. – New York: Random House, 1957.
9. Montgomery L.M. Anne of Green Gables. – Boston: L.C. Page & Co., 1908.
10. Lindgren A. Pippi Longstocking. – Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1945.