

Magical Growth and Moral Lessons; or, How the Conduct Book Informed Victorian and Edwardian Children's Fantasy.

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Abstract

Victorian and Edwardian writers of children's fantasy appropriated the codes and forms of the conduct book in their works. Using the aegis of an adult guide and the medium of dialogue, authors such as Kingsley, Carroll and MacDonald applied these to the growth and development of their central characters. According to Ostry, Carroll mocks these conventions and later the children in E. Nesbit's works will develop their own morality in the absence of an adult guide. Thus the children in these fantasies progress from needing instructive, moral dialogues to independence, and self-control. The children learn to create their own dialogues and teach themselves.



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Elaine Ostry

How can we help children grow up? Growing up is a tricky business, as children develop physically, mentally, emotionally, morally and spiritually all at once, at different rates. Guiding the child through this process was the key concern of writers for children in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, regardless of which genre they chose. Two genres, conduct books and fantasies, seem diametrically opposed. However, I suggest that they intersect in the treatment of maturity. For the Victorians, moral growth was as important as, if not more so than, physical growth. As the child grew, his or her moral development was as regulated as diet. In works of fantasy, magical physical growth can be a way of exploring the topic of moral maturity: it is a metaphor for the invisible side of growing up. Physical growth is related to power and independence, and the child must negotiate this power by exercising moral qualities. As the children use the power that physical growth gives, they take on the responsibility to make moral choices independent of adult guidance. From *The Water-Babies* in 1863 to *Five Children and It* in 1902, we can trace how some writers increasingly granted moral responsibility and maturity to their child heroes. To this aim, the writers use conduct books both as models to emulate and to reject. Specifically, they appropriate the language of these books: the instructional dialogue, the use of the moral guide or mentor(ia), and the emphasis on wonder and growth. These aspects, combined with the motif of the journey, echo the traditional allegory. Children here are on a quest to achieve moral and physical maturation.

Conduct books address the child and/or parent, and focus on the moral development of the child. They include lectures on morality, cautionary

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