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**ADULTIFICATION IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: an analysis of *A Little Princess* (1905), by
Frances Hodgson Burnett**

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ADULTIFICATION IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: AN ANALYSIS OF A *LITTLE PRINCESS* (1905), BY FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT

Mariana Cordeiro Falcão¹

ABSTRACT

The way the concept of childhood is understood nowadays is quite recent, considering human history. And the consequences of this perception induce a change in the understanding of the circumstances that children were subjected to. Before, these circumstances were naturalized, but today they are seen as harmful, which leads to the 'adultification' concept. Bearing this social issue in mind, the present article analyzes Frances Hodgson Burnett's novel, *A Little Princess* (1905), in order to understand how the author portrayed 'adultification' in a Children's Literature book and how to look into it in a critical way. Using the close reading method in a textual analysis of the novel and its excerpts as discussed by Belsey (2013) and Kusch (2016), the selected excerpts were chosen based on the concept of adultification as perceived by Davis (2020) and others and the language used. Whereas the book seems to encompass different characteristics of Children's Literature, the analysis of the story and the language also showed that different meanings and depth depend on the reader.

Keywords: Frances Hodgson Burnett; *A Little Princess*; Children's Literature; Adultification; American Literature.

RESUMO

A forma como o conceito de infância é compreendido atualmente é algo recente, considerando a história da humanidade, e as consequências dessa percepção levam a uma mudança no entendimento das circunstâncias às quais as crianças eram submetidas. Antes, situações que eram consideradas naturais se tornaram algo prejudicial atualmente, o que aponta para o conceito de 'adultização'. Tendo em vista esse problema social, o presente artigo analisou o romance *A Little Princess* (1905), de Frances Hodgson Burnett, para entender como a autora retratou a 'adultização' em um livro de literatura infantil e também para tratá-lo de uma forma crítica. Utilizando a leitura atenta da análise textual como estabelecida por Belsey (2013) e Kusch (2016), os excertos do romance foram selecionados baseados na linguagem usada e no conceito de 'adultização' como entendido por Davis (2020) e outros. Embora o livro pareça englobar diferentes características da literatura infantil, as análises da história e da linguagem usada também mostram que os diferentes significados e a profundidade do texto dependem do leitor.

Palavras-chave: Frances Hodgson Burnett; *A Little Princess*; Literatura Infantil; Adultização; Literatura Estadunidense.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the Middle Ages, a child was considered as a child only as a baby. So, when they reached some level of coordination, they were considered adults and were put to live among them. The images of fragility and necessity to be cared for that are characteristic of childhood were only present during the first years of a child and even so, they were not treated as they would be today. The feeling towards children around this time was similar to how someone would feel about a puppy (Ariès, 1986). Still, according to Ariès (1986), after the 17th century, the children stopped being put with the adults to learn how to be and live through experience. By that time, they were living with other children in a separate place to learn and grow; after the 18th century, childhood became recognized with an importance similar to contemporary days.

Putting a child to work might have been a common behavior before, but in the 19th century, this was changing along with the comprehension of what it meant to be a child. From that point on, some of the things that children were supposed to do were not naturalized anymore. And when the children started to be treated with more care and protection, they were susceptible to adultification, which is considering a child as an adult and causing them to endure circumstances that could be harmful.

However, in the present days, the concept of childhood is strongly related to innocence, vulnerability, and cognitive and socio emotional development. The actions and struggles imposed on children back then would seem cruel and wrong nowadays. Some of those hardships, such as orphanage, parentification and child labor can be considered factors of children's adultification, a phenomenon that happens when a kid is considered grown up in some aspects and has their innocence and vulnerability underestimated and they are expected to perform actions and roles entitled to adults.

Since Literature, albeit artistic, tends to demonstrate the society of a time, the present article uses the concept of adultification to analyze a novel written between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, that has a child as a protagonist who, throughout the story, goes through events that a child should not go through. The previously mentioned novel is *A Little Princess*, 1905, by Frances Hodgson Burnett.

Although this article focuses on Burnett's novel, it is worth mentioning that the British trailblazer in using a child as the protagonist in a novel was Charles Dickens with *Oliver*

Twist, in 1838. Not only did he use the boy as the leading role, but he also depicted situations like orphanage, violence, child labor; all of it that, today, can be considered as adultification factors. Therefore, Dickens was the first novelist to, in a way, address this theme.

Considering that Burnett was born in the UK, but lived in the USA, it is important to also point out the American pioneer in this matter. Mark Twain was also a novelist who used a child as a protagonist with the character Huckleberry Finn. First introduced in Twain's novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, in 1876, and after that, being more focused on in the novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in 1884, in which the author brings depth to the characters' life.

Following these authors, Burnett also wrote novels with children in the leading role and, specifically, in *A Little Princess* she tells the story of a rich little girl, called Sara Crewe that is sent to a boarding school while her father is away. She used to be treated as a princess, but when her father died abroad, she was thought to have become poor. Then, the owner of the school, Miss Minchin makes Sara work in exchange for a roof over her head and some food. At that moment, Sara finds comfort in her imagination and in her friends and, particularly, Becky, who is a servant at the school too. After a while, Captain Crewe's friend finds her and restores her princess life.

The moment that Sara becomes allegedly poor, she is sent to live in the attic, in a room that has a non-functioning fireplace, is incredibly dirty and has rats in it. Everything she owned was used to "pay her debt"; even her clothes. The remaining ones were few and plain and she had outgrown them. In addition to that, she had to take care of the youngest students, teach them French, do errands around the city, forget about her own education and become so tired that she had no time to be a child anymore.

Burnett's story was first published as a serialized novel in *St. Nicholas Magazine*, 1887; as a script for theater in 1902, and the expanded version of both, finally as a complete novel in 1905. *A Little Princess* was originally illustrated in its first version and also widely translated, including to Brazilian Portuguese. Likewise, it was extensively adapted to theater and television, including a homonymous movie released in 1995, in which the character of Becky is portrayed as a black girl, whereas in Burnett's original she was not. And that specific case of the character's representation was considered racist and it actually exemplifies the most common type of adultification bias.

The main aspect that this work aims to investigate is the representation of such sensitive and important topics as adultification in a work of Literature, specifically *A Little*

Princess, by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Thus, the main objectives are to analyze Burnett's novel in order to explain how she depicted adultification and its factors in her story, whilst being a Children's Literature book, and to criticize this theme through Literature's perspective. Plus, in a more specific way, this paper aims to verify, through text excerpts, how the author's language in the novel was used to describe and explain the way the adultification of two of her characters was expressed in the novel, as well as how the language used represented Children's Literature.

The methods used in this article were the qualitative research as well as the textual analysis, by using the concept of 'close reading' as Belsey (2013) and Kusch (2016) defined it, which consists of a thorough reading of the story to identify a theme and use it to interpret the language use and meanings. This work takes upon 'adultification', a concept from other fields, mainly Psychology and Social Services, and re-interprets the words Burnett used in her novel, and in doing so another meaning is conveyed to a well-established story. Therefore, some excerpts of Burnett's novel were analyzed to identify factors of adultification and the aspects that would confirm that being Children's Literature is not synonymous to being without depth or importance.

A child that has to become an adult sooner than he or she should is a social problem, and a testament that the people and the system around this child have failed. A child should be able to play, study, be healthy and worry of nothing else, as worrying is the job of adults and of caregivers. This issue is what the concept of adultification addresses, how, moved by life's circumstances, some children have to grow up early and take on adult-like roles. But this was only possible when society changed its view of childhood and understood situations like homelessness and child labor, for instance, as not natural anymore. That made it possible to understand those circumstances, amongst others, as adultification factors.

2 CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

As society's understanding of childhood improved, so did Children's Literature. It started as books of rules and values, a way to "domesticate" the kids that were considered by the Puritans as wicked (Sachdeva, 2020). After going from a manual on how to behave to books that entertain, instruct or even make children think, Children's Literature has become more and more relevant, and a key point to its spreading and development was the commercial interest in it.

Rita Felski, a literary critic mentioned by Kusch (2016) states that Literature can be understood as a way to “recognize ourselves in the words of others, to gain knowledge, to experience shock, and to feel a sense of enchantment with new worlds and new ways of seeing our own – all uses attuned to the reactions brewing in the individual reader’s mind” (Felski, 2008 *apud* Kusch, 2016, p. 4). Felski manages to describe Literature quite accurately and she also includes the reader's experience. This is one of the points that differentiate Literature and Children's Literature: the audience. The meaning is so dependent on the reader that Reimer (2000) demonstrates how the exact same novel, *A Little Princess*, can be interpreted through a Post-colonial perspective. She points out how, in using particular words to describe a character, Hodgson Burnett manages to express the idea of imperialism and of British superiority, whether consciously of it or not.

Being another main aspect of this research, it is important to understand how Children’s Literature is conceptualized and how Frances Hodgson Burnett’s novel fits in it. According to Britannica Encyclopedia (2023) Children’s Literature is an independent type of Literature not completely established as one definition followed everywhere. For some scholars, Children’s Literature is understood as written works sided with pictures or drawings, easy-to-read, with moral lessons, and with the aim of teaching and/or entertaining children (Britannica, 2023).

In agreement with Britannica Encyclopedia, Danielle Sachdeva (2020) goes even further by pointing out types of leading roles that are usually related to Children’s Literature: animals and children. Another aspect she addresses is that during the period that childhood was not recognized, there were no books meant for children. And that was the reason why stories intended for adults like *Robinson Crusoe*, 1719, by Daniel Defoe became so popular, because kids liked to read about adventures.

Seeing that it is not particularly defined, Children’s Literature can encompass a wide range of different types of stories, whether it be lullabies, fairy tales, fables and so on. To some scholars and critics, it might even only be considered a subsection of Literature itself (Britannica, 2023).

On this matter, Margaret Meek acknowledged that

[e]arlier compilations of information about children’s books were more heroic, written by individuals with a commitment to the subject, at the risk, in their day, of being considered quaint in their choice of reading matter (Meek, 2004, p. 1).

That citation illustrates how reading and researching about Children's Literature was not seen in a prestigious manner. It was understood that the ones that read and research about it have nothing better to read, even though Children's Literature is a widely plural and rich area of studies, since it has a lot of different themes and genres as mentioned before. That is why it is possible to wonder what it means to be categorized as Children's Literature and if it still carries this prejudice.

3 ADULTIFICATION

Adultification is a concept common to different fields, such as Psychology, Sociology, Medicine and, specially, Social Services. These areas of knowledge recognize this term as some kind of prejudice and discrimination that oversee or ignore the innocence and fragility of any child and most of the times, identify this prejudice being more evident to children of minorities (related to their color, ethnicity and/or socio-economic situation) and it causes a lack of understanding and caring while assisting them.

In addition to that, the term is also addressed as a phenomenon usually associated with media and the exposure of children to it (Menezes, 2016), although it is older than this and can happen in other forms, related to racism, labor, homelessness, violence, orphanage or other life adversities usually entitled to adults, for example. While concerning children's rights, 'adultification' is "when notions of innocence and vulnerability are not afforded to certain children" (Davis, 2020). That is when a child gets "adult-like roles" making it difficult for adults to recognize them as children as any other.

Some researchers conceptualized the term and explained how it happens and shared some common ground; they also brought attention to different aspects of the matter. Elizabeth Jean (2022), for instance, makes an overview of many authors that defined and explained 'adultification' through Psychology's perspective and the essence of what she gathered was that usually childhood is associated with comfort, protection, innocence and development, and even though adults try to provide that for children, when these are not possible due to life's circumstances and a child is requested to occupy adult-like roles and answer to their responsibilities, that is adultification. She even mentions that this phenomenon can have positive and negative results, affecting children's maturity, leadership and mental health.

However, Burton sheds light on the fact that adults tend to choose which children to give "children status" and that they usually lean on their perceptions and on stereotypes that

they believe (consciously or not) to do so, and that affects the image of how a child should look like and behave (Burton, 2007). In comparison, Schmitz and Tyler mention that some authors and even some young people that went through some kind of adultification might see a positive side of it, like preparing for future parenthood, or even some leadership skills. But also state that the majority of the cases end up causing more downsides, such as overwhelm and stress (Schmitz; Tyler, 2016).

On the other hand, when addressing Literature, there is also a relation between adultification and racism, known as ‘adultification bias’ as mentioned by Toliver (2018) in which the concept is addressed in the most common form of it: directed to black children. In her work, she mentions the casting of a black girl for the character of Rue, from *The Hunger Games* (2008), by Suzanne Collins, and how this reverberated among the fans on social media such as Twitter. The writer says, during the description of Rue’s physical features, that she has dark eyes and dark brown skin.

The main issue that Toliver (2018) highlights is, why, with this description, would it not be a black child to portray Rue? And the argument that Toliver defends is that the readers never considered that Rue could possibly be black, because she was also described by Collins as short and fragile and the protagonist always associated her with delicacy and innocence because she reminded her of her little sister, Primrose, and then the readers automatically presumed Rue was white.

Although Toliver addresses racism's perspective, it is important to remember that there are other factors related to it, such as homelessness, child labor, orphanage, violence and so forth (Davis; Marsh, 2020). This research focuses only on the aspects that are identified in Burnett’s novel, mostly child labor, orphanage and (momentary) poverty.

4 ANALYSIS

Supposing it is not possible to say whether Frances Hodgson Burnett wrote her novel consciously thinking about how orphanage, poverty and forced labor could engage in such an important social thermometer so many years from her time, to look at it in a critical way is necessary, but never forgetting that it is Literature also. She might not have known the implications of something that could commonly happen at her time, and she might have written it only for economic reasons, since Children’s Literature was at a strong rise during

the 19th century, but it does not make it unfeasible to look for (in)voluntary hints that she portrayed adultification and that her novel was really intended for children.

Therefore, an analysis was held trying to make sense of these suppositions and the portrayal of the unfortunate events that Sara went through after four years of living like a princess at the boarding school were addressed, looking how Hodgson Burnett chose to describe it using the voice of the narrator. The theories about adultification and Children's Literature, as well as Belsey's and Kusch's methodology on textual analysis, were used to exemplify and interpret the representations of those concepts in the novel.

The first analyzed quote is from the moment when one of the younger students of Miss Minchin's keeps yelling and crying and always emphasizing that she has no mother. "And from that time Sara was an adopted mother" (Burnett, 2016, ebook, p. 32). The little girl in this event is called Lottie, and as Sara, she has no mother, but differently from her, she is very emotional about it and because of her age, the only way she expresses it is through yelling and crying. Sara was the only student who could calm her younger peer, and so she was given this responsibility. Yet she was in no place or age to be anyone's mother.

According to Burton (2007), parentification is one of the types of adultification, which Schmitz and Tyler (2016) call premature caregiving, and in that excerpt it occurs when Sara takes on some kind of parenting role and feelings toward the younger child. However, she is a child herself that should be protected and cared for as well. She should not be entitled to the responsibility of caring for others. Her only role should be of being a kid, playing, studying, having a healthy life and being loved.

By getting this responsibility of being the caregiver of another, Sara loses the possibility of having her own feelings protected and evolved, and be the one cared for. Instead, she is the one providing this to another child. She also has to worry more and has to take other actions that are entitled to adults in order to support Lottie. And that might cause her to be overwhelmed and stressed, as pointed out as a consequence of adultification by Schmitz and Tyler (2016).

In a real context, knowing the types of adultification situations that a youngster has gone through might help authorities and social services' professionals to know how to help such children and what to expect from them. The importance society gives to this kind of problem might dictate how it should be handled, maybe providing shelter, safety and kindness to orphans like the two girls. Actions like these could create a safe environment for them to just be children, as they were supposed to be.

In the second excerpt analyzed, Burnett introduces a new character, Becky.

She was a forlorn little thing who had just taken the place of scullery maid—though, as to being scullery maid, she was everything else besides. She blacked boots and grates, and carried heavy coal-scuttles up and down stairs, and scrubbed floors and cleaned windows, and was ordered about by everybody. She was fourteen years old, but was so stunted in growth that she looked about twelve (Burnett, 2016, ebook, p. 36).

In Burnett's description of Becky, she states that the girl looked younger than she really was. Perhaps, this could be related to malnutrition and the heavy amount of work that she was supposed to do. She also says that the character used to do every kind of work in the boarding school, from carrying heavy coal scuttles to cleaning, which are heavy tasks for a child, and even heavier for a child that seems small and thin as Becky does. And she should not be doing those tasks in such circumstances – as a way to earn her living.

At such a young age, a child should be taken care of, and not be compelled to have a “job” to be able to survive, which is named as early independence by Schmitz and Tyler (2016). These are all factors that would constitute adultification, as conceptualized by them. The particular issue about Becky is that the reader knows little of her. One only knows what the narrator says, but these circumstances – of having to work in order to survive and to do such heavy tasks – could indicate the lack of someone caring and providing for her.

Becky might also be an orphan, since there seems to be no one helping her or caring for her. A child that is fourteen years old is at the beginning of such an important and turbulent time of life, and because of her situation, the girl has no time or energy to live the transition between childhood and adolescence. Looking into the social perspective of this matter, could it be that Becky is in a situation analogous to forced child labor or even slavery? Either way, she was not even seen as a child; she was not afforded to be and act like one.

In the third quote, the author introduces the change in Sara's life and how she received her new condition.

“Can I work?” she said. “If I can work it will not matter so much. What can I do?” “You can do anything you are told,” was the answer. “You are a sharp child, and pick up things readily. If you make yourself useful I may let you stay here. You speak French well, and you can help with the younger children.” “May I?” exclaimed Sara. “Oh, please let me! I know I can teach them. I like them, and they like me” (Burnett, 2016, ebook, p. 70).

After the death of Sara's father abroad, she lost all of her privileges and that excerpt shows the beginning of her much different and new life. From that moment on, Sara, who was, at the time, about eleven years old, becomes poor and needs to make herself useful in a

way that Miss Minchin would let her stay living in the boarding school, as some kind of maid or errand girl. Here, having a roof over her head is used as a blackmailing coin: the only way for Sara not to be expelled and for her to pay her debt is to work at the school where she was once the star pupil.

In the excerpt “The first night she spent in her attic was a thing Sara never forgot. During its passing she lived through a wild, unchildlike woe of which she never spoke to anyone about her” (Burnett, 2016, ebook, p. 74), Sara has to go from being a little princess and having everything to being an orphan who is forced to work in order to live in the attic with only her most worn out clothes and the rats. She went from being a cherished person to her father to being someone replaceable for Miss Minchin.

No kid should go through this amount of sorrow, stress and fear, and the fact that Sara had to keep thinking about how to act to not let her spirits get low because it was hard, but she had to carry on. But how was she supposed to have energy to study, play and be healthy if the basics were not guaranteed for her?

And the fact that we do not know her life after the story ended, but in this part of the text, Burnett hints out that her first night in the attic was something that marked Sara’s whole life when she said “Sara never forgot”. Which consequences might those nights in the attic have brought to her? There is also the part where Burnett even gives an opinion through the narrator’s voice, when she says “she lived through a wild, unchildlike woe”, so even the narrator believes no kid should endure what Sara went through.

Lastly, in the fourth excerpt, Burnett demonstrates the change in Sara’s appearance and feelings.

She worked like a drudge; she tramped through the wet streets, carrying parcels and baskets; she labored with the childish inattention of the little ones' French lessons; as she became shabbier and more forlorn-looking, she was told that she had better take her meals downstairs; she was treated as if she was nobody's concern, and her heart grew proud and sore, but she never told anyone what she felt (Burnett, 2016, ebook, p. 77).

In this part of the novel, when the reader gets more and more examples of what Sara went through, even the narrator does some judgement call when she says “she was treated as if she was nobody’s concern”, when, clearly, Sara should be someone’s concern, especially the one person who her father hired to take care of her. This passage also shows how the girl felt about it; how the treatment she got impacted her.

All of the pieces of research brought here show that going through these adversities has consequences when a child grows up and it is an obligation of the family, the caregivers

and society, to protect and be kind to children in the phase of their lives when one of their needs is to develop their own characters and abilities.

By the end of the story, as it is usual to some kind of children's books, the character that behaved well gets to have a happy ending and the villains should suffer, but in this story, there is a lack of satisfying consequences for the "villain" that would be Miss Minchin. Despite the fact that the writing is direct, with not as many layers and symbolism as it would be expected of a work of pure Literature, it still seems more than a children's story for children to read, since it considers the way some adults mistreated those two girls natural. And that is something that adults who care about children would not like for them to believe in.

Even though it has a simple use of language, the novel has a lot of escapisms from the hard reality that Sara has to live in. Whenever she imagines something, whenever she recalls something that she has learnt, whenever she creates and tells a story, she is finding a way to stay in a different place for some minutes, a way to cope with the hardships of her real life.

Considering it is a book written for children, even with the direct language, the depth and the inferences might not be seen because they are held with the reader, as Reimer (2000) showed. In spite of it being a book intended for children, it has the possibilities and meanings of a work of Literature. And this goes against the scholars that diminish Children's Literature, once it shows that some of their expected layers are built by the reader.

The main point is: a child should not have to find a way to deal with orphanacy, mistreatment, cruelty, forced labor and a poor way of living and feeling uncared for and unprotected. In spite of the fact that the book was written between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, it is possible to notice those indications of adultification, even if this is a recent concept and that might not be the purpose of the author with that story, it is an important movement to do: to read old stories with a current understanding of the world to see how much has changed and how much more we still have ahead of us. Perhaps this type of reading and understanding stories considered classic through different eyes might lead us to reflect on how to be a better society.

5 FINAL REMARKS

The novel *A Little Princess* is, indeed, a children's book, with direct and simple language and some kind of final resolution. But it also has layers of meanings that depend on

the reader, and this reading experience might change each time a person reads the book in different phases of their life. On the contrary of what some scholars and critics may say, being simple does not mean being shallow or less worthy, as some prejudices might portray Children's Literature to be.

Burnett illustrated an important matter in her novel and the hints of 'adultification' in the story were many and noticeable (child labor, poverty, homelessness). In concordance with Kusch's theory of what Literature should be, Frances Hodgson Burnett depicted a lack of multiple explicit meanings and symbolism in her novel, but they can still be achieved through the reader's interpretation.

A Little Princess was written between the 19th and 20th century, and in spite of that it was an efficient way to address a topic that is, until now, a reality in our society. How many children are forced to work, or are exposed to violence and poverty? Even in the 21st century, with eyes and ears everywhere, we are still failing to protect our children from these situations.

It is a novel; it is fiction; it is art, but it is also a beginning. Reading Literature with a critical mind is a path to start caring, to start feeling uneasy with topics that should cause outrage. Frances Hodgson Burnett might not have known that her work could be read in so many different ways, but even adults were children once. This paper is a first step on researching about how a story intended for children and written in a different time can be accurate, while showing the way Literature represents social issues and not losing its essence as art, entertainment and uneasiness. Hopefully, it is the beginning of further research about such a rich area of possibilities as Children's Literature is.

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