

## Children's Literature, An Escape Into A Utopian World: A Study of Selected Stories

**Shivani Lata**

Research Scholar, Department of English  
S.D. (P.G.) College, Ghaziabad  
Email: shivanilata1991@gmail.com

**Dr. Bindu Karnwal**

Research Scholar,  
Department of English  
S.D. (P.G.) College, Ghaziabad  
Email: binduraj20feb@gmail.com

### Abstract

Children's Literature and stories portray innocent children and young adults and their inner struggles without adult intervention. These children's characters represent an idyllic period of a human's life, which is full of mystery and enthusiasm. These children's stories always have some utopian qualities. A utopia is an imaginary place where everything is perfect and full of happiness. The aim of this paper is to analyze utopian qualities and elements in the two famous children's novels "Lord of the Flies" by William Golding and "The Secret Garden" by Frances Hodgson Burnett. These two novels show the struggle of children and young adults in their own new world. In these stories, children find or get stuck in an unknown place, where they start their new life. This new life in a totally new world is full of hope and happiness. This idealized world gives a glance of hope to this materialistic world. Utopian writing for children gives the idea of social organization to the young readers. These stories give relief to the readers from their sufferings. This new world gives hope for the future.

### Keywords

Children's literature, adults, stories, utopia, hope.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

**Shivani Lata,  
Dr. Bindu Karnwal**

*Children's Literature, An  
Escape Into A Utopian  
World: A Study of Selected  
Stories*

**Notions June 2021,**  
Vol. XIII, No. 1,  
pp. 27 - 35  
Article No. 4

Online available at :

<https://anubooks.com/notions-vol-xiii-no-1-jan.-june-2022/>

## **Introduction**

The children's literature includes books, magazines, stories and poems that are created for children. Many classic and famous children's books were published in the late nineteenth and twentieth century that's why it is called *the "Golden Age of children's literature."*

If we talk about children's stories, these stories are based on mythological stories in which the writer shows an imaginative place and setting. This place is supposed to be an island or unknown place, which is far from the world of adults. In these, stories children lose their parents by some means. It is almost a rule of children's writings. They have to manage their life on their own, the grown-ups can't be around them to solve the problems of their daily life. Children reach on an unknown Place or find it accidentally. This island is a small resembling world, which is full of secrets, magic and ready for conquering e.g. *The Famous Five* by Enid Blyton, *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, and *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett.

These children's island stories have some utopian qualities. A utopia is an imaginative place, that is similar to a paradise. It is a place where everything works and everyone is supposed to be happy. It is like a perfect society. The English philosopher Sir Thomas More invented the term '*Utopia*'. It is a Greek word that means 'good place' or 'no place'. Sir Thomas More described an ideal utopian society in his book '*Utopia*', first written in Latin in 1516 and translated into English in 1551. "Utopianism, some argue, is essential for the human condition. But if it is used wrongly, it becomes dangerous. Utopia has an inherent contradictory nature here"(Sargent, P.21). Utopia is a popular theme in fiction, with authors using it to push their own bounds. Utopian literature is a style of literature that takes place in an idealized world. The authors of utopian fiction set their stories in a world or society that is in harmony with their broader spirit and personal philosophy. Utopian literature is considered to be literature in which main characters explore problems and create moral, political, and philosophical points through storytelling. Utopian literature, is generally written to find and explore ideas about how society should or could be. By depicting childhood as a golden age, some utopian novel authors establish a myth about it too.

We need this kind of literature, especially for children and young readers, to provide hope for a different and more human world. Utopian stories are generally written to explore new worlds and ideas. For example, The Eco Utopia would be based on the story to explore the concept of a society, which is based on perfect harmony with nature. On the other hand, a Libertarian Utopia would be a world based on the concept of perfect freedom and individualism. These stories can be a

great way to examine such philosophies, to see how these philosophies would affect people in practice in this real world.

There was always a utopian element in children's stories or literature from their beginning in the eighteenth century, as it gradually started from the oral tradition. Stories, plays, novels and poems, all literary forms have these utopian qualities and elements, and start or produce them from a lack we feel in our lives. It comes from a desire or longing for a better society and world. It gives us some glimpses of a world full of happiness. The happiness of children and young readers of utopian stories depends on the unhappiness of the writers or authors. Because of how much these writers are unsatisfied with the world in which they are living, they will create a better and more satisfying world in their stories. Maybe without dissatisfaction, there is no utopia. Our world would be a gloomy place without the portrayal of utopia. It represents our lives in a more interesting way. There are lots of stories in which children and adolescents imaginatively travel to many fantasies and unknown worlds such as *Neverland*, *Narnia*, *Hogwarts*, and *Oz*. This paper will examine the characteristics of utopian literature in two books: *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding and *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett.

*Lord of the Flies* (1954) is the debut novel by the Nobel Prize-winning author William Golding. In this novel, a British airplane crashes near an isolated island. A group of boys in their childhood are the only survivors. Ralph and Piggy find a conch, which Ralph uses as a horn to collect all the survivors. Once assembled, they choose Ralph as their leader. Ralph announces that they must create a signal fire to attract the passing ships. The boys succeed in igniting the fire, but the flames quickly engulf the forest and one of the boys disappears. In the beginning, the boys enjoy their life without grownups. One day, a ship passes from there. But the fire burned out. Piggy criticizes Jack, because he hit Piggy across the face. Ralph collects the boys by the signal of conch shell and tells the boys in a speech intended to restore order. The youngest has been troubled by nightmares, and now boys believe that there is some sort of beast on the island. Sam and , the twins, are responsible for watching the fire at night. When they wake up, they see an enormous figure of parachute and hear the strange flapping noise and report that the beast has attacked them. Now Jack declares himself the new leader. Jack and the other boys hunt and kill a pig. They leave it as an offering to the beast. Simon comes upon the head and says that it's the Lord of the Flies, the beast in all men. They had a feast. The mob thinks that Simon is the beast and kills him. Jack's tribe captures the twins and a boy named Roger rolls a bolder that smashes the conch and kills Piggy. Eventually, the boys catch Ralph on the beach. But the burning jungle has attracted a naval ship,

and an officer is standing on the shore. Ralph starts to weep and soon the other boys start weeping too. The officer looks away toward his warship to give them time to pull themselves together. The novel comes to a pleasant conclusion. The lads are saved by the loving, caring, and mature outside world as their dumb cruelty reaches its height.

*The Secret Garden* is a novel by British- American writer Frances Hodgson Burnett, originally published in serial form in America (November 1910-August 1911) in *The American Magazine*, at the end of the Edwardian Era in England. Now, we considered it as the story of children because the main characters in the story are children. *The Secret Garden* is an example of the 'first golden age of children's literature, which started from 1850 to the First World War. It is one of the most popular novels of Burnett and is seen as a classic of English children's literature. It is a story about Mary Lennox, who is a neglected and unloved ten-year-old girl. Mary was born in British India to a wealthy family. Her family never wanted her and always tried to ignore her. Unfortunately, her parents died in an epidemic. She is soon sent to England to live with her uncle, Archibald Craven, who is married to her father's sister, Lilies. He lives on the Yorkshire moors in a large English Country house. At first, Mary dislikes her new home and the people living in it. After some time, she befriends with her maid, Martha Sowerby. Martha tells her about Lilies and her secret garden. After the death of Lilies, her husband locked the garden and buried its key somewhere. Mary becomes interested in finding the secret garden. One night, Mary hears the cries and decides to follow them. She is shocked to find a boy of her age named Colin. Collin is the son of her uncle Archibald and suffers from an unspecified spinal problem that makes him unable to walk and he spends all his time in bed. Mary visits him every day and distracts him from his troubles, with her stories. Mary finally finds the secret garden. Colin asks her to see it and it is the first time, he has been outdoors for several years. After some time, Collin stands from his chair and finds that his legs are fine, though weak because of long disuse. Collin and Mary spend almost every day in the garden. As Collin's health improves, his father receives a letter from Mrs. Sowerby and he finally returns home. He finds the door of the secret garden unlocked and is shocked to see the garden in full bloom and healthy Collin. The children tell him the whole story and everyone sees that Archibald and Collin walk back to the manor together.

There are some qualities of utopian literature, according to Maria Nikolajeva, that most researchers agree upon in her book *From Mystic to Linear: Time in Children's Literature*.

1. The importance of a particular setting and a felicitous space from the rest of the world.
2. Absence of repressive aspects of civilization such as money, law, and government.
3. Absence of sexuality.
4. The a great sense of harmony.
5. A general sense of innocence.

### **The Importance of A Particular Setting**

Utopian stories tend to be set in an unknown place and country and the weather is usually sunny and temperate pleasant there. The idea of the novel, *Lord of the Flies*, came about after a good read of the portrayal of helpless children at a young age in the novel *The Coral Island: A tale of the Pacific Ocean* (1857) by R.M. Ballantyne. As a result, there are several references to *The Coral Island* in this book. This island represents that particular setting where children start their life in a totally new and unique way, far from the world of adults. "All around him the long scar smashed into the jungle was a bath of heat; he was clambering heavily among the creeper and broken trunks..." (P.1). These lines from the novel's opening paragraph, introduce the island as a hauntingly beautiful but uninviting place that has been disturbed by the children's arrival. The garden discovered by Mary in the novel is that place where the children find a new beginning in their lives. "When her mind gradually filled with itself with springtime and with secret garden coming alive day by day, there was no room left for the disagreeable thoughts...and so she becomes well and healthy"(P.288). In the world of *The Secret Garden*, the children need only fill their minds with positive thoughts to change their fortune. Divine nature in the form of a garden, makes this possible for both Mary and Collin. Both novels have a particular setting in which the children start to set their own society or a totally new world. This setting is secluded and this secluded or walled place provides security, protection, and restriction to push back against. Inside, the boundary is the world of children, and outside is the world of adults.

### **Absence of Money, Law and Government**

In these stories, characters never worry about where food comes from and the same goes for the money. In both of the novels, there is an absence of money, law, and government in different ways. In *Lord of the Flies*, Golding creates a scene of global war for a fictional story about a group of boys trying to build a civil society. This story of an isolated group of young boys tries to remake society without law and order. The group of boys tries to create their own law and government.

First, they select a leader of the group and divide their roles. "Things are breaking up. I don't understand why. We began well; we were happy"(P.115). Ralph realizes that their perfect early days on the island were short-lived and creating a civilization is difficult without law and order. In chapter two of this novel, Jack asserts that the boys should follow some rules on the island. But Golding shows us that children are not completely innocent. These boys always choose to engage themselves in things that please them, such as playing in the water. The boys are supposed to be working on building fires, hunting for food or building shelters to sleep in, but they choose to play instead. Due to a lack of adult supervision, children tend to lose the law and order in their society. Without any source of supervision on the island, the youngsters have no choice except to seek leadership and authority from a different child. Boys become savages and the laws and rules become things of the past. In *The Secret Garden*, there is no adult in the home. There is only Mary, other children, and servants. An adult represents the law and order in a house. But the absence of the parents and adults in the novel gives the full authority to the children to create their own law and order. In the absence of parents, children become furious and rude. Mary's parents died in the outbreak of Cholera. *The secret garden* opens by introducing us to Mary Lennox, a sickly, foul-tempered woman, as a 'tyrannical and selfish pig'. But Mary's hatefulness is not precisely in her but it's because of her parents. Throughout the first part of the novel, Mary remains furious and rude. She represents an uncivilized child who beats her servants.

#### **A General Sense of Innocence**

Children's stories and literature depict characters going through the most innocent phase of their lives because they are all children. In general, this is a time of innocence, where children are oblivious to the world's politics, intellectual debate and so on. The concept of childhood began with the romantic view of childhood, where children were seen as pure and sin-free. Rousseau believed that children are born good and guiltless, and through life experiences, they learn badness and guilt.

According to Anthony Burgess 'Goodness and Innocence is something chosen.' In *Lord of the Flies*, the young boys are set free from the regulations set by the adult in their lives while on the island. There is no one to tell them what to do or how to act. Innocence is a lack of guilt from any crime or wrongdoing. The novel, *Lord of the Flies*, is about young English boys that have been deserted on an island due to a plane crash. While the boys are all under the age of thirteen, the reader would assume that innocence is seen throughout the novel. But as soon as the boys face the obstacles of surviving, they lost their innocence. While it can be said that innocence can be taken away from the boys very early, it does not mean that innocence

does not reveal at points throughout. "I'm frightened. Of us. I want to go home. Oh God. I want to go home"(P.225). The novel revolves around schoolboys, so the innocence can be seen occasionally. At the end of the novel, soon the rest of the boys join Ralph and tell the officer about their story as they speak the reality has happened to them, finally it hits them and several boys are crying. They are transformed from murderous savages back into children the quickness of the boy's transformation suggests their innocence. "The tears began to flow and sobs shook him and in the middle of them...Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart" (P. 290). The novel is about Mary and Collin Craven, ten years old innocent children. It is the children's innocence and goodness that make the garden full of flowers. "Perhaps out of pure heavenly goodness the spring came and crowned everything it possibly could into that one place" (P.304).

#### **The Absence of Sexuality**

There is also the absence of sexuality in the children's literature. Sexuality is entirely absent in the novel *Lord of the Flies*, every single character is male. In a pre homosexual time, sexuality never crops up. Today's world and society became materialistic. To represent the utopian ideal world in children's stories, the story writers portray a world or society without sexuality. The idea of innocence is strongly interrelated with children's sexuality. Children's literature and stories teach gender norms at a time when children are establishing their gender identity and trying to understand it. In *The Secret Garden*, all main characters are children and they represent the ideal age of their life. Children's literature helps young readers to think beyond traditional gender identities, rethink and challenge gender stereotypes, and consider the possibility of multiple masculinities and femininities. During this time, children are forming their gender identities and developing views on them, literature that supports diversity in gender and sexuality may not be available to them.

#### **Sense of Harmony**

The children's literature or stories show the harmony between the characters. Harmony denotes a state of balance among forces influencing and even opposing one another. The boys in *Lord of the Flies* have different ideas and thoughts. They represent different aspects of human nature. Ralph represents scientific and intellectual aspects of civilization. Jack represents savagery and desire for power. Simon represents natural human goodness but the main motive of these children is to survive on this desert island. They know that their first and foremost purpose is to live in any condition and these children try to help each other to survive in this difficult situation. In *The Cement Garden*, Mary and other characters show harmony for each other. Mary helps Collin to recover from his disease. He was not able to

stand and stay in his room all day. Because of Mary, he can walk and live his life wholeheartedly and now he can see the outside world. Chapter seventh and eighth in the novel *The Secret Garden* gives the idea of rebirth. This rebirth takes in two forms; the first coming of the spring to moor and the second Mary's first entrance into the secret garden. Just as the landscape at the advent of spring, Mary as well; the natural environment and its habitants are shown in harmony. Dickon's unique sympathy for animals and Mary's affection for them show the love and harmony in the story.

### **Conclusion**

There are always some utopian qualities in children's literature. From Lewis Carrol's nonsensical *Wonderland* to the contagious world of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Material* series, hundreds of children and young adult books have presented the utopian qualities and elements. In this utopian world, children create their own rules and conventions. Some books and stories present non-existent societies in utopian tradition, which is meant to depict an atmosphere that's better than the reader's own world. The history of children's and young adult literature is always connected with utopian writing. Utopian literature shows life as it could be. The children in both of the novels were true to themselves. *In the Secret Garden*, each character finds harmony and love in every difficult situation they find happiness and good health at the end of the novel. "These fictions are typically concerned with an existential question like: who am I, why am I here, where am I going, and what does it all means"(Bradford, et al. *New world order in contemporary children's literature*. P.12)? These children's stories show the personal growth or maturity, the relationship between self and others, and between individuals and society. These stories show the new world order by creating a society in children's literature. Children's stories seek ways to engage with major ideas and explore their impact on the individuals through theme and structure both. In *Lord of the Flies*, we can find the utopian and dystopian qualities. At the beginning of the novel, all characters and the island represent the utopian world. The children create their own society on that deserted island which is far from the real world of adults. These stories represent the world of hope for humanity. Today's life of a person is full of chaos and suffering, these children's stories give a relief and hope to the reader from this world. Utopian writings for children and young adults have been produced for a variety of reasons, and it has had a range of effects. In utopian writings for children, the readers learn the social organization. The purpose of these stories is to teach young readers about self-identification in the world. These stories provide the concept of an idealized world which does not have the qualities of today's materialistic and uncivilized



world. These stories represent the absence of sexuality and death in the world. “Some utopian writings of children offer us the idealized personal vision that evokes an Edenic image of the ostensibly unspoiled state of childhood itself” (Hintz and Ostry, *Utopian and dystopian writing for children and young adults*. P.1).

### References

1. Burnett, Frances Hodgson. (1998). *The Secret Garden*. Wordsworth Editions Limited: Hertfordshire.
2. Bradford, Clare. et.al. (2008). *New world order in contemporary children's literature*. Palgrave MacMillan: New York.
3. Golding, William. (1986). *Lord of the Flies*. Faber and Faber: London.
4. Hintz, Carrie., Ostry, Elaine. (2013). *Utopian and dystopian writing for children and young adults*. Routledge: London.
5. Hunt, Peter. (1999). *Understanding of Children's literature*. Routledge: London.
6. Sargent, Lyman Tower. (2010). *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK.
7. [www.researchgate.net](http://www.researchgate.net)
8. [www.ipl.org](http://www.ipl.org)