

## Children's Literature of 1922: Historicity and Modernism in Margery Williams' *Velveteen Rabbit* and Hugh Lofting's *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle*

Jain Mary Sajeev

### Abstract

The year 1922 also known as *Annus Mirabilis* contributed significantly to literary modernism by instilling the traumatic memory of World War I and radical experimentations of modernism. The corpus of Children's Literature is denied a space amongst the literary works which are deemed as 'modern'. The main features of Literary modernism like individualism, alienation, symbolism, and experimentation are also reflected in the children's literature of 1922. Margery Williams' *The Velveteen Rabbit* represents a non-materialistic view of death and may be regarded as a coming-of-age/ bildungsroman for the toy kingdom. It also talks about selfhood, death, love, loss, technological progress, survival, and renewal. Likewise, Hugh Lofting's *Dolittle* is one of the most radical characters in 20th-century literature. *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle* comprises of themes like alienation, individualism, pro-animal rights, anti-war and colonialism. This work advocates for animal rights and critiques a culture that goes to war. The paper attempts to look at the Children's book of 1922 from a modernist perspective by unravelling the modernist themes, symbolism, and experimentation employed in writing.

**Keywords:** Children's Literature, Modernism, 1922, Velveteen Rabbit, Doctor Dolittle



The year 1922 comes after the dreadful four years of humanity's first transnational conflict. Indeed, four years was required to appraise the global disaster, to assess what had happened in Europe and the world, and to determine whether the promise of the new, so widespread in 1913, would lead to a new order or new anarchy. T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* were all published near-simultaneously in 1922, making it the annus mirabilis ("miracle year") of Anglo-American literary modernism. Every level of society went through profound changes during this period. As a result of the war and industrialization, individuals were devalued. Global communication has made the world smaller. It was a dizzying pace of change. The new world sparked a variety of reactions in writers. Continuous experiments in subject, form, and style characterized the period. The radical departure from tradition and Western cultures, in general, was deliberate during the modern period. There were several main characteristics of literature during that period, including experimentation, formalism, symbolism, absurdity, and individualism. Likewise, the literature of the modern era reflected disillusionment, distaste for war, and themes of death and degradation. But oftentimes when we discuss modern literature, the children's literature belonging to that age seldom finds a space.

Literature for children traces its history back to the end of the 16th century. Many writers created books specifically for children. Children's literature entered a golden era in the 19th century when new writers like Lewis Carroll, Carlo Collodi, L. Frank Baum and J. M Barrie came to the scene. The famous works like Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Carlo Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883), L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1900), J.M Barrie's *Peter and Wendy* (1904) and Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book* (1894) had contributed immensely to the growth of Children's literature. There is no way for the children's literature of that age to escape from the socio-political changes and the impact of the turbulent times. Subtly, these authors have communicated their ideologies, disillusionment, ideas of war and death through their works.

We found minimal mention of the relationship between the phrases 'children's literature and 'modernism' in internet databases and library stacks. The end conclusion is the same, regardless of how we approach our search from the extensive literature on modernism or the rising corpus of scholarship on children's literature. *The Norton Anthology of Children's Literature* (2005), for example, provides a two-part explanation. In its prologue, the book's editors point out that, the term literature traditionally excludes children's literature, implying that children's literature has been separated from 'real' literature. Second, the anthology's table of contents is divided into two sections: genre and chronology. Children's literature may also be categorized by genre over chronology due to the ease with which it moves from generation to generation of readers. Many readers become aware of the historicity of a book only after it no longer resonates with its time and place. A book's words or pictures are changed so that past ideologies do not clash with present ones - P.L Travers' revisions to *Mary Poppins* (1934), such as removing racial stereotypes, further obliterate or freeze the moment of cultural exchange. In many cases, the best children's books speak to future generations beyond the boundaries of a single generation. Children's literature is particularly vulnerable to losing its historical foundation. Although generally, literature aspires to this goal, children's literature is particularly at risk for such a loss. Accordingly, good "adult" literature is often both historical and ahistorical, but good children's literature is typically ahistorical. Thus, genre



becomes a means for categorizing its texts (Westman 284). The omission of children's literature from literary history and the emphasis on the genre totally neglect the resonating cultural and socio-political influences on children's literature belonging to that particular age. Even though most children's literature is classified based on its genre without paying attention to its socio-cultural and political means of production, this paper attempts to view the children's literature of 1922 namely Margery William's *Velveteen Rabbit* and Hugh Lofting's Doctor Dolittle series through the lens of historicity and literary modernism.

Originally published in 1922 by Margery Williams, the *Velveteen Rabbit* is a story about innocence. The *Velveteen Rabbit*, featuring charming illustrations by William Nicholson, quickly became a children's literature classic. As soon as the copyright ran out in the United States, several new editions with different illustrations appeared. Several reviewers have called it an American cult at one time, noting that parts of it were often cited by many in their orations. This simple story is written for children between the ages of 5 to 10. A boy receives a Velveteen Rabbit as a present in his Christmas stocking. Following the initial excitement of receiving a toy rabbit, the Boy becomes more interested in other toys found among the Christmas paraphernalia. After its first day, the little boy did not play with the rabbit and it sat for a very long time in either the toy cupboard or the nursery floor with other abandoned toys. In the story, the Little Rabbit ponders the question of "what he is" and his relationship with the boy who owns him. The skin horse told him that "toys like them can become real as little children adore them. He also emphasised that being 'real' is not a natural state. "It's a situation that you find yourself in. You become real when you are loved by someone for a long time, not just for playing, but for a genuine relationship". The boy and the rabbit later become inseparable and the Velveteen rabbit made of sawdust and cloth becomes real through love. The little toy rabbit becomes real when the little boy establishes a close-knit connection with him, but other rabbits from the forest, those with hind legs that move independently ridicule him as a fake. When the boy suffers from scarlet fever, the Velveteen rabbit was thrown out to burn and then the nursery fairy transformed it into a real rabbit in every sense. Toys that aren't real, toys that can become real through love, and objects in the world with the capacity to move and act on their own resemble the levels of reality discussed by Plato in *The Republic*.

In the *Velveteen Rabbit*, themes of death and revival are explored, and the images described resemble those of the near-death experience. It is worth paying particular attention to the theoretical implications of *The Velveteen Rabbit*, that includes attempts by some critics to substitute psychoanalysis for narrative analysis. According to this perspective, ideas about death that entail personal survival cannot be better understood when they are analysed using psychoanalytic defence theories. As a result of its refusal to acknowledge "the finality of death", the *Velveteen Rabbit* gained a lot of psychoanalysis attention. The rabbit's death scene does not result in the death of the rabbit. Steven Daniels (1990) points out that the rabbit's death represents a phoney view of death, prompting him to study the psychodynamics of defence, motive, and symbol. It is a critical narrative device for the way it supports more important themes, at least for young readers, because renewal and survival are themes that help readers cope with death. Across disciplines, these broader themes reflect the mutual interdependence of relationships, as well as the triumph of love against change and transformation in life, particularly as viewed from a personal perspective (Ekram).



In the story of the Velveteen Rabbit, the toy rabbit is under the disillusionment of what is real. Initially, he felt alienated when the child ignores him and he is in a relentless pursuit of a quest for identity formation and belonging. The story is placed in a socio-cultural context where the author introduces a rabbit land of talking wild rabbits and a mechanical world of toys with movable parts. The transition from handmade toys to mechanical toys symbolize the movement of an agrarian society to a mechanical and industrialized world. As the story unfolds, the rabbit is discriminated against by all of the "mechanical toys" and is befriended by the old and wise Skin Horse, who acts as a mentor and explains reality to the rabbit in the very confusing nursery environment. The story also mocks the idea of the finality of death and approaches a non-materialistic view of death. The Velveteen rabbit filled with sawdust becomes real to the boy when he loves him too much and later the nursery fairy converts him into a real rabbit in every sense. Death for Velveteen rabbit acts as a renewal or a new life. In the same way, people during that period were not able to comprehend reality due to the disillusionment that arises due to the war. They also experienced alienation and identity quest and a sense of belonging was possible only through the love of dear ones. People of that age are often left alone in the same circumstances that the rabbit finds himself in. They are made to feel inadequate and inhumane, or as if they aren't quite real or like everyone else. In an era of world war, being real is a disillusionment and the process of survival becomes tedious.

There are several themes in *Velveteen Rabbit*, such as becoming oneself, developing positive human relationships, and dealing with a dynamically changing world. As the rabbit tries to become "real", becoming of oneself is a major theme in the book. The rabbit deals with one of the most pervasive conflicts within the self; namely, the philosophical question of what is real, good, true, and beautiful. Thus, rather than being a simple children's story Margery Williams' *Velveteen rabbit* evolves to be a 'coming of age' story of the toy world where modern themes of death, loss, renewal and identity quest are explored. *Velveteen Rabbit* has been described as an allegory about human love and childhood. Just like other modern texts, this simple children's story also questions the notion of permanent reality, rejects the centrality of human subject and provides multiple perspectives on the concepts like death and 'real'.

The popular English author Hugh Lofting's Doctor Dolittle series which started with *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* (1920) continued with *Voyages of Doctor Dolittle* (1922). A more sophisticated illustration style is used to complement the writing style in this 1922 book. In comparison to its predecessor, the novel is nearly five times longer and divided into six sections. A Newbery Medal was awarded for this book in 1923. Doctor John Dolittle, the central character is a physician who shuns human patients in favour of animals, with whom he can speak in their languages. He later becomes a naturalist, using his abilities to speak with animals to better understand nature and the history of the world. One of the reasons for considering Lofting's work as 'modern' is a biographical one. He had been a part of World War I and had witnessed its terrors and experienced the global trauma which had transformed his sensibilities, and this carnage of World War functioned as an inspiration for his work. Doctor Dolittle may appear to be just another goofy children's book character meant to teach children good manners, but he was inspired by tragedy. According to biographer Gary Schmidt, Lofting created the character while serving in the trenches of Flanders during World War I. His children asked him to write them letters and draw them pictures from the frontiers, but he felt that the atrocities of trench warfare were too much for them to fathom. But there was something he could talk



about that would not only entertain him but would also be therapeutic for him: animal treatment.

Animals were utilised in World War. Their fate, however, was very different from that of human beings. Whatever the severity of a soldier's injury, his life was not lost; all of the resources of a war-time operation were brought to his help. But an injured animal like a horse is devoid of any medical help and is left out to die. If we made the animals face the same risks as we did, did we not treat them with the same care when they were injured? But knowing horse language is required to construct a horse surgery like that of our Casualty Clearing Stations. That was the seed of the idea: an eccentric rural physician with a penchant for natural history and a deep affection for animals, who eventually decides to abandon his human profession in favour of the more difficult, more sincere, and, to him, more appealing animal world therapy.

In the stories, Doctor John Dolittle lives in the fictional village of Puddleby-on-the-Marsh in the West Country of England during early Victorian times. Even though the story is set in Victorian times Doctor Dolittle is a man of modern sensibilities. His relentless sea voyages symbolizes the restlessness of the modern world. The Cats'-Meat Man, Matthew Mugg, and Tommy Stubbins are some of Doctor Dolittle's close friends. His animal acquaintance includes a parrot named Polynesia, the pig Gub-Gub, the watchdog Jip, a duck named Dab-Dab, the monkey Chee-Chee, an owl named Too-Too and, the white mouse Pushmi-pullyu, later named as "Whitey". After gaining the doctor's support, Whitey founds (with the doctor's help) the Rat and Mouse Club, whose membership eventually numbers 5,000 rats and mice.

All the books written on Dolittle have a concern for life and living creatures, particularly animals. A doctor with a passion for health and life, Dr. Dolittle is concerned for the welfare of his patients. In addition to treating animals, he is also kind to people and rescues many of them during his adventures. Dolittle treats Tommy as a friend, as opposed to the Colonel, who treats him as an inferior from the working class. Dolittle enjoys the company of Tommy and takes immense pleasure in meeting Tommy's parents. To save the hermit Luke, Dolittle translates the dog language at Luke's trial so that he does not have to go to jail. As part of his effort to free the natives incarcerated on Spider monkey Island, Dolittle recruits Jabrizi to help him free the Long Arrow and his colleagues. *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle* thus becomes a tale of anti-war and pro-animal rights which also touches upon the diverse aspects of colonialism and racism.

Especially at that time, Dr Dolittle was quite radical in his animal rights views. The character was an opponent of fox hunting, which was then a popular sport in England, among many other things. Allyson N. May points to a scene in Doctor Dolittle's Circus (which was made into a 1967 film) in which Dolittle chides a fox hunting advocate for his backward thinking. Even though Lofting's work advocated for innovative views on animal rights, it was backward on race issues. Both the language and the drawings in the original Doctor Dolittle books are filled with racist tropes and colonialism.

There's a plot in Doctor Dolittle about a black prince who asks Dolittle to turn him white. During the height of British Imperialism, Lofting travelled over the world working on railways, which some researchers believe contributed to this part of his work. He could not efface his identification with the white Englishmen who promote civilization and consider it a burden. Thus, it becomes imperative that Lofting too adhered to Kipling's



concept of White Man's Burden. Doctor Dolittle, is the personification of the Great White Father bearing the White Man's Burden, and his creator Lofting was a white racist and chauvinist, guilty of almost every prejudice known to modern white Western man, especially to an Englishman growing up in the last years of the Victorian era, when the British Empire was at its pinnacle.

Lofting was known for his pacifist and anti-war views in addition to his focus on animal rights. The injury Lofting endured during World War I compelled him to become an internationalist to avoid the nationalism and militarism that led to the war. Throughout *The Voyage of Doctor Dolittle*, some scenes depict the cruelty of war and depict themes of pacifism. As a result, we can deduce that Lofting's opinions ran counter to Victorian values. While Dr Dolittle's persona was situated in Victorian England, Lofting developed him after World War I, putting him in the Edwardian era. His ideas were ground-breaking at the time, but they also reflected a rising sense of disillusionment disenfranchisement among Europeans following World War I. The various themes like alienation and identity quest are also visible in this narrative. The character Dolittle is more drawn towards the animal kingdom and people mocks and ridicules him by calling Do-little as his activities do not make any sense to the societal norms in an anthropocentric world.

The modern literature intertwines the events in the contemporary period with different allusions, legends and myths and this phenomenon is clearly visible in texts like *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*. Lofting, like Eliot and Joyce, connects current events to myths and stories from the past. Lofting traces the imbalance of power between animals and humans back to the Biblical flood myth in *Doctor Dolittle and the Secret Lake* (1948), just as Eliot alludes to ancient fertility myths and the Christian Grail legend and Joyce creates elaborate correspondences between his modern-day Dubliners and ancient Greek gods and heroes. Lofting, like Eliot and Joyce, has a contemporary ambivalence towards the past. Peter Glassman has prepared a great afterword that includes a brief biography of Lofting, a summary of the Doctor Dolittle stories, and a wonderful remark from Lofting "If we make children see that all races, given equal physical and mental chances for development, have about the same batting averages of good and bad, we shall have laid another very substantial foundation stone in the edifice of peace and internationalism" (Bedtime book review). Lofting also incorporates diverse techniques like blended imagery, nonlinear narratives and absurdism and questions the idea of relativity of truth through diverse animal voices.

Modern Literature considered individuals more fascinating than the society. In the *Voyages of Doctor Dolittle*, the main protagonist is the son of a cobbler named Tommy Stubbins. He becomes an apprentice to Doctor Dolittle and exhibits his immense liking towards natural history and adventures. The characterization is also daring as he creates a universe of talking animals with a personality of their own, a doctor who is interested in animals and birds more than humans and a protagonist hailing from a working-class background who is constantly adapting and learning from a dynamic world. He also exhibits his indifference and detest towards war by calling it as a "messy stupid business" (Hartmann) which involves making speeches and talking about rights. Some of the most common themes found in 1922 literature are alienation, identity, a quest for belonging, death and renewal, existentialism and disillusionment. These themes are foregrounded in the 1922 masterpieces like *Ulysses*, "Wasteland" and *Jacob's Room*. In a similar manner Children's literature too experiment with various themes and modern stylistic elements.



Thus, we can say that looking at children's literature only through the lens of the genre is a fallacy. Children's literature published in 1922 like Margery Williams' *Velveteen Rabbit* and Hugh Lofting's *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle* are intricately linked to the socio-historical and political contexts and the destructive aspects of World War I. Williams offers a non-materialistic idea of death and ponders the question of the 'Real' whereas Lofting advocates animal rights and mirrors the horrors of war and criticizes a society that goes to war.

### Works Cited

- "Children's Literature." *Children's Literature - Early History, Fairy and Folk Tales, Victorian Children's Literature, Contemporary Children's Literature - Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society*, [www.faqs.org/childhood/Ch-Co/Children-s-Literature.html](http://www.faqs.org/childhood/Ch-Co/Children-s-Literature.html).
- Ekram, Disha Tananze. "The Velveteen Rabbit" - on LOVE, Loss and Life." *The Daily Star*, 24 May 2021, [www.thedailystar.net/lifestyle/news/the-velveteen-rabbit-love-loss-and-life-2098433](http://www.thedailystar.net/lifestyle/news/the-velveteen-rabbit-love-loss-and-life-2098433).
- Elderkin, Beth. "The Anti-War, pro-Animal Rights, Colonialist History of Doctor Dolittle's Creation." *Gizmodo*, 14 Jan. 2020, [gizmodo.com/the-anti-war-pro-animal-rights-colonialist-history-of-1840930670](http://gizmodo.com/the-anti-war-pro-animal-rights-colonialist-history-of-1840930670).
- Hartmann, Tory. "Doctor Dolittle & World War I by Colleen Adair Fleidner." EIN Presswire, EIN Presswire, 2 Feb. 2020, [www.einpresswire.com/article/508675407/doctor-dolittle-world-war-i-by-colleen-adair-fleidner](http://www.einpresswire.com/article/508675407/doctor-dolittle-world-war-i-by-colleen-adair-fleidner).
- Kellehear, Allan. "Death and Renewal in The Velveteen Rabbit: A Sociological Reading." *Journal of near-Death Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1993, pp. 35–50.
- "The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle Themes & Characters." *BookRags*, [www.bookrags.com/shortguide-voyages-doctor-dolittle/themesandcharacters.html#gsc.tab=0](http://www.bookrags.com/shortguide-voyages-doctor-dolittle/themesandcharacters.html#gsc.tab=0).
- "The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle." *Bedtime Book Review*, [www.bedtimebookreview.com/reviews-by-jill-golla/the-voyages-of-doctor-dolittle](http://www.bedtimebookreview.com/reviews-by-jill-golla/the-voyages-of-doctor-dolittle).
- Westman, Karin E. "Children's Literature and Modernism: The Space Between." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2007, pp. 283–286, doi:10.1353/chq.2007.0055.



