

Maria Edgeworth : A Pioneer of Realist Juvenile Short Fiction

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Abstract—Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849) was a prolific Anglo-Irish writer of child and adult literature. In fact, she was a pioneer of the realist juvenile literature and a significant figure in the evolution of the novel in Europe. In spite of her remarkable and valuable contribution in children's short fiction, she was one of the most neglected of women writers in English. The fiction she wrote herself for and about children, was very best of its own kind, but stayed in print for more than a century. Her sparkling comedies of high life English manners influenced Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott.

Writing about children is much more creative and interesting than writing about adults. Children provide a great deal of matter by creating their own world of fantasy and imagination. That's why much attention has been given to children's literature as an area of study. But there is still a lack of fresh researches on writers who died unwept unhonoured and unsung as Maria Edgeworth. This study can fill such gaps and will also appeal to the growing numbers of scholars and students working in children's literature.

Keywords—Maria Edgeworth, Short Fiction, Juvenile

I. INTRODUCTION

THE writers of juvenile short fiction in nineteenth century were Maria Edgeworth [1767-1849]; Mrs Sherwood [1775-1851]; Samuel Goldrich [1793-1860] and Nathaniel Hawthorne [1804-1864]. An Anglo- Irish novelist Maria Edgeworth's literary instincts were encouraged by her father Richard Lovell who was a deeply committed moralist and is still considered a notable figure in the history of education in England and Ireland. Her first works were children's tales, usually short and always with a clear and forcefully advanced didactic thesis. Her first publication was a plea for female education, *Letters to Literary Ladies* [1795] and in 1796 appeared the collection of stories known as the *Parent's Assistant*. The stories had been submitted as they were written to the juvenile critics of Edgeworth's nursery. Therefore they were children's stories for children.

In fact, the credit of inaugurating juvenile fiction goes to Maria Edgeworth who "had the capacity to enter the child's mind." [Baker, the History of Eng. Novel, vol. IV, [208]. Her father Richard Lovell had made her a thorough moralist so that her didacticism adversely affected her art. Her novels and tales, whether written for children or adults, are saturated with morality.

In this context Baker has asserted: "Novels deal with the actual world, which ordinary men and women know only too well; and it is a highly complex world.... The child, we know, is the father of man; Maria Edgeworth made too much of that truth, not when she tried to prepare young people for the ordeal of life, but when she essayed to educate their elders by the same elementary means." [Baker, 27].

Maria Edgeworth was able to understand children ever since her own childhood and came to learn their psychology because she had to look after many brothers and sisters in her own household. Her interest in childhood inclined her to sensibility enabled her to absorb in her joys and tragedies of childhood. Her interest in childhood inclined her to write tales for children who definitely brought her credit in spite of their pre-occupation with morality. It is interesting to go through the titles of her tales which are manifestly didactic—"Forgive and Forget"; *Waste not Want not*," "Simple Susan" and so on. If she has praised hard work in some, she has denounced laziness and idleness in others. In order to extol what she liked and to cry down what she did not like. Maria used the traditional method of contrast. She has tried to illustrate the virtues of goodness of industry by contrasting them with the evil of idleness and modesty and integrity with pride and arrogance. She was particularly careful about the child's ethical values, for "children are the most moralistic creatures alive and sternly insist on poetic justice" [Baker, 25].

Her capacity to enter the child's mind fairly enabled her to convince her child readers with certainty and efficiency. Her craftsmanship went a long way in making her child fiction a series of genuine classics by making it very touching. Her fiction seeks to bring out powerfully for her child readers eliminated the abnormal, the complicated, and the obscure:

The world depicted was perfectly credible to those who had not much experience of the problem of evil, it was an unravaged Eden, an Arcadia that was simple how things ought to and might easily be. It was a beautiful intelligent world, everything was admirable regulated. A child accepted it with unquestioning faith [Baker, 26].

The themes of many of Edgeworth's short fiction are an instance of her extensive outlook for children and adults. They display her wit, her empathetic representation of juvenile thoughts and actions, her interest in promoting debate and her gift for realistic characterization. She wrote a number of overtly didactic story for children, probably the most famous of which is the *Purple Jar*. The story revolves around seven years old girl, Rosamund, who needs new pair

of shoes but is attracted to a purple jar which she sees, displayed in a shop window. It is quite interesting when her mother gives her the choice of spending her money on shoes or the jar. Her final word- "however I am sure, no, not quite sure but I hope I shall be wiser another time". [The Purple Jar and other Tales, 19] Ultimately she chooses the purple jar. But it was utter disappointing when the girl comes to know that it was not purple but filled with dark liquid. It was more shocking when her father refused to take her out in public because she has no good shoes.

Edgeworth's another story The Good Aunt highlights the thoughts and actions of three boys at public school. The quite nurturing presence of the titular good aunt' is crucial Tale is about judicious system of early education, the rights and wrongs of private and public education. Edge worth explored her intellectual roots as well as childhood experiences in this fable.

Slavery and abolition is the theme of The Grateful Negro. The story raises the questions about the legitimacy of forced child labour and their treatment as property. The story ends with a hidden warning regarding the results of thoughtless and irrational negligence and exploitation in the form of Jefferies family's ruin and their death.

Parent's Assistant and early lessons are her earliest stories for young readers. In these stories child heroes begin to think for themselves and to achieve logical self command. They also try to solve their own problems in the direction of independence. Simple Susan is a popular story from The Parent's Assistant. In this tale Susan Price, the honest, loving, hardworking twelve years old daughter of Mr. Farmer Price. She is quite different from Barbara Case, the selfish, vain, indolent daughter of Mr. Attorney Case. These two girls are the mirror images of their parents. In the course of time, Barbara takes many aggressive actions against Susan because her father was indebted money from Barbara's father.

Lazy Lawrence is another story from The Parents Assistant. The strong revolves around a boy named Jem, a hero who lives in the village of Ashton. The story teaches the children to be caring, hardworking and preserving in their daily endeavours. Jem lived with his widow mother Preston who was well even in her old age. She was neat and happily humoured. Jem did not only care for his mother when she was ill, but also he took care of his farm house which was the major source of his family livelihood.

Edgeworth wrote moral tales for children and adults both and these tales are directly connected to her commitment to enlightenment. She created child character who learn from their own mistakes rather than from the direct instructions from the responsible person like parents, guardian or teacher. These children naturally become aware of what is right or wrong. She saw interaction with a child as an opportunity for instruction. She used a common technique throughout the juvenile stories- the use of contrasting characters to reveal the moral lesson.

Edgeworth was of the opinion that Greek Myths, fairy tales and romances were too violent and belonged to the past. She fashioned the stories of real that boys and girls instead of

giant and fairies. She found that the science and practical matters along with the building of character were more suitable subject for youthful reading. Children should read the fiction that is related to truth. It must have moral and instinctive content, virtues to be explored included honesty and obedience to adult. There should be reward for proper behaviour but they must be conscious for punishment and take the responsibility of its own. Her child characters reveal themselves in the most natural and possible way. The short fiction she wrote herself for and about children, was very best of its own kind. It may be concluded that the tales written by her are the beginning of child fiction. In fact she can be considered as a pioneer of the realist juvenile short fiction and a significant figure in the evolution of the novel in Europe.

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