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Time-travel and Mystical Magic in Edith Nesbit's Later Fantasies

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"There is a curtain, thin as gossamer, clear as glass, strong as iron, that hangs for ever between the world of magic and the world that seems to us to be real. And when once people have found one of the little weak spots in that curtain which are marked by magic rings, and amulets, and the like, almost anything may happen" (Edith Nesbit, *The Enchanted Castle*)



Portrait of Edith Nesbit, from Julia Briggs, *Edith Nesbit: A Woman of Passion*, Tempus, Gloucestershire, 2006.

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Introduction

The aim of this dissertation is to prove that Edith Nesbit's crucially contributed to the development of Victorian children's fantasy, through her time-travel stories and magic novels.

The first chapter analyses the most significant features of the fantasy genre and its centrality in children's literature, introducing the figure of Edith Nesbit as one of the most innovative writers in the background of "modern" fantasy, and focusing on the impact her life had on her literary production.

Some critics, like R. Jackson and C. Manlove, describe fantasy as a genre which does not have to undergo the restrictions of literary conventions, which often rejects the rules of "time-space" and which uses magic as a crucial element in order to free children's imagination.

The origins of fantasy date back to myth and folklore and until the eighteenth century critical terms still had to be created to distinguish between fantasy stories and folk and fairy tales. In the critical contribution of V. Propp, who analysed the structure of folk tales in his *Morphology of the Folktale*¹, the fantasy genre could be regarded as an independent literary category with peculiar traits, although it showed some similar features to other genres (to the chivalry romance or to the Gothic, for instance).

Through the centuries, the idea of "childhood" deeply changed: the "classic" notion of the child as a passive human being who depends on his/her parents' authority was replaced by the "more modern" idea that a child was a distinct being with his/her thoughts and feelings. Because of the evolution of the concepts of childhood and imagination due to the cultural and social transformation brought by Romanticism and by the Industrial Revolution, the fantasy genre underwent crucial changes.

As a consequence, Victorian fantasy writers looked for a new language which could satisfy the need to address a different reading audience, and writers like C. Kingsley, G. MacDonald and L. Carroll prepared the ground for modern fantasy; however, it is Nesbit who is widely considered the modern creator of this genre between the Victorian and the Edwardian age.

¹ Propp's study of the narrative structure of folk tales is mentioned in section 1.1.3.

Born in 1858, since she was a child Edith Nesbit showed a great talent for writing, which increasingly grew in the years of her marriage to the socialist Hubert Bland and of her entrance into the Fabian Society. Besides, she revealed her great ability to move between different literary genres, by writing poems and ghost stories as well as realistic novels and time-travel fantasies, which enabled her to gain a great popularity among the most celebrated twentieth-century fantasy writers.

Chapter two and three of this thesis are devoted to Nesbit's time-travel fantasies and her later magic novels.

The second chapter opens with some considerations about how the concept of "time" changed in the twentieth century, in order to better contextualise the contribution Nesbit gave to time-travel fantasy with the novels herein analysed. The birth of new sciences (like paleontology in the nineteenth century for instance), the development of new scientific theories (such as Charles Darwin's theory of evolution) and the improvements in trade and communication, put the previous worldview in a difficult position; it was indeed based on the Newtonian physics and underwent important changes relating to the notion of "time" and "space". Philosophers and scientists like Henry Bergson and Albert Einstein analysed "time" from a different point of view: the former distinguished the time of consciousness from the time of science, whereas the latter recognized the validity of "time" only as a subjective perception.

Whereas in some novels primary time stands still while the characters visit ancient ages and magic worlds, in other time-travel fantasies time passes and adults notice the disappearance of the children while they are in a secondary world (as in J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, for example).

After a brief hint to the history of time-travel in literature with a reference to Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, as the first most important novel regarding time-travelling, Chapter Two explores H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), highlighting the influence the writer had on Edith Nesbit's writing, although his novel may be considered to belong to the science fiction genre (besides being both members of the Fabian Society, Wells and Nesbit were close friends).

In his novel, Wells tells us the story of the Time Traveller, a man who travels into the future by means of a time machine he himself has built. The novel is extremely symbolic, as it enables the writer to express his social criticism about Victorian age and his attitude towards progress: the two social classes into which human beings have evolved in this

distant future are the result of the destruction and the involution to which communism and capitalism have contributed.

In spite of the inspiration Nesbit drew from Wells's science fiction in writing her Arden books, many significant differences regarding time-travel in adult literature and in children's literature can be noticed. Unlike in adult literature, where the journeys of an adult traveller generally occur into the future and they are scientifically explained as they are taken by means of a time machine, in children's literature a child (or a group of children, as in Nesbit's Psammead Trilogy) travels into ancient ages and it is only magic which allows time-travelling to happen.

The last part of Chapter Two analyses Nesbit's time-travel fantasies: *The Story of the Amulet* (1906), *The House of Arden* (1908) and *Harding's Luck* (1909).

The Story of the Amulet belongs to Nesbit's Psammead Trilogy (the other two novels are *Five Children and It*, published in 1902, and *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, in 1904) and tells the story of four brothers who, thanks to a magical half amulet (bought in the same shop where they met for the second time the Psammead, the sand fairy that had fulfilled their wishes in *Five Children and It*), visit different historical ages (such as Ancient Egypt in the year 6000 B.C., Ancient Babylon, Atlantis and Britain of 55 B.C), in order to find the missing half of the amulet and reunite their family. Besides showing Nesbit's harsh social criticism towards her society and inducing the reader to long for a socialist utopia (Wells's *The Modern Utopia* certainly inspired Nesbit), in this novel, just as in the following Arden books, time-travel achieves a further didactic function: during their visits into the past the children, who magically do not have problems in communicating with people of different historical ages (unlike in Wells's *The Time Machine*, where at the beginning the Time Traveller does not understand the language of the Eloi), learn something new and reach a personal growth.

Compared to *The Story of the Amulet*, Nesbit's later time-travel fantasies *The House of Arden* and its sequel *Harding's Luck* are more complex in the treatment of time-travel.

At the centre of *The House of Arden* there are Edred and Elfrida Arden, two brothers who have to find a secret treasure in order to restore their ancient family's mansion. By changing clothes found in some chests and by passing through *the* door, they travel in time led by the white mole Mouldiwarp, only to finally realise that the material treasure they are looking for is actually their father's return home (he was thought to be lost in South America). The two children's psychological development occurs thanks to the help of their cousin Richard, who is the protagonist of the sequel *Harding's Luck*. In this novel Nesbit

tells the story of Dickie, a poor and lame Edwardian boy who one day awakes in the Jacobean age and turns out to be Edred and Elfrida's rich cousin; Dickie/Richard lives a double reality travelling from a century to another thanks to the magic sprung by magical moonflowers. Unlike in *The Story of the Amulet*, every children's journey in time in the Arden books takes place in a different age of English history (during Queen Anne's reign, for instance, or in 1535, when Henry VIII was the king). To a detailed description of the different historical periods Nesbit prefers the focusing on the impact that the children's visits in time have on their personal development.

Once again, like in *The Story of the Amulet*, the writer shows her disapproval of Edwardian society, by highlighting the contrast between the lives Dickie leads in the two different historical periods (the welfare of Jacobean age contrasts with the ugliness of Edwardian age) and by introducing Dickie's disability as a metaphor of Edwardian social evils (indeed, Dickie is not lame when he lives in the sixteenth century).

Even more than in Nesbit's time-travel fantasies, the importance of magic and the power of imagination is predominant in her later magic novels, *The Enchanted Castle* and *The Magic City*, which are analysed in the last chapter of this dissertation.

In fantasy novels, visits in time are usually possible by means of magic, which follows some important "narrative laws". In her *The Magic Code. The Use of Magical Patterns in Fantasy for Children*, M. Nikolajeva explores how magic works in children's fantasy. In order to be transported into a secondary world the character needs a magic object (a ring, an amulet or a carpet, for example) or he/she needs to pass through a magic threshold, which can be a door (like the one Edred and Elfrida have to find in *The House of Arden*) or, for instance, a wardrobe (as in Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*); broadly speaking, even the device of the dream can be regarded as a magic portal and it is often used in Nesbit's time-travel novels.

As M. Nikolajeva observes, in order to allow a character to move from the primary world to the secondary one, the writer often has to introduce the "fantaseme"² of the messenger, which can be represented by a talking animal (like the Phoenix in *The Phoenix and the Carpet*), or a creature coming from an alternative world. Thanks to the combination of these devices (the magic objects, the magic passages and the messenger), magic can occur and enable the characters to travel in time and to have their wishes fulfilled.

² M. Nikolajeva's definition of the word "fantaseme" is given in section 3.1.

In comparison to Nesbit's previous works, in her later magic novels *The Enchanted Castle* and *The Magic City* magic has a more complex function: it allows us to explore a mystical and supernatural world, so as to think over our existence and our abilities as human beings to improve ourselves and the society we live in. In these novels Nesbit no longer uses the episodic structure of the Psammead Trilogy and prefers a more complicated philosophical structure and more profound themes: both works praise the power of imagination and creative activities (like reading and building), as vehicles which lead towards human civilization.

Published in 1907, *The Enchanted Castle* tells the story of three brothers who discover an enchanted castle and a sleeping princess, who later turns out to be the castle's housekeeper's niece. Thanks to the magical power of a ring, the children experience magical situations: the person who wears it can become invisible or twelve-feet high or a heap of rags and some cold marble statues come to life at moonlight. Although even in this work Nesbit does not lose the opportunity to express social criticism (the sinister Ugly-Wuglies, whose presence reminds us of Nesbit's passion for the macabre, stand for the emptiness of bourgeoisie), at the core of *The Enchanted Castle* stands the writer's platonic³ vision, which culminates in the last mystical scene, when the owner of the castle and his beloved get married.

The Magic City was published in 1910 and by Nesbit's own admission it was not very successful. It tells the story of Philip, a ten-year-old boy who is momentarily abandoned by his sister Helen, who leaves for her honeymoon with her husband Peter. Therefore, Philip is sent to stay in Peter's house, where he gets acquainted with Lucy, Peter's disagreeable daughter. In order to escape from the servant's hostility (the nurse turns out to be Philip's antagonist at the end of the novel), Philip builds a city with the toys he finds in Lucy's nursery: it is a magic city, because at night it becomes real and Philip can enter it. In the city, Philip has to perform seven deeds (two of them are accomplished with Lucy, who joins him there), in order to free the city from invaders and, symbolically, to bring his process of growth to a conclusion. The city is a magic space where Philip can find shelter from real life (he is jealous of his sister and her departure has disappointed him); however, it can be regarded as the utopian city, which satisfies the citizens' needs (once again, Wells's influence on Nesbit's social criticism can be noticed).

³ Prickett's approach about the influence that Plato and the Bible had on Nesbit's novels is mentioned in section 3.2.1.

The novel, which closes with the reunion of Philip's family, shows Nesbit's moral message: Philip has learnt to love Lucy and the family can now live in harmony, the same harmony to which every human being should tend to in social life.

1. Nesbit's Fantasy: an introduction

1.1. Fantasy: Definition and Main Features

1.1.1. For a Definition of "Fantasy"

If we examine the etymology of the word "fantasy" we discover it derives from the Greek φαντασία, what is meaning visible, visionary, and unreal. It would appear therefore that all literary works are related to fantasy, but this way of thinking is clearly wrong and very reductive. Many critics attribute the term "fantasy" to literature which does not lay stress on realistic representation: myths, fairy tales, horror stories and so on.

The term "fantasy" is hard to define precisely because it is generally applied to different categories that may not have much in common. When we talk about fantasy we often refer to comics, horror, films set in magic landscapes, but the genre of fantasy is much more than this.

The Oxford Dictionary defines fantasy as a "genre of imaginative fiction involving magic and adventure, especially in a setting other than the real world". If we rely on this definition, it seems evident that fantasy and realism are opposite literary categories; in fact, as well described by Richard Mathews in *Fantasy: the Liberation of Imagination*, fantasy arises from the juxtaposition with the literature of realism, even if it uses "the novel – the most ambitious and popular vehicle for realism – as its primary literary vehicle"⁴.

Literary fantasy is successful in its attempt to free itself from the conventions of realistic texts: it sometimes rejects the rules of "time-space-character", leaving out chronology, three-dimensionality and the distinction between animate and inanimate objects. For this reason, Rosemary Jackson describes fantasy as "the literature of subversion"⁵, because it is not subject to conventions and it creates special effects on the audience.

⁴ MATHEWS, Richard, *Fantasy. The Liberation of Imagination*, Routledge, New York and London, 2002, pp. 2-3.

⁵ MANLOVE, Colin, *The Fantasy Literature of England*, Macmillan Press, Basingstoke, 1999, p. 142.

As is clearly described by Colin Manlove in *The Fantasy Literature of England*, fantasy helps us in filling the needs that other realistic genres are not able to satisfy. When a reader faces stories that talk about flying carpets, fairies that fulfill children's desires or time-travels, he/she is reading about things not belonging to his/her experience; the genre of fantasy breaks the limits of what we call "possible", sometimes involving the "supernatural", which through forms of magic plays different functions, depending on the genres of fantasy. In ghost stories, for instance, the "supernatural" terrifies, in metaphysical fantasy it awes, in comic fantasy, on the contrary, it amuses.

Fantasy is clearly a central category for children's literature and from a certain point of view it can be argued that all children's literature is a fantasy: in fact, as an author can describe a fantastic world which he cannot experience (as for example the world of Neverland or Narnia), so adult writing about childhood is facing a world to which the author does not belong anymore. Even in writing the most realistic children's story that ever existed, an author uses his fantasy to define a condition he is not in any longer: childhood. It is described as the era of the imagination, fantasy and dream: children are considered to be more imaginative than adults because they are free from the conventions of reality and get more frequently involved in fantasy⁶.

From what has already been said we could erroneously think that fantasy is an easily comprehensible and simple genre; it would be wrong to consider fantasy and children's literature in a simplistic way only because it deals with children and childhood. It is better not to forget that these two notions raise two major issues. Firstly, children's literature concerns the concept of child and the field of childhood, but it is written and bought by adults. Secondly, what children are, think or feel, changes under historical and cultural settings. The idea of what a child is can change depending on time, place, social class and this can raise different issues about morality, politics or gender⁷.

It is true that the notion of "child" has changed throughout centuries. Prior to Romanticism, children were considered as miniature adults and consequently the literature dedicated to them was instructive but not so amusing. From the nineteenth century on, the child began to exist as a distinct entity, as a being with its thoughts, its feelings and its existence.

⁶ WHITE, Barbara and SULLIVAN, Ceri, *Writing and Fantasy*, Longman, London and New York, 1999, p. 197.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 198.

1.1.2. Fantasy vs. Fantastic

The psychological approach proves to be the most useful in analysing fantasy, because the categories of space, time and character are considered both by fantasy and by psychoanalysis. Consequently, we can not help but mentioning the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, and his theory about the unconscious in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

As has been frequently stated, the dimension which the genre named “fantasy” makes reference to, in order to enable us to free our psyche from realistic restrictions, is dream. Colin Manlove writes:

The most frequent form that subversive fantasy takes in the Romantic and mid-Victorian periods is that of the dream. The structure is loose, often fragmentary, sometimes unfinished; there are strange transitions and transformations, magic-seeming events and characters. [...] The use of dream structures also more generally reflects a growing contemporary interest in the powers of the unconscious mind⁸.

It is well known that while for the Romantics the analysis of dreams led to understand how a released imagination could be powerful, the Victorians recognized the importance of dreams as ways of releasing repressed psychic and sexual forces.

In *Die Traumdeutung*, Sigmund Freud points out that dreams are fundamentally a form of wish-fulfillment. In his approach to the interpretation of dreams, he asserts that in a modern and civilized society primitive desires must be repressed and the only way to release them is during dream sleep. While we are sleeping our subconscious mind is free to express its most hidden desires, since the conscious level does not operate in that moment.

It is in his essay *Das Unheimliche*, published for the first time in 1919 but written some years earlier, that Freud explains the concept of fantastic through the theory of the so-called “uncanny”. According to his analysis, the reader is disturbed but also attracted by the return of the repressed (with the term “repressed” Freud means what is familiar but which has been separated from consciousness and relegated to the unconscious). What we

⁸ MANLOVE, pp. 145-146.

fear and desire, returns in the form of fantastic characters and adventures, arousing disorientation and perturbation in the reader⁹.

Freud asserts that, in order to understand his theory in connection to fantasy, it is necessary to explain the two different levels of meaning of “das Unheimlich”. On a first level, by this word we mean what is unfamiliar, strange and extra-ordinary; “das Heimlich”, on the other hand, is a term we identify with the concept of intimate and friendly. But “das Heimlich” also means “that which is concealed from others: all that is hidden, secreted, obscured”¹⁰; on the contrary, the uncanny reveals “what is hidden and, by doing so, effects a disturbing transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar. Fantastic literature transforms the ‘real’ through this kind of dis-covery”¹¹.

As far as literature is concerned, the main contribution to a critical study of fantasy has been given by the theorist Tzvetan Todorov¹². In his *Introduction à la Littérature Fantastique*, he wonders what fantastic fiction is and provides the following definition:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know [...] there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us [...].

The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty [...]. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event¹³.

⁹ *The Uncanny* is an essay by Freud, which opens with a definition of the term “uncanny” and analyses in particular the effects it has in literature and fiction. With regard to this, the essay offers a deep analysis of Hoffmann’s works (considered by Freud an “unrivalled master of the uncanny in literature”). Even before Freud’s approach, E. T. A. Hoffmann had written the gothic-tale *The Sandman* (1815), a classic example of the theory of the uncanny. About this work, one hundred years later, the Italian writer Italo Calvino will assert: “The discovery of the unconscious is here in the great romantic literature, almost a hundred years before it is given a theoretical definition”.

¹⁰ JACKSON, Rosemary, *Fantasy. The Literature of Subversion*, Routledge, London and New York, 1981, p. 65.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

¹² Tzvetan Todorov is a Franco-Bulgarian critic who has been very important in literary theory about fantastic. In his book, translated in English as *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973), Todorov defines the Fantastic, distinguishing between the fantastic uncanny and the fantastic marvelous. The analysis of these different categories helps the reader to more easily understand how fantasy can be delineated.

¹³ TODOROV, Tzvetan, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, tr. by Richard Howard, London, 1973, p. 25.

According to Todorov, a fantastic text arouses a particular effect on the reader, feelings of fear, anxiety, and suspense, caused by "hesitation". This sense of hesitation takes place when the reader departs from realism, as the reading of fantasy literature inevitably requires. Fantastic gives origin to a psychological mechanism on the reader that brings him to remain suspended between reality and dream, real and supernatural.

Rosemary Jackson defines modern fantasy "a literature of subversion", because texts belonging to this category free the forces of psychic suppression, describing unusual forms of experience through a new language.

In order to clarify what Todorov means for Fantastic, a diagrammatic representation as the following could be very useful. Therefore:

MARVELLOUS	FANTASTIC	STRANGE
Supernatural	Unnatural	Natural

Sharing many of Freud's theory aspects, Todorov starts his study by making a distinction between "marvellous" and "strange". The marvellous "predominates in a climate of belief in supernatural and magic"¹⁴, while the strange "explains all strangeness as generated by unconscious forces" (the reference to Freud is evident)¹⁵; the Fantastic exists between these two categories. Todorov defines the Fantastic as covering events that happen in our world but seem supernatural. At this point it must be decided whether the event is real or imaginary; when the decision is made, we enter into the genres of uncanny and marvellous. While the strange is an effect produced by stories in which events can be explained as the products of the narrator's or protagonist's dream or delusion, the marvelous, on the other hand, assumes no such psychological explanation and strange events are taken to be truly supernatural. This last category is reserved, in Todorov's opinion, to the fairy tale, that allows the presence of supernatural but does not cause perturbation.

In his book Todorov later comments as follows:

The Fantastic requires the fulfillment of three conditions. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural or supernatural

¹⁴ JACKSON, p. 24.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 24-25.

explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations¹⁶.

The Bulgarian theorist uses the category of the marvellous to identify fairy tales, in which the presence of the supernatural does not arouse perturbation; on the contrary, he affirms that the Gothic novel or Edgar Allan Poe's tales, for example, belong to the category of the "fantastic". Therefore, "fantastic" and "fantasy" are words which can not be used without distinction, as fantasy can be generally defined as a narrative form representing situations that depart from what we consider real and existent.

In the genre of fantasy the narrator creates a secondary world to satisfy his need of amusement and produce an alternative reality and creates conditions in which the impossible can happen.

1.1.3. From the Origins of the Fantasy Tradition to Victorian Fantasy

The origins of fantasy are strictly connected to myth and epic of the ancient world, folklore, fairy tale and romance; fantasy seems to draw from all these genres.

Greek and Roman mythologies are full of gods and heroes shaped by the imagination of people, even in relation to their need to justify everything that happened in real life every day; like the characters in fantasy literature, so the ancient hero lives a life full of extraordinary events and unexpected deeds.

A decisive contribution to the fantasy genre was certainly given by folk tales, whose origins are lost in the antiquity of the myth itself.

In his *Morphology of the Folktale*¹⁷ (1928), Propp clarifies the narrative structure of folk tales and identifies thirty-one functions, also known as Propp's Sequences. They are unalterable in the order and create the story. Each function represents a typical situation in

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 33.

¹⁷ It is a treatise in which the author tries to defend the fairy-story as a literary genre. Together with C. S. Lewis, he can be considered the first to establish the existence of an alternative world as the setting of science fiction, fantasy etc.

the course of the plot of a folk tale, referring in particular to characters and to their specific roles. Propp's general scheme of folk tale develops as follows:

- Initial balance (start)
- Breaking of the initial balance (complication or motive)
- Adventures of the hero
- Return to balance (conclusion)¹⁸

Propp analysed a hundred Russian folktales and identified eight categories of character-type: the villain, the dispatcher, the helper, the princess or prize, her father, the donor, the hero and the false hero. For all the differences between fantasy and folk tales, Propp's functions definitely help to build the outline of fantasy stories.

Until the eighteenth century, before Propp's functions showed the outline for most all of the early fantasy stories, authors were not aware that fantasy differed from folk and fairy tales. Certainly fantasy would not be able to develop without the contribution of fairy tale, from which it inherits some elements (as the characters and the presence of magic). Critics now consider them as representing two different narrative genres. Whereas fairy tale arises from popular culture and it shows a strong relationship with myth and oral tradition, fantasy is an eclectic category because it includes characteristics of fairy tale, of chivalry romance, of Gothic, of science fiction, of animal stories.

Secondly, fantasy does not always achieve a "happy ending" and it can require its main character to accomplish more demanding deeds than fairy tale does; the protagonist of the fantasy genre is given the possibility of running across an itinerary of personal growth and to consolidate his identity. At the end of her journey in Wonderland, for example, *Alice* is more aware of her own identity than before and reaches a gradual maturation.

As Grenby observes in his *Children's Literature*, "fantasy is extremely well suited to consideration of questions of identity"¹⁹: the journey to another world or to another time moves the protagonists away from the strictures that bind them to the role they hold within their family and their society. In this way the characters find themselves in a different reality in which they have to discover who they really are. On the contrary, fairy tales do not imply a process of self-discovery and awareness.

¹⁸ Propp's scheme of folk tale reminds us Hegel's dialectic. The German philosopher's dialectic method develops in the triad thesis, antithesis and synthesis and involves the notion that progress is the result of conflicting opposites. The same phases are analysed by Propp as regards the narrative structure of folk tales.

¹⁹ GRENBY, M. O., *Children's Literature*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2008, p. 164.

The notion of time and place too is different if we compare fairy tale and fantasy: the first takes place in an indefinite past (it generally opens with “Once upon a time”), while the protagonist of fantasy finds himself in a secondary world and moves from a realistic setting (for example Oxford in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* or London in *Peter Pan*) to a magic one (Wonderland and Neverland)²⁰.

According to Mathews' approach, the first example of what we would now call fantasy is *The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor*, a magical tale from Egypt recorded on papyrus dated about 2000 B.C. It narrates the story of a man shipwrecked on a phantom island, where he meets a genie-snake. At the end he will escape and the island will disappear. This tale contains elements which allow us to consider it as fantasy: the presence of a hero, an encounter on an enchanted island, confrontations with monsters. It can certainly be asserted that it represents a precursor of *The Arabian Nights* and of *The Odyssey*, two of the four greatest works that had influence on the fantasy tradition: the others are *The Iliad* and the Latin epic by Virgil, *The Aeneid*. All these texts are very representative of fantasy and offer models from which later writers will draw inspirations to create nowadays fantasy genre.

In Latin literature the first impulse to fantasy was given by Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Lucius Apuleius' *Golden Ass*: they both deal with the theme of “transformation”, anticipating one of the most frequent subjects of fantasy. It is important in Victorian children's fantasy (see *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, for example) as it is essential in Edith Nesbit's trilogy, as we will see further on.

Even some religious texts contribute to the development of the genre we are analysing. The books of the Old Testament, for example, contain several tales of magic and power, stories about the creation of the world and the parting of the Red Sea. Although they are more religious than literary texts, however they strongly influenced the birth of modern fantasy.

Mathews is one of the critics who attest the influence of the sacred on fantasy, asserting that

Though the Old Testament, like the more ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead, is a religious rather than a purely literary text, both of these works,

²⁰ TOSI, Laura, “Alla scoperta dei mondi della meraviglia: la *fantasy* vittoriana”, in *Dall'ABC a Harry Potter*, edited by Laura Tosi and Alessandra Petrina, Bononia University Press, Bologna, 2011, p. 178.

as well as other religious writings, exerted strong influences on the creation of the literary genre of fantasy²¹.

Christian fantasy enjoyed great popularity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially with those works which will be considered among the most famous texts of English fantasy literature: Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1604), Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678).

From the beginning of the nineteenth century a change in the definition of fantasy happened. Words like *fantasy* and *imagination*, the latter strictly connected to the former, began to be rediscovered and to undertake a different meaning with the coming of Romanticism and especially the "Romantic poet" Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

The Romantic poets attributed a great power to imagination, but they freed it from its siblings and rivals, fantasy and fancy. It was S. T. Coleridge who separated imagination and fancy. He identified two kinds of imagination: the primary imagination, that was the capacity of perceiving the reality through our senses (capacity that all people possessed) and the secondary imagination, that was the ability of creating images modifying the perceptions (faculty peculiar to poets only). According to Coleridge, fancy occupied a lower level than imagination, being a logical skill that associated images through poetic devices. Fantasy, on the other hand, in contrast with the aesthetic and creative power attributed to imagination, came to be seen as the quality of dreams and reverie²².

His friend W. Wordsworth, the famous Romantic poet who wrote with Coleridge the *Lyrical Ballads*, underlines the role of imagination in the process of poetic creation, as a special gift reserved to poets. In his preface of the *Lyrical Ballads* (first published in 1798), Wordsworth distinguishes between fancy and imagination. They both have the power of associating images, but the material on which they operate is different, as their purpose; while fancy works on images making them exact and definite, imagination leaves everything vague and indefinite.

The subsequent Victorian writers turned to the work of the Romantics (Blake, Coleridge and Keats), searching a new language which could thoroughly describe areas of human experience disregarded as yet: the world of dreams and nightmares, children and their psychology.

²¹ MATHEWS, p. 8.

²² PRICKETT, Stephen, *Victorian Fantasy*, Baylor University Press, Waco, 2005, p. 9.

The great development which English children's fantasy knew within the Victorian age was mainly due to cultural and social reasons.

The concept of childhood and imagination underwent a change. While in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century "the child" was considered a creature to be educated by adults and free imagination was thought to be even socially dangerous, thanks to Blake's *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and Wordsworth's *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality* (1807), the point of view changed. Romanticism provided rich soil for the first fantasy stories explicitly published for children. Childhood began now to be considered a happy condition of natural innocence, becoming object of nostalgia and veneration for literature. There was a growing attention towards children (this was due to a decline in infant mortality, to the *Foster Education Act* in 1870, which provided for free compulsory education) and the child from being a potential demon became a god. This transformation provoked a new market for publishers and writers that "felt it safe to let their private fantasies find expression in writing for children"²³.

In England the historical and social transformation caused by the Industrial Revolution was wider than in any other nation and Victorian Britain knew a period of intense anxiety and self-doubt. Victorian fantasy writers began to show their fear for the fate of their society and signs of latent repression²⁴. In his novel *Hard Times* (1854), for instance, Charles Dickens highlights the social and economic pressures of those times, placing itself as a work of denunciation. Unlike romantic writers, who praised nature despising the effects of industrialization, Dickens wrote novels of social criticism, setting them in industrial towns, such as Coketown in the North of England, in the case of *Hard Times*. Dickens shows his indignation at the social injustice of the new industrial age, criticising the utilitarian mentality derived from industrialization, which risked to completely annihilate the importance of fantasy in human life.

In the following famous passage from *Hard Times*, Dickens introduces one of the major themes of his novel, the difference between fact and fancy; facts alone can not bring intellectual pleasure because they deprive people of feelings and fantasy.

"Ay, ay, ay! But you mustn't fancy", cried the gentleman, quite elated by coming so happily to his point. "That's it! You are never to fancy"²⁵.

²³ REYNOLDS, Kimberly, *Children's Literature in the 1890s and the 1990s*, Plymouth, Northcote, 1994, pp. 13 and ff.

²⁴ PRICKETT, p. 39.

²⁵ This quotation is taken from Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, Kindle edition, location 196.

Those writers who nowadays are considered the pioneers of fantasy as a modern literary genre, Charles Kingsley, George MacDonald and Lewis Carroll, tried to find a balance between the wish to instruct and the wish to amuse, sometimes one prevailing over the other.

Charles Kingsley (1819-1875) was a prominent personality in that nineteenth-century fantasy which had didactic and moralistic purposes. In his *Bildungsroman The Water-Babies. A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby* (1863), which offers a mystical reading of evolutionist theory (Darwin's *Origins of Species* was published in 1859), the author, like many other Victorian fantasy writers, makes use of "another world", an underwater world where the young chimney-sweeper Tom becomes a water baby and meets other aquatic creatures.

Few years later, George MacDonald's writing appeared, with its considerable imaginative power and the visionary theology which inspired many writers, including Edith Nesbit. His two fantasy novels *Phantastes* (1858) and *Lilith* (1895) are addressed to an adult audience, while his following works were written for children. *Phantastes*, particularly, is considered to be the first adult fantasy novel ever written: it is a *Bildungsroman* in which the protagonist learns to go beyond appearances in order to understand the truth that hides behind an imaginary world.

The Princess and the Goblin (1872) and its sequel *The Princess and Curdie* (1883), which present a more episodic structure than the previous works, are MacDonald's most significant fantasy novels for what concerns his visionary fantasy. They tell the adventures of Irene the Princess and her friend Curdie, a miner boy who saves her from dangerous beings, the goblins.

MacDonald was one of the greatest allegorists of all time (like Kingsley, he admired Dante Alighieri) and one of the few writers who recognized that realism and fantasy are two sides of the same coin: they both are complementary literary conventions and fantasy depends on experience in the same way as realism does.

Like Kingsley and MacDonald, Lewis Carroll managed to create an alternative world for his characters, playing with linguistic conventions and on many meanings of words and making use of allegories and puns.

His well-known fantasy novels, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1872), are considered to be two of the best examples of nonsense literature. Alice falls in an 'other world' where the laws of logic are suspended and where she meets mad and irrational characters.

Many critics agree in declaring that Alice is a breaking point with the didactic tradition of previous children's literature. Firstly, Alice does not represent the "perfect" Victorian child: she is not timid, nor fearful; on the contrary, she is curious and does not lack common sense. Secondly, the Victorian world is ridiculed and when Alice underlines its "social perfection" she receives in return rudeness and does not learn anything from adults: she is the first child in children's fantasy to learn no moral.

Later children's fantasy writers appeared in the literary scene of Victorian and Edwardian age, like Rudyard Kipling and Edith Nesbit, who is frequently considered to be the creator of modern fantasy for children, as she introduced a modern narrative voice and a child's perspective in her novels²⁶.

1.1.4. Forms of Fantasy Literature

According to Mathews, fantasy has to be considered in relationship to other genres such as gothic horror, science fiction, utopian fiction and satire, all genres that are nearer to realism, than to pure fantasy.

The gothic genre represents the first rebellion against the realistic novel, combining elements of fear and dark terror and pervading the setting with an atmosphere of mystery and suspense. It developed in the eighteenth century with *The Castle of Otranto* (1765) by Horace Walpole, who is thought to be the precursor of this mode of literature, together with Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*. This genre deals with ancient settings, as isolated castles, mysterious abbeys and convents with hidden passages, dungeons and secret rooms; the plot of gothic novels is often built around an obscure prophecy and events have sometimes a natural explanation, sometimes a supernatural one.

Science fiction differs from fantasy in its describing events subject to rational and scientific explanation; the most evident element which distinguishes one genre from the other is the presence of magic in fantasy, in contrast with the actions in science fiction which are demonstrated scientifically and based on laws of nature. Generally, science fiction deals with things that might happen in an "ordinary" world of universal laws, whereas fantasy usually involves "alternative" worlds, governed by laws such as the power of wishes and magic.

²⁶ PRICKETT, p. 51.

The Time Machine by H. G. Wells is a science fiction novel, published in 1895. It narrates the story of an English scientist who builds himself a time machine and travels over 800,000 years into the future. He finds a society living in apparent happiness and meets the Eloi, fragile creatures that lead a life of fun and distraction and completely lack discipline and curiosity. Later, the scientist, called the Time Traveller by the narrator, discovers that his time machine has been stolen by the “Under-grounders”, the Morlocks, carnivorous creatures who surface only at night and feed on the Eloi. After several adventures, the Time Traveller succeeds in retrieving the time machine and continues to make trips in time until he fails return to his laboratory.

Wells is considered to be the initiator of the time-travel genre and in *The Time Machine* the protagonist exposes his four-dimensional theory, which combines the dimension of “time” to the three spatial dimensions (length, width and thickness): so, it makes possible a true journey through time and consequently this will be one of the most analysed themes of the following science fiction.

Utopian fiction is a literary genre in which actions take place in an ideal or perfect world in which all the evils of society are removed. Compared to fantasy, it is strictly connected to the “realistic rules”, for the ideal society it describes is considered in relationship to the present and desired utopias imply that real society changes into a more ideal one. Among all utopian novels, we can mention *News from Nowhere* (1890) by the Victorian writer William Morris, in which a man of 1890 wakes up and finds himself in twenty-first century England with no private property and no authority, but with a population living in equality and pleasure.

Few years later, at the beginning of the twentieth century, H. G. Wells wrote his work of fiction *A Modern Utopia* (1905) which is an attempt to propose a social reform thanks to changes which would encourage human happiness.

Like the two previous genres, satire is associated to fantasy but it is nearer to the real world than to fantasy. It is a genre of social criticism with the aim of drawing attention to the defects of the real world and correcting them.

Even though the above-mentioned genres are very different from each other, they all provide a context for fantasy; they help the evolution of this genre, confirming that pure genres do not exist. And neither fantasy is a pure genre²⁷.

²⁷ MATHEWS, pp. 4-5.

According to Manlove, six types of fantasy can be identified: secondary world, metaphysical, emotive, comic, subversive and children's fantasy.

In the first type, the author imagines an alternative world ruled by particular laws: the world he creates is far from reality, it represents desires and fears and for this reason there are some affinities with emotive fantasy. Anyway, at the same time there are some connections with metaphysical fantasy, as alternative world fantasy often describes supernatural powers.

The theme of time-travel is central for secondary world fantasy: writers wish to transport their characters and subsequently their readers to fairylands and "other" worlds.

The above mentioned H. G. Wells is a central personality in the development of the secondary world fantasy.

Secondary world fantasy is often connected to metaphysical fantasy. This last fantasy genre includes different concepts, such as the religious, the cosmic, and the mythic, even if the most evident form of this kind of fantasy is the Christian. The reader is asked to take the supernatural for potentially real.

Emotive fantasy is a kind of fantasy genre which recognises the expression of feelings as central theme. It originates as a reaction to the Enlightenment, a period in which reason dominated and emotions were subdued to it. Emotive fantasy takes its origins from a new sensibility for creation and a new notion of imagination in the eighteenth century with the advent of Romanticism.

On the basis of such considerations about the emphasis given to emotions by emotive fantasy, we can admit the existence of two kinds of emotive fantasy: one who deals with fear and horror and the other with enchantment and desire²⁸. Anyway, one does not exclude the other, because elements of enchantment and elements of horror can simultaneously coexist in the same novel.

As concerns the second mode of emotive fantasy, the one that deals with enchantment and desire, it seems evident that "there are three basic kinds of desire fantasy: there is longing for another or a lost world; there is finding our own world enchanted; and there is romantic and sexual love"²⁹.

If we start analysing the desire for another world, we find that both nineteenth-century fantasy and Romantic and Victorian poetry expressed the longing for another world. There are many poems and novels that hide a regret issued from the rise of science

²⁸ MANLOVE, p. 91.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 91.

and industrialisation, which brought to the desire of a world different from reality – the poems by J. Keats, the poems by the Brontë sisters, the famous poem *Kubla Khan* by S. T. Coleridge.

Another attitude about desire is largely expressed by Kingsley's *The Water Babies*: it belongs to a group of fantasies which have as aim the transformation of our own world in a place of wonder. The main protagonist does not desire an alternative world but tries to change the one in which he lives and the way he looks at it.

The third and last kind of fantasy desire is very common: sexual desire. It is strikingly represented by Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*: it narrates the savage love between Cathy and Heathcliff, transgressing the Victorian morality and the ethics of contained sexual desire.

At the end of the nineteenth century English fantasies describing “femmes fatales” appear on the literary scene, such as S. T. Coleridge's poem *Christabel* and J. Keats' well-known ballad *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, which inspired some pre-Raphaelite painters to create famous works of art (*La Belle Dame Sans Merci* by John William Waterhouse, for example).

The fourth type of fantasy recognized by Manlove is comic fantasy. It includes the genre of parody, satire, nonsense and was particularly successful in England.

Edith Nesbit is one of the most significant writers of nineteenth century comic fantasy. By means of the expedient of magic, all her comic fantasy becomes a “compendium of games”³⁰. The adventures faced by her characters mix opposite elements and this confers humour to her books.

The creature that fulfills the four children wishes in *Five Children and It* does not belong to the traditional canon of fairies (we think for example of Tinker Bell in *Peter Pan*). On the contrary, their wishes are granted by a Psammead, a sand-fairy that reminds us more of a monstrous creature rather than a charming little fairy:

Its eyes were on long horns like a snail's eyes, and it could move them in and out like telescopes; it had ears like a bat's ears, and its tubby body was shaped like a spider's and covered with thick soft fur; its legs and arms were furry too, and it had hands and feet like a monkey's³¹.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

³¹ NESBIT, Edith, *Five Children and It*, Penguin, London, 1996, p. 11.

Although its ill-temper and its bad manners the Psammead is one of the dominant personalities in the book: the children's destiny and their deeds depend on him.

Edith Nesbit also wrote many parodies of fairy-tales where it is possible to find some of the most comic pieces of her whole production, such as *Septimus Septimusson* or *Belinda and Bellamant* (both written in 1911).

The subsequent comic fantasy production is well depicted by A. A. Milne's *Pooh* series, one of the most noteworthy comic fantasies of the 1920s. The author narrates the story of the child Christopher Robin and his world of toys. In the world of the *Pooh* books, part of the fun is provided by a society which does not work, where ludicrous talking animals embody human defects: Pooh often loses his memory, Eeyore is depressed, Tigger shows his hyperactivity, Piglet is paranoid and Owl is dyslexic.

With reference to Rosemary Jackson's *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Manlove identifies the fifth mode of fantasy with subversive fantasy. The critic notes that this genre seems to be more present in periods in which culture and society are in a state of change: a great part of subversive modern fantasy reveals the struggle between imagination and reason, therefore Romanticism is one of the most profitable ages for this kind of fantasy.

The last sub-group of English fantasy is children's fantasy, the most common form of fantasy in the nineteenth century. It is more a category than a kind of fantasy and collects elements belonging to the other five sub-groups, especially to comic, secondary world and emotive. Lewis Carroll, Edith Nesbit, C. S. Lewis are representatives of this category. Thanks to Edith Nesbit modern children's fantasy can undergo important changes and innovations.

1.2. Edith Nesbit: a Short Biography

1.2.1. Her Childhood

In the foreword of her work *Edith Nesbit: A Woman of Passion*, the critic Julia Briggs presents Edith Nesbit as "the first modern writer for children. She invented the children's story more or less single-handed, and then added further magic ingredients such as wishing rings and time travel. [...] She had already tried her hand at many different

kinds of writing – poems, plays, romantic novels, ghost stories, tales of country life, reviews, as well as her earliest and now long-forgotten writings for children”³².

Edith Nesbit wrote towards the end of the Victorian period and the beginning of the Edwardian one casting her mind into modernity. The influence of her life on her works is enormous: her literature is inspired by her life, the places she visited (she frequently changed house) and the books she read. The five children of *Five Children and It*, for example, remind us of her own children and even the dogs that appear into the Bastable stories and in *The Magic City* are inspired by dogs that belonged to her. The figure of the absent father is often recurrent in Nesbit's books; especially in her fantasy of wish-fulfilment Psammead Trilogy, one of the children's wishes is the return of their far-away parents. Although Edith was only four when her father died and did not have many memories about her reaction to his death, this episode left an indelible mark on her life, so that in *The Railway Children* she introduced some of the most touching and intense lines of all her writing, as the following extract shows:

“Oh! My Daddy, my Daddy!” That scream went like a knife into the heart of everyone in the train, and people put their heads out of the window to see a tall pale man with lips set in a thin close line, and a little girl clinging to him with arms and legs, while his arms went tightly round her³³.

Her great success as a writer in children's literature is clearly due to her vivid memories of her childhood; in one of the twelve articles of *My School-Days*, published in the *Girl's Own Paper*, she wrote “when I was a little child I used to pray fervently, tearfully, that when I should be grown up I might never forget what I thought and felt and suffered then”. Her wish was fulfilled.

Edith Nesbit was born on 15 August 1858 in Kennington, Surrey, to Sarah and John Collis Nesbit.

She had two brothers and a sister but she was the youngest child: she was called Daisy by the whole family. After her father's death, when she was four, and for her sister's illness, they moved to Stamford and from then on Edith would begin to suffer through all

³² BRIGGS, Julia, *Edith Nesbit: A Woman of Passion*, Tempus, Gloucestershire, 2006, p. 10.

³³ This quotation is taken from Edith Nesbit's *The Railway Children*, Kindle edition, location 2952.

the several moves she underwent. Her particular attention to what children feel is expressed in the following extract from *My School-Days*:

I was bored with travel, as I believe all children are – so large a part of a child's life is made up of little familiar playthings and objects. It is a mistake to suppose that children are naturally fond of change. They love what they know. In strange places they suffer violently from homesickness, even when their loved nurse or mother is with them. They want to get back to the house they know, the toys they know, the books they know³⁴.

She remembered those days as a period of despair and distress:

I seem to have had a period of more ordinary terrors – of dreams from which to awaken was mere relief; not a horror scarcely left than that of the dream itself. [...] It was not till that night at Rouen that the old horror of the dark came back, deepened by superstitious dread³⁵.

Edith possessed all the characteristics of the imaginative child; she was easily frightened by the dark, by nightmares or strange sights. Certainly, this aspect of her being such a child can be found in her children's books: the animating power of imagination is the central theme of her works and it is often figured as magic.

In her childhood Edith was a tomboy, she hated school and, as Julia Briggs' biography reports, the Ursuline nuns of whom she was a pupil "were surprised and probably a little shocked at the passionate temper and high spirits of their small English pupil [...], a proper little devil, a holy terror, the mad English girl, capable of anything, but a good child"³⁶. For her own admission Edith confirmed her temper in a letter to her mother, where she writes "The nuns are all very kind to me though I have been very naughty".

Despite her "naughtiness", Edith soon showed her qualities in writing; when she was only eleven she wrote a sonnet to her sister Mary, who would die two years later. With her death there was not the need to search for a healthier climate anymore and Edith and the

³⁴ Edith Nesbit, "My School-Days," in *Girl's Own Paper*, quoted in BRIGGS, p. 28.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 266.

³⁶ BRIGGS, p. 40.

rest of her family moved to Halstead. Here she spent the years between childhood and womanhood, passing from the fantasies of a child to the dreams of an adult. With the ending of her travels and her schooldays the pains of childhood were over: now adult life began.

1.2.2. Her Marriage to Hubert Bland and the Foundation of the Fabian Society

Having financial problems, Mrs. Nesbit could not afford her previous life-style and moved to Islington. On a visit to her stepsister Saretta in Manchester, Daisy met Ada Breakell, her dearest friend who years later would have married Harry, Edith's brother. An important event took place in this period: during one of Ada's visits, in 1877, Edith met Hubert Bland, her future husband. He was a man with a strong personality and sense of humour and shared Edith's love of poetry and writing. He had a brilliant intelligence and an extraordinary ability in amusing Edith which caused her to fall in love with him. Edith's mother did not like Hubert Bland and did not approve of his engagement to her daughter; she felt that he was not sincere. However, seven month pregnant, on 22 April 1880 Edith married Hubert; the couple did not immediately live together, as Bland initially lived in his mother's house.

Their married life began at Elswick Road. Before her marriage Edith had published poems in newspapers and magazines and now she was selling greetings cards inscribed with her own verses; she lived in a society which took for granted women's weaknesses, rather than women's strengths and even for a determined, unconventional and transgressive woman as Edith, it was not easy to excel. Meanwhile, Hubert's business failed and he found a new occupation in writing and collaborating with his wife. In 1881 Edith's second child, Mary Iris, was born. She proved a loving mother who was good at taking care of her house, as a letter to her friend Ada witnesses:

I have just got Iris to sleep, and laid her down and Paul is standing watching my scribbling pen.[...] - The maid had gone out for the day and I have just washed up the dinner things.[...] I have done two sheet 'sides into middle' – written some paragraphs for a newspaper – cooked the

dinner, nursed Iris for a whole hour. [...] They are very good children, I think, as children go³⁷.

At about the time she wrote this letter she was pregnant again and the following year Fabian Bland was born: his name was due to the newly founded Fabian Society³⁸. Actually, Edith and Hubert were among the founders in 1884; she was so fascinated by these new life-styles of the Fabian Society that she introduced in *The New Treasure Seekers* (1904) two characters who reflected many characteristics of the New Lifers.

The entry in the Fabian Society brought her to a transformation: she discovered a new and more active role for herself, managing to find a more solid independence. In a letter to Ada, Edith describes her change:

Now – Ada – I have something dreadful to break to you *gently*. – A certain friend of ours says ‘When a woman becomes “advanced” she cuts her hair’. I don’t know whether I am ‘advanced’ – but I have *Cut my hair off!!!!!!!*

I retain the fringe – but at the back it is short like a boy’s. I wonder how you will like it. – It is *deliciously* comfortable. Miss Adkin, Miss Hoatson and a few others like it. Others *don’t*. I have also taken to all – wool clothing which is also *deliciously* pleasant to wear³⁹.

Through the Fabian Society she made new friends, especially “advanced” women who were leaders of the Women’s Suffrage Movement.

Under the pseudonym “Fabian Bland” the collaboration between Edith and her husband went on: they produced two novels and many short stories which appeared in the London newspaper *The Weekly Dispatch*. Of this period is *The Prophet’s Mantle*, a novel whose central theme is socialism and which includes some autobiographical elements: its protagonist is a woman got pregnant by her socialist lover. In this book, as in many others, Edith shows her habit of introducing in her works places and people of her real life; for this reason, her literature can be considered the “extended commentary on her life”⁴⁰. The

³⁷ Edith Nesbit’s letter to Ada, 30 March 1884, in BRIGGS, pp. 78-79.

³⁸ The following extract of Bland’s letter to Shaw explains what the Fabian Society involves: “The Fabian about which I spoke to you last night is a new society of men and women. Its object is to collect information on all social questions and to discuss such questions with a ‘view to action’”.

³⁹ Edith Nesbit’s letter to Ada, after 23 August 1885, in BRIGGS, p. 84.

⁴⁰ BRIGGS, p. 88.

Bastables in *The New Treasure Seekers*, for instance, live in the Mill House, the place in Dymchurch where the Blands stayed during their holidays.

In 1884 G. B. Shaw was introduced into the Fabian Society by Hubert Bland and started to attend Fabian meetings regularly. He and the Blands became friends and Shaw was often a guest at their house; he had not yet become a playwright but Edith asked him to give her his opinion about her first book of poems *Lays and Legends*.

In 1886 the love affair between Edith and Shaw began; they felt an intense passion and their relationship led Edith to abandon her inhibitions about being unfaithful. *Daphne in Fitzroy Street* was inspired by him (he had lived in that street) and shows the real end of Edith and Shaw's relationship.

In this period Edith met Alice Hoatson: she would become Hubert's mistress and would bear him two children, brought up as Edith's. When the friendship between Edith and Alice began, Edith felt very lonely and Alice helped her with sincere affection in looking after her children. Edith wrote her some verses in return and was very fond of her. When the Blands moved, Edith asked Alice to come and live with them and become their housekeeper. She agreed and entered completely in the Blands' life: she looked after the household and the children, and being herself a journalist, helped Edith in her writing. Alice was soon seduced by Hubert and the bond between them, followed by the birth of two children, inevitably led to a crisis in the Blands' marriage. Alice herself confessed to Edith that her children's father was her husband Hubert; nonetheless, the two women remained friends and kept on sharing everyday life.

Besides poems and novels, Edith published two collections of ghost and horror stories, a very popular genre in that period: they were entitled *Grim Tales* and *Something Wrong*. When she was a child Edith had a fervent imagination and now, though she was a very sensible woman, she was very superstitious. For example, she kept a skull and some bones in her house to familiarize her children with this kind of images and feelings of terror arising from them. In her biography Julia Briggs describes Edith Nesbit as follows:

Sometimes when she was writing ghost stories, she frightened herself so much that she was afraid to go to bed. Some of the elements in her tales of terror seem to have their origin in particular phobias to her, for example being buried alive, but as often as not they borrow plot elements and settings from other writers⁴¹

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 187.

1.2.3. Edith Nesbit's Main Works

In 1899 Edith Nesbit wrote her first novel, *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, possibly her most significant work to understand Edith's narrative technique.

The protagonist, Oswald, tells the story in the third person, sometimes slipping back into the first person and asking the reader to guess who the narrator is:

It is one of us that tells this story – but I shall not tell you which: only at the very end perhaps I will. While the story is going on you may be trying to guess, only I bet you don't.

It was Oswald who first thought of looking for treasure. Oswald often thinks of very interesting things⁴².

The tone alternates between informal and literary, revealing Oswald's inexperience as a storyteller. Using this technique Edith finds a solution to one of the most important questions of children's literature, that is who is addressing whom; she does not need to decide whether she is speaking to her reader as an adult or as a child.

The novel focuses on the importance of reading, which inspires the children in their looking for the treasure, together with their games. At the same time the book is a parody of contemporary literary clichés, as it is clear from its beginning, where Oswald reflects on the right way of narrating a story:

This is the story of the different ways we looked for a treasure, and I think when you have read it you will see that we were not lazy about looking.

There are some things I must tell before I begin to tell about the treasure-seeking, because I have read books myself, and I know how beastly it is when a story begins, "Alas!" said Hildegarde with a deep sigh, "we must look our last on this ancestral home" – and then someone else says something – and you don't know for pages and pages where the home is, or who Hildegarde is, or anything about it. Our ancestral home is in the Lewisham Road⁴³.

⁴² This quotation is taken from Edith Nesbit's *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, Kindle edition, location 38.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, location 31.

Some critics assert that Edith's own narrative method was inspired by Kenneth Grahame⁴⁴'s *The Golden Age*⁴⁵, but it is not difficult to find substantial differences between the two writers. The worlds they create in their books are basically very different, even if the fantastic elements they use could lead us to think they are very similar.

Grahame introduces ideal fantasy worlds, dream worlds far from daily reality. Unlike the Scottish writer, Edith Nesbit, through the use of fantastic elements in the form of children's games or magical powers, creates worlds that are closer to real life, worlds more realistic and less perfect than Grahame's. The characters in her stories are frequently brought back to reality and common clichés are criticised and shunned by her. Probably, Edith's strength as a writer is her refusal to romanticise the child's power or the world he/she lives in; perhaps, this is the greatest contribution she has given to children's literature.

She presents her children characters in conflict with the adult world, being aware that their only power is that of imagination, which adults do not possess; it is through imagination that they can travel with magic carpets, or ask a Psammead fairy to fulfill their wishes. The consequences of all these magic adventures are events and feelings of real life: worries about mother and father's return home⁴⁶.

When Paul fell ill with typhoid, Edith was forced to the umpteenth change of address and the whole family moved to Well Hall, a place she fell in love with. This new house inspired Edith's novel *The Red House* (1902) and it also appears in *The Wouldbegoods*, the sequel of *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*. In *The Red House* we find a mix of humour and sentimentalism; in this novel she tries to imagine what a woman could expect from her marriage, passionate and romantic love, demonstrating how romance was really important in her real life. The love affairs she lived outside her marriage attest to her passionate and volatile temper, as can be assumed from the description below, made by the novelist Berta Ruck:

She could be morose as a gathering thunder-cloud. She could flash into a prima donna's rage. Having spread panic, blight and depression over the entire household of which one member had displeased her, she would

⁴⁴ Kenneth Grahame was a Scottish writer mostly known for his *The Wind in the Willows*, one of the classics of children's literature, first published in 1908. The novel tells the adventures of four anthropomorphised animal characters in a pastoral version of England.

⁴⁵ BRIGGS, p. 199.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 202.

withdraw behind an emphatically-closed door, and there stay, leaving those who loved her to the darkness that can be felt.

When she emerged – a sunburst! The entire landscape and population would bask in that genial all-pervading warmth, charm and sympathy that streamed from her⁴⁷.

The early years at Well Hall led to Edith's first successes, in the name of a more fruitful writing: her stories previously written for the monthly magazine *The Strand* were published as *The Book of Dragons* in 1900. A new serial in nine episodes will have the same fate: in 1902 they will be published as *Five Children and It*. From this moment on Edith's works had such a great success that they all appeared in *The Strand* and only short stories were published elsewhere.

Five children and it opens with the dedication to her little child, John, who at that time was only two years old:

My lamb, you are so very small,
You have not learned to read at all.
Yet never a printed book withstands
The urgency of your dimpled hands.
So, though this book is for yourself,
Let mother keep it on the shelf
Till you can read. O days that pass,
That day will come too soon, alas!⁴⁸

As the Lamb of this dedication reminds us of Edith's little child, so the other children characters are strictly linked to her own children: Anthea impersonates Iris, Robert is Fabian, Jane reminds us of Rosamund. Also the White House where the story takes place probably belongs to Edith's real memories: it is the real house where Edith had lived on a holiday.

The White House was on the edge of a hill, with a wood behind it – and the chalk-quarry on one side and the gravel-pit on the other. Down at the

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 209.

⁴⁸ NESBIT, Epigraph to *Five Children and It*.

bottom of the hill was a level plain, with queer-shaped white buildings where people burnt lime, and a big red brewery and other houses⁴⁹.

At the bottom of a gravel pit the five children find a strange creature, whom they ask daily to fulfill a wish which will end at sunset: it is a sand fairy, called Psammead (from the Greek "psammos", which means sand) and it was so vividly illustrated by H. R. Millar that Edith thought he was telepathic: he had drawn the fantastic creature just as she had imagined it⁵⁰.

In their adventures the children have their wishes granted but they get into trouble – for instance, when they ask the Psammead to be as beautiful as the day, the servants do not recognise them and do not let them into the house; in the episode "Being Wanted" the children, tired of taking care of their little brother, wish that someone else wants him and the little Lamb is kidnapped by gypsies.

Through this novel Edith underlines the vanity of human wishes. The central theme she deals with in *Five Children and It* is that you never get exactly what you expect and it is often better not to receive what you ask for, because this could cause damage, instead of positive events.

The book's ending anticipates the existence of a sequel – "they did see it again, of course, but not in this story. And it was not in a sand-pit either, but in a very, very, very different place. It was in a — But I must say no more"⁵¹.

The children reappear in the sequel *The Phoenix and the Carpet* (1904), dedicated to Edith's godson. Unlike *Five children and It* and *The Story of the Amulet*, the third novel of the trilogy, in *The Phoenix and the Carpet* there is less sense of loss and loneliness, as the children lived in their home in London with their parents. After having damaged their nursery carpet with some fireworks, the five children (in this novel reduced to four) receive a new one in which they find an egg: the egg hatches and a golden Phoenix appears. It tells the children that their new carpet is magic and can take them wherever they ask.

The next two or three years were the most productive of Edith's career: *The Railway Children* and the third novel of the Psammead trilogy, *The Story of the Amulet*, appeared between 1905 and 1906.

The Railway Children belongs to that realistic genre to which Edith devoted herself, in contrast with the fantasy genre. It describes the harsh reality of a wrongful imprisonment

⁴⁹ NESBIT, *Five Children and It*, p. 4.

⁵⁰ BRIGGS, p. 233.

⁵¹ NESBIT, *Five Children and It*, p. 237.

in England and Russia, looking at some aspects of contemporary politics but simultaneously avoiding the description of England as a nation in poverty and in class conflict.

Unlike the two previous novels of the trilogy, *The Story of the Amulet* gives the reader a different point of view: it does not look at the present, but at the past. In Victorian children's books historical novels were common but Edith did something different: she threw her children characters of today back into an ancient past. Actually, time-travel is the most important theme of this novel and helps the author in underlining her social criticism of the Edwardian era.

With the guide of the Learned Gentleman the children visit ancient Babylon and Atlantis, and it is precisely in the episode with the Queen of Babylon that Edith shows her most severe criticism of the period she lived in, as can be seen by the following extract.

“But how badly you keep your slaves. How wretched and poor and neglected they seem”, she said, as the cab rattled along the Mile End Road.

“They aren't slaves: they're working-people”, said Jane.

“Of course they're working-people. That's what slaves are. Don't you tell me. Do you suppose I don't know a slave's face when see it? Why don't their masters see that they're better fed and better clothed?”⁵².

The Psammead Trilogy was a great success. Edith sent Kipling *The Phoenix and the Carpet* and received from him two letters in which he thanks her for the pleasure given by her novels to his children.

My kiddies are five and seven (they can't read, thank goodness) and they took an interest in the Psammead stories – a profound and practical interest. [...] I wish I could tell you what joy it gave them and how they revelled in the fun of it.⁵³ [...]

[...] They want a lot more of the same sort quick. I am to tell you this and I am to send you their love. [...]

⁵² NESBIT, Edith, *The Story of the Amulet*, Penguin, London, 1996, p. 148.

⁵³ *The Kipling Journal* (December 1947), vol. XIV, no. 84, pp. 15-16, quoted in BRIGGS, p. 280.

P.P.S. The one they liked best was about the Cook and the Burglar.
Children are given to crime from youth up⁵⁴.

At this point her children's books had acquired a more serious tone, a more complex structure and more ambitious intents, using magic of a different kind, almost with religious and mystical tones. The *Enchanted Castle* is a fruit of this period. It handles the same theme of *Five Children and It*, the danger of fulfilled wishes but unlike the first novel of the trilogy, the *Enchanted Castle* offers a less controlled atmosphere: the barriers between reality and imagination fall down and fantasies take place in an uncontrollable world⁵⁵. A sinister and terrifying atmosphere hovers over the entire novel: the approaching sunset does not solve troubles caused by granted wishes, as in *Five Children and It*, on the contrary, things get worse during the night – by moonlight the statues and the stone dinosaurs come to life.

During these years Edith met H. G. Wells, whose writing inspired many of the ideas she had for her books, especially for what concerns the theme of time-travel and the quest for Utopia. They shared the love for parties and long walks and admired each other's books.

In 1908 and 1909 *The House of Arden* and its sequel *Harding's Luck* appeared. The possibility of reconstructing a healthier society in Edwardian England permeates the first book.

In 1910 the first episodes of Edith's new series appeared in *The Strand*. It was a work which marked a turning point in her concept of imagination, together with the following *Wet Magic*. According to Julia Briggs, Edith's later books "began to occupy that place in her imagination that life and social conditions had once held: *The Magic City* (1910) and *Wet Magic* (1913) make literal this retreat of the imagination, so that characters are released from books to fight battles that will save the ideal city"⁵⁶.

The Magic City reminds us of H. G. Wells' *A modern Utopia* (1905): both Edith and Wells were attracted by miniature buildings, but the aim Edith had in her *Magic City* differed from Wells' in his *A modern Utopia*. While Wells had the idea of a miniature city as figure of Utopia, in her book Edith had the idea of constructing an imaginary world in the form of a child's model of order as metaphor of society reconstruction⁵⁷.

⁵⁴ *The Kipling Journal* (July 1948), vol. XV, no. 86, p. 13, quoted in BRIGGS, p. 281.

⁵⁵ BRIGGS, p. 290.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 309.

⁵⁷ BRIGGS, p. 348.

Wet Magic was Edith's last children's book and it seems it was written in a period of strong stress: *Wet Magic* appeared in *The Strand* in August 1913 and was Edith's last work for the magazine.

1.2.4. Edith Nesbit's Last Years

While Edith was spending some spring days in Crowlink a telegram arrived announcing Hubert was very ill: her husband died on 14 April 1914. The following years after Hubert's death were years of great pain: he had been the only man who had really conquered her heart and "she kept his death mask wrapped in a silk handkerchief on the mantelpiece, a sacred relic"⁵⁸.

When Edith managed to recover from the shock, she moved to Paris, where she became ill and the doctor diagnosed an ulcer which had to be operated at once. Edith's transgressive nature was clear during her stay in hospital, "she was quite the naughtiest patient they ever had but they all loved her and she was the life and soul of her ward"⁵⁹; Edith herself was convinced to be inwardly a child in an adult world, as she underlines in the following extract from *Wings and the Child*, written the year before:

For a middle-aged gentleman with a beard or a stout elderly lady with spectacles to move among other elderly and spectacled persons feeling that they are still children, and that the other elderly spectacled ones are really grown-ups, seems thoroughly unreasonable, and therefore those who have never forgotten [their childhood] do not, as a rule, say anything about it.

They just mingle with the other people, looking as grown-up as any one – but in their hearts they are only pretending to be grown-up; it is like acting in a charade⁶⁰.

Edith's success in her writing for children was probably due to her childish nature, as it was easy for her to understand children's feelings and emotions just because she felt closer to the children's world than to adults'.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 381.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 384.

⁶⁰ John Bland in interview, Notebook I; *Wings and the Child* (1913), pp. 6-7, quoted in BRIGGS, pp. 384-385.

Unexpectedly, Edith's life was destined to change. After three painful years spent in memory of her husband, she met the engineer T. T. Tucker, who she would marry on 20 February 1917. To her brother Harry she wrote what follows:

“After the cold misery of the last three years I feel as though someone had come and put a fur cloak round me. Or like one shipwrecked on a lonely island, and have found another shipwrecked mariner to help me to build a hut and make a fire. [...]

I fell as though I had opened another volume of the book of life (the last volume) and it is full of beautiful stories and poetry”⁶¹.

The marriage proved happy; for the first time Edith could understand what it meant to be the only woman for a man and for this reason she felt relaxed and calm. But it did not last long. In the last years of her life Edith had grown terribly thin and even specialists did not know explain the causes of her disease. Her heavy smoking was probably the cause of her lung cancer.

She died on 4 May 1924 in the arms of her daughter Iris. According to the terms of her will, Edith Nesbit was buried in the churchyard of St Mary's In the Marsh, in a grave made by her beloved Skipper (the way in which she called her second husband). He himself wanted her funeral to end with the final words from Edith's novel *Dormant*:

“It seems such waste, such stupid senseless waste”, said Bats. “His great thoughts, his fine body that loved life, all the friendship, the aspiration, the love [...] all thrown away, gone, wasted for ever”.

“Who says that it is wasted?” said the Jew. “It is his body that has served its turn and is cast away. The great thoughts, the friendship, the aspiration, the love; can we say that these die? Nay, rather, these shall not die. These shall live in the Courts of the Lord, for ever”⁶².

⁶¹ Edith Nesbit's letter to her brother Harry, February 1917, in BRIGGS, pp. 393-394.

⁶² Quoted in BRIGGS, p. 414.

1.3. Main Narrative Features in Edith Nesbit's Fantasy

In the foreword of her *Edith Nesbit: A Woman of Passion* Julia Briggs points out how Edith Nesbit was a polyhedral writer, capable of spacing through different genres: after the success of *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* and *The Wouldbegoods*, realistic books where she narrates the adventures of the Bastable children, she experiences the genre of fantasy, which can be divided into two phases.

The first phase is exemplified by the Psammead Trilogy – which includes *Five Children and It*, *The Phoenix and the Carpet* and *The Story of the Amulet* – where Nesbit relates the story of a family of children, who will have wishes granted by a strange sand-fairy and will travel in time. The second phase includes all her *time-travel fantasies*, among which it is inevitable to remember *The Enchanted Castle* and *The Magic City*, texts more difficult to understand, if compared to the trilogy.

As has already been stated, Edith's own childhood had a great weight in her writing for children (she loved parties, bicycling, boating and adventures of all kinds) and the childishness within her even when she became adult is certainly one of the main reasons of her success; thanks to her vivid childhood memories, her vitality, her humour, her strong imagination, she can easily create child characters which experience emotions that “real” children feel.

You cannot hope to understand children by commonsense, by reason, by logic, nor by any science whatsoever. You cannot understand them by imagination – not even by love itself. There is only one way: to remember what you thought and felt and liked and hated when you yourself were a child. Not what you know now – or think you know – you ought to have thought and liked, but what you did then, in stark fact, like and think. There is no other way⁶³.

Nesbit wrote about middle-class children, children who were conscious of belonging to a society in which rules regulate life, but at the same time they are able to enrich their childhood with the power of imagination.

Since she wrote at the turn of the Victorian and Edwardian age, she had to fight the Victorian age restrictions, preferring to choose modernity, both in her style and in her

⁶³ MANLOVE, Colin, *Fantasy as Witty Conceit: E. Nesbit*, Mosaic, 10:2 (1977:Winter), p. 111.

vision of childhood (she was even defined a post-Victorian writer)⁶⁴. Nesbit recognised the great importance of imagination in childhood, identifying it as one of the most significant faculties to be taught in a child's education. Therefore, the vision of childhood changes with Nesbit's writing for children: she frees her child characters from the prior myth of childhood, removing the image of the child as a victim of adult cruelty; unlike many Victorian child characters, the Bastable children, for instance, are not abused by adults. On the contrary, Nesbit's child characters have loving parents who understand them. In *The Wouldbegoods* the narrator confirms what has just been said:

The author of these few lines really does hope to goodness that no one will be such an owl as to think from the number of things we did when we were in the country that we were wretched, neglected little children, whose grown-up relations sparkled in the bright haunts of pleasure and [...]. It was nothing of the kind, and I wish you to know that my father was with us a good deal – and Albert's uncle – And we had some very decent times with them; and enjoyed ourselves very much, thank you. In some ways the good times you have with grown-ups are better than the ones you have by yourselves⁶⁵.

Nesbit's child characters succeed in liberating themselves from the romantic myth of childhood as they behave with wit and humour and take an active role in their adventures: their temperament finds expression in activities of reading, building (Philip who fabricates a city with his toys, for example), creating. Nesbit's child characters are bright and intelligent children, well-educated and literate. Like Carroll, she wants to extol their cleverness and their experience, distancing herself from Wordsworth and Mac Donald's tendency to praise children's simplicity and innocence⁶⁶.

The following key passage is useful to understand Edith Nesbit's writing especially for what concerns her narrative techniques in her novels.

Now that I have begun to tell you about the place, I feel that I could go on and make this into a most interesting story about all the ordinary things

⁶⁴ TOSI, Laura, "Alla scoperta dei mondi della meraviglia: la *fantasy* vittoriana", in *Dall'ABC a Harry Potter*, edited by Laura Tosi and Alessandra Petrina, Bononia University Press, Bologna, 2011, pp. 197-198.

⁶⁵ This quotation is taken from Edith Nesbit's *The Wouldbegoods*, Kindle edition, location 2924.

⁶⁶ MOSS, Anita, "E. Nesbit's Romantic Child in Modern Dress", in *Romanticism and Children's Literature in Nineteenth-Century England*, edited by James Holt McGavran, The University of Georgia Press, Athens and London, 1991, p. 245.

that the children did – just the kind of things you do yourself, you know – and you would believe every word of it; and when I told about the children's being tiresome, as you are sometimes, your aunts would perhaps write in the margin of the story with a pencil, "How true!" or "How like life!" and you would see it and very likely be annoyed. So I will only tell you the really astonishing things that happened, and you may leave the book about quite safely, for no aunts and uncles either are likely to write "How true!" on the edge of the story⁶⁷.

The previous lines are very explanatory about what kind of storyteller Edith Nesbit is. Trying to avoid "classic" didacticism and keeping at a safe distance from moralism (as Carroll did), she has got the ability to create a special relationship with the recipient of her works, to make fun of her characters, with whom, as a narrator, she establishes a relationship of total complicity. For this reason, for the closeness she feels with her child characters, some novels by Edith Nesbit are defined "domestic novels"; probably, because she does not use a high narrative register and the protagonists of her works do not perform extraordinary feats⁶⁸. On the contrary, they find support and consolation in the ordinary relationship with their family (the celebration of home and the domestic spaces is one of the central themes of Edith Nesbit's novels). Even when she writes about magic adventures in her novels, the narrator includes prosaic details to find a balance between the magic and the ordinary things. The magic is normalised and blended with everyday life; some of the comments that the narrator makes about the difficulty of taking care of babies (in *Five Children and It*) or about the difficulties of housekeeping (in *The Phoenix and the Carpet*) have the purpose to counterbalance episodes like the one in which children ask for wings. Nesbit's contemporary child characters enter magical settings, they use magical objects and face magical adventures.

Didacticism is obviously a crucial aspect in children's literature and Edith Nesbit certainly does not evade her duty to instruct her young readers. However, she instructs them in an unconventional way, parodying the "classic" didactic tradition, mocking adult morality and ensuring that adults are more and more useless in her works. The fact that she uses fantasy as a genre for children does not mean that her works are devoid of their own

⁶⁷ NESBIT, *Five Children and It*, pp. 4-5.

⁶⁸ TOSI, Laura, "Alla scoperta dei mondi della meraviglia: la *fantasy* vittoriana", in *Dall'ABC a Harry Potter*, edited by Laura Tosi and Alessandra Petrina, Bononia University Press, Bologna, 2011, p. 198.

lessons⁶⁹. On the contrary, every chapter in *Five Children and It*, for example, can be considered a moral lesson; her child characters reach their own maturation, being responsible for their personal change, without adults guide or interferences. Therefore, it would be easy to state that Edith's fantasy, like other fantasy of the nineteenth century, lacks didactic elements; on the contrary, she simply gives lesson in an innovative way, allowing her heroes to learn through experience and dialogue⁷⁰.

Edith Nesbit's talent lies in having found an innovative narrative style in addressing her young readers and in establishing a special bond with them. This occurs thanks to the fact that she writes from a "child's eye" point of view, siding with her child-readers against the unimaginative structures imposed by adults⁷¹.

In a way Nesbit herself is a reader of her own novels and shows involvement in her characters' adventures. This can be illustrated by means of the following examples in her fantasy novels, where the writer uses the narrative technique of the intrusive narrator⁷².

In the first novel of the Trilogy the narrator's participation is indicated by passages like these:

I shall not tell you whether anyone cried, nor, if so, how many cried, nor who cried. You will be better employed in making up your minds what you would have done if you had been in their place⁷³.

Of course you, who see above that this is the eleventh (and last) chapter, know very well that the day of which this chapter tells must be the last on which Cyril, Anthea, Robert, and Jane will have a chance of getting anything out of the Psammead, or Sand-fairy⁷⁴.

The Story of the Amulet offers examples like the following:

⁶⁹ FLEGEL, Monica, "Fabianism and Didacticism in E. Nesbit's Writing for Children", in *E. Nesbit's Psammead Trilogy. A Children's Classic at 100*, edited by Raymond E. Jones, Children's literature association and The Scarecrow Press, Lanham, 2006, p. 26.

⁷⁰ OSTRY, Elaine, "Magical Growth and Moral Lessons: or, How the Conduct Book Informed Victorian and Edwardian Children's Fantasy", in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2003 January), pp. 50-51.

⁷¹ KNÖPFLMACHER, Ulrich, "Of Babylands and Babylons: E. Nesbit and the Reclamation of the Fairy Tale", in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1987 Autumn), p. 314.

⁷² The intrusive or obtrusive narrator interrupts the narration to speak directly to the readers, expressing his/her views on the characters or events.

⁷³ NESBIT, *Five Children and It*, p. 107.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 221.

I think I must have explained to you before how it was that the children were always able to understand the language of any place they might happen to be in, and to be themselves understood. If not, I have no time to explain it now⁷⁵.

If I only had time I could tell you lots of things. For instance, how, in spite of the advice of the Psammead, the four children did, one very wet day, go through their Amulet Arch into the golden desert, [...]. But, alas! I haven't time, so I must leave all that out though it was a wonderfully thrilling adventure⁷⁶.

The passages above lay stress on the relationship between the narrator and the reader, to which Edith Nesbit gives great emphasis. Her reader, as we have seen, is frequently engaged in the narrations through a narrative technique which eliminates the emotional distance between the narrator and the addressee. The narrator comes nearly close to have a conversation with the implied child reader and always relates her stories from the children's point of view, establishing a relationship of confidence with the reader and sharing information and feelings with him/her.

In Nesbit's fantasy magic plays an essential role. In her magical books she follows the standard rules the genre generally requires: characters experience magic through magical objects (in Nesbit a ring, an amulet, a carpet) or magical creature (the Psammead or the Phoenix); the narrative structure, undoubtedly in *Five Children and It* more than in the other two sequels, is episodic; the tone is ironic and humorous, also as a result of a mixture of reality and magic.

It is precisely this last feature of magic fantasy which reveals Nesbit's strength as a writer. Her talent lies in creating realistic child characters who, however, become at the same time protagonists of magical events, a capacity which finds supreme expression in the Psammead trilogy and even more in *The Enchanted Castle*.

The Enchanted Castle can be considered the "most magical work among all her literary production", as the frequent expressions throughout the novel attest – "The feeling of magic got thicker and thicker", "Every stage of the adventure [...] had deepened the feeling of magic", "This castle is crammed with magic", "It doesn't matter, because everything is magic here".

⁷⁵ NESBIT, *The Story of the Amulet*, p. 103.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 259.

The four children find a Sleeping Princess who invites them to visit her castle. At this point of the narration, the heterodiegetic narrator introduces the following discourse about magic:

But the things that seem really likely, like fairy-tales and magic, are, so say the grown-ups, not true at all. Yet they are so easy to believe, especially when you see them happening. And, as I am always telling you, the most wonderful thing happen to all people, only you never hear about them because the people think that no one will believe their stories, and so they don't tell them anyone except me. And they tell me, because they know that I can believe anything⁷⁷.

Once again, by her own admission, Nesbit's vivid imagination and her personal participation in her characters' feelings and sensations are confirmed.

The Princess shows the children the treasures of the castle, including a ring which has magical powers, and which, however, leads to unpleasant and frightening situations. This is one of the most typical peculiarities of Nesbit's magic: wishes expressed by her child heroes cause consequences which the narrator seems not worried about. The narration almost reaches tones of nightmare, as for example in the episode in which the four children build the Ugly-Wuglies, dummies made from clothes, walking sticks, umbrellas and other domestic objects.

It's from the relationship between magic and everyday reality in Nesbit's fantasy that her humour takes its origin: only when the child characters use magic they manage to avoid negative effects, creating, on the contrary, humorous and extravagant situations.

Many treatises and books have been written about humour, identifying it as a not easy phenomenon to be analysed. In her essay "Communicating Humour in E. Nesbit's Fantasy Trilogy", Donna R. White relies on the following "communication triangle pattern", in order to explain Nesbit's mechanisms of humour.

⁷⁷ NESBIT, Edith, *The Enchanted Castle*, Penguin, London, 1994, p. 27.

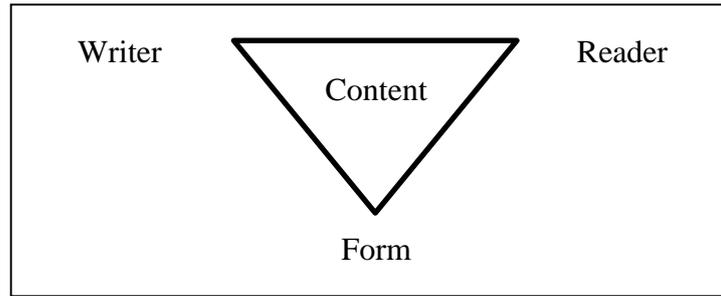


Fig. 1. Communication triangle pattern

In order to create effective humour, these four components have to find a balance, but the process does not always work perfectly. The reader can perceive humour in situations where the writer did not really intend to be humorous, or vice versa, the author can write with intent of fun which the reader does not share; also the narrative techniques to produce humour may be ineffective and the form has to be an apt vehicle for humour.

Before writing the Psammead Trilogy, Nesbit had already introduced humour in her works, in the realistic story of the Bastable children, for instance. Later, it was easy for her to combine fantasy and humour, because she was a “natural comedian and had the habit of borrowing from other writers”⁷⁸. The most significant model for Nesbit’s writing humorous fantasy is Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, so that the form of Nesbit’s comedic discourse can be defined Carrollian⁷⁹. Both Nesbit and Carroll managed to combine fantasy and humour in an episodic structure, using similar humorous techniques, such as literary parody and puns.

As concerns, more specifically, Nesbit’s techniques to communicate humour, they can be firstly identified with alliteration and repetition, which, taken to an extreme level, provide running gags; this is a literary device used by authors to arouse fun and entertain the reader. This can be seen from the joke on names taken from the episode “Grown Up”, in *Five Children and It*, when the children wish that their little brother was grown up – “How often am I to tell you that my name is Hilary or St Maur or Devereux”, “the grown-up Lamb”, “The grown-up Lamb (or Hilary, as I suppose one must call him), “the Lamb (or St Maur)”, “the grown up Lamb (otherwise Devereux), “the Lamb, whom I must try to remember to call St Maur”⁸⁰.

⁷⁸ WHITE, Donna R., “Communicating Humour in E. Nesbit’s Fantasy Trilogy”, in *E. Nesbit’s Psammead Trilogy. A Children’s Classic at 100*, edited by Raymond E. Jones, Children’s literature association and The Scarecrow Press, Lanham, 2006, p. 114.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 115.

⁸⁰ NESBIT, *Five Children and It*, p. 189 and ff.

In her humorous fantasy Nesbit often combines different linguistic elements, such as word sounds, meanings, syntax, involving in some cases morphology, as when, for example, in *The Phoenix and the Carpet* she uses the morpheme *un-* as a reminiscence of the un-birthday in *Through the Looking-Glass*.

Other devices which Nesbit uses to produce humour in her readers are malapropism and linguistic register of her characters.

Malapropism involves the misuse of similar sounding words. Even if it is in the adventures of the Bastable that Nesbit makes a larger use of this technique, however, some examples can be found in the trilogy. In the eighth chapter of *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, Robert described the cow brought by the magic carpet as a “remunerating creature”⁸¹, creating a pun between the words “remunerating” and “ruminating”. And when Anthea wishes to have a brain like her parents, she declares to want a “futile brain”, instead of a “fertile brain”⁸².

Another means Nesbit uses to provoke humour is register. Characters often change it throughout a novel, moving easily from slang to a more formal register and vice versa. In Nesbit's trilogy, child characters speak Edwardian slang when they are alone, but they try to speak formally when they address adults; however, their lack of grasp of a more formal register creates humour, as the following examples show. In *The Story of the Amulet* the children know “the learned gentleman”, who helps them in their adventures with the magic amulet; in the third chapter Cyril turns to him with the formal sentence “we're very sorry to disturb you”⁸³, but then his language falls into the pure slang of the following expression “But, of course, if you've got another name that can lick ours, our charm will be no go”⁸⁴. Humour, which often in Nesbit takes the form of parody, derives from a mixture of Edwardian slang and formal archaisms, as, for instance, when Robert tries to speak with a proper language of an historical romance to Sir Wulfric de Talbot, as follows:

“And yesterday we wished for wings, and we got them, and we had a ripping time to begin with”

“Thy speech is strange and uncouth”, said Sir Wulfric de Talbot. “Repeat thy words – what hadst thou?”

⁸¹ NESBIT, Edith, *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, Penguin, London, 1994, p.190.

⁸² *Ibidem*, p. 269.

⁸³ NESBIT, *The Story of the Amulet*, p. 44.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 45-46.

“A ripping – I mean a jolly – no – we were contented with our lot – that’s what I mean; only, after that we got into an awful fix”

“What is a fix? A fray, mayhap?”

“No – not a fray. A – a – a tight place”⁸⁵.

As concerns the other component of the communication triangle pattern, the reader, as Nesbit’s trilogy is considered children’s literature, it is necessary to distinguish a child audience from an adult one. When children choose books for themselves, they certainly choose funnier books than those their parents would choose for them. Children have a different and stronger sense of humour than adults, as they don’t think fantasy is an inferior quality genre.

As the critic Gail Munde observes in his essay “What Are You Laughing At? Differences in Children's and Adults' Humorous Book Selections for Children”, “humour and the forms it takes seem to follow cognitive development but can vary greatly within age cohort groups”⁸⁶. According to Munde, all ages in childhood generate a different sense of humour: a five-year-old child is attracted by exaggeration and nonsense, nine-year-old children prefer puns and riddles, adolescents find fun in sarcasm, insults and ridicule⁸⁷.

Nesbit’s trilogy contains many of these humorous elements. The reader of her fantasy writing is a well-cultured, upper-middle-class child, with a strong sense of humour. Despite the fact that for a contemporary reader it might be difficult to understand the humour of Edwardian children – the components of “space” and “time” are very influential for successful humour – Nesbit’s humour, anyway, turns out to be comprehensible to a contemporary child, being based on characters and situations.

Nesbit’s humour is directed at themes such as food, women, children, fashion. Food is one of her favourite subjects, as the example below shows (she describes an invisible dinner with hilarity):

The next moment all the others were following his [Cyril] example, and opening and shutting their mouths an inch or so from the bare-looking table. Robert captured a slice of mutton, and – but I think I will draw a veil over the rest of this painful scene. It is enough to say that they all had

⁸⁵ NESBIT, *Five Children and It*, pp.130-131.

⁸⁶ MUNDE, Gail, “What Are You Laughing At? Differences in Children’s and Adults’ Humorous Book Selections for Children”, in *Children’s Literature in Education*, vol. 28, no. 4, (1997), p. 220.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 220-221.

enough mutton, and that when Martha came to change the plates she said she had never seen such a mess in all her born days⁸⁸.

Humour also affects women of Nesbit's own social class. When the children in *The Phoenix and the Carpet* are delivered to a local bazar by the magic carpet they "crept out under a stall covered with all sorts of table-covers and mats and things, embroidered beautifully by idle ladies with no real work to do"⁸⁹.

Social class is also a central feature of in Nesbit's humour. The writer shows people belonging to the working-class which experience adventures proper to upper-class or even royal life, as in the episode in *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, when the cook is proclaimed queen and marries a burglar, whose wedding speech is the following:

"Ladies and gentlemen", he said, "and savages of both kinds, only I know I can't understand what I'm a saying of, but we'll let that pass. If this is a dream, I'm on. If it ain't, I'm onner than ever. If it's betwixt and between – well, I'm honest, and I can't say more. I don't want no more 'igh London society – I've got someone to put my arm around of; and I've got the whole lot of this 'ere island for my allotment, and If I don't grow some broccoli as'll open the judge's eye at the cottage flower shows, well, strike me pink"⁹⁰.

Nesbit's humour is occasionally directed to fashion. She sometimes plays with children's attire, making fun of their odd hats or dirty gloves. However, Nesbit's most effective way to make fun of her child characters is to "fill their mouths with malapropisms and their minds with odd perceptions of life that generally derive from the books they have read"⁹¹.

Edith Nesbit infused her magic stories with a new and fresh narrative voice, and with a playful and ironic tone; her works are still worthy of attention and nowadays young readers still find pleasure and fun in her children's fantasy.

⁸⁸ NESBIT, *Five Children and It*, pp. 141-142.

⁸⁹ NESBIT, *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, p. 96.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 223.

⁹¹ WHITE, "Communicating Humour in E. Nesbit's Fantasy Trilogy", p. 120.

2. Time-travel in Edith Nesbit's time-travel fantasies

2.1. Time and Time-travel

2.1.1. The Concept of "time" in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century

The analysis of the concept of "time" has always inspired a large number of reflections and issues. In philosophy and physics "time" has been defined in different ways over the centuries: "static", "dynamic", "epic", "imaginary" and "universal", are only some of the adjectives that have been attributed to it.

At the beginning of the twentieth century important changes occurred, thanks to the formulation of new theories which might have led to talk of a "second scientific revolution", comparable to that revolution which in the seventeenth century had given rise to modern science. These new theories put in crisis the former worldview, which was based on the Newtonian physics and shaped an extraordinarily revolutionary notion of time and space.

Therefore, the twentieth century can be considered not only the century in which new human sciences were born (as, for instance, psychology, anthropology, psychoanalysis), but also the century in which natural sciences entered a new phase of their development. This has radically transformed our vision of reality and has also profoundly influenced the progress of the philosophical thought, leading to a series of new reflections on science and on categories examined by them.

In the nineteenth century both the birth of paleontology as a new science and the important contribution of Charles Darwin had already introduced an innovative approach about the notion of "time". While in 1848 the students of theology at Cambridge were still questioned about the exact date of the great flood (Edith Nesbit's grandfather himself, in his *Essay on Education*, explained the extinction of prehistoric animals on theological grounds, asserting that they had become extinct because Noah had left them out of the ark)⁹², in the same years the study of fossils and the birth of paleontology led to a total change in man's way of thinking about time and his world.

⁹² PRICKETT, Stephen, *Victorian Fantasy*, Baylor University Press, Waco, 2005, p. 75.

The influence that these two elements also had in literature is well recognized in Edith Nesbit's novel *Five Children and It* (1902). When the four children, who live in Fitzroy Street near the British Museum, meet for the first time the Psammmead, the sand-fairy asks them questions about ancient creatures similar to dinosaurs, as in the following passage:

“How very sunny it is – quite like old time. Where do you get your Megatheriums from now?”

“What?” said the children all at once. [...] “Are Pterodactyls plentiful now?” the Sand-fairy went on. The children were unable to reply. “What are Mega-what's-its-names and Ptero-what-do-you-call-thems? And does anyone have them for breakfast?”. “Why, almost everyone had Pterodactyl for breakfast in my time! Pterodactyls were something like crocodiles and something like birds”. [...] “And if they wanted fish, the Ichthyosaurus was asked for”⁹³.

In the Victorian period, time, which until then had been measured on the basis of a datable creation, was now dilated to distant geologic ages.

In those years the English naturalist Charles Darwin became famous for the formulation of his theory of evolution, published in his well-known book *On the Origin of Species* (1859). He spread ideas that were to be considered very innovative for that period, such as the notion of natural selection and the adaptation to the environment, also introducing the possibility of extinction (as Tosi underlines, the figure of the Dodo in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* can be considered one of the symbols of an extinction caused by humans)⁹⁴.

Moreover, the significant technological progress that had taken place in Britain with the Industrial Revolution, had brought real changes which had had effects on social, economic and cultural conditions; the introduction of the railway, a general industrialization and new inventions like the telegraph, for example, had enabled a greater rapidity in trade and communication and a quickening in ordinary life, fully exemplified by Lewis Carroll's White Rabbit. His constant concern about time and his famous words “Oh

⁹³ NESBIT, Edith, *Five Children and It*, Penguin, London, 1996, pp. 14-15.

⁹⁴ TOSI, Laura, “Alla scoperta dei mondi della meraviglia: la *fantasy* vittoriana”, in *Dall'ABC a Harry Potter*, edited by Laura Tosi and Alessandra Petrina, Bononia University Press, Bologna, 2011, p. 187.

dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late”⁹⁵ well represent modern times. The White Rabbit only pays attention to chronos, time measured by clocks and hours; he focuses on his watch so much that he is unable to understand what is happening around him (he mistakes Alice for his housemaid, for example).

Almost a century later, in Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958), for instance, the clock as a magical object, has a double function and it is a metaphor of the double nature of time. Tom is a young boy who lives in his aunt and uncle's old house with no garden. His attention is drawn by a grandfather clock in the hall of the house that strangely strikes thirteen. When he decides to get up to look at it more closely, he finds himself in a different hall and discovers a beautiful garden. From this moment on, every night when the clock strikes thirteen, Tom visits the garden and meets Hatty, a little girl who soon becomes his friend. Here, the boy realises he is invisible and only Hatty can see him.

Time in Tom's world passes differently from that of Hatty's: in the garden, where the children almost create their own paradise, time is subverted and Tom and Hatty experience different seasons and times of day in a non-chronological order⁹⁶.

In Pearce's novel, the clock is certainly metaphor of the flow of time, but it is also Tom's "password" to the magical garden, where special happenings occur (time as kairos)⁹⁷.

The two literary examples above are noteworthy to stress how the way of thinking about time changed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While positivism was focusing on the supremacy of science on nature, theories that radically put this current of thought in a difficult position began to develop.

One of the highest expressions of the reaction to positivism was certainly represented by the French philosopher Henri Bergson. In his *Essai sur le données immédiates de la conscience*⁹⁸ (1889), Bergson observed that the time we experience subjectively is different from the time measured by clocks and calendars; a time which is considered the same by

⁹⁵ This quotation is taken from Lewis Carroll's, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, Penguin, London, 1998, p. 10.

⁹⁶ LEHNERT-RODIEK, Gertrud, "Fantastic Children's Literature and Travel in Time", *Phaedrus*, XIII (1988), p. 63.

⁹⁷ Kairos (καιρός) is a Greek word that in ancient Greece meant "the right moment" or "the time of God" and was in contrast with "kronos". While the latter refers to chronological time, kairos refers to a moment in which something special happens. Therefore, while "kronos" refers to quantitative time, "kairos" has a qualitative nature.

⁹⁸ Bergson's essay was translated in English *Time and Free Will: an Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*.

all the measuring instruments can be felt as shorter or longer by our consciousness, according to the state of mind we are into. Time for joy, for instance, is generally experienced as shorter; on the contrary, time for suffering or boring time is usually experienced as longer. The French philosopher contrasts a time of science with a time of consciousness. The first is defined as cosmological time, a repeatable time, a continuous succession of the same things; on the contrary, the “real” time is the time of consciousness, which Bergson identifies with “real duration” (he drew on St. Augustine’s observations about time). Real duration follows an irreversible process which is in constant change.

A strong turning point to Positivism is represented by Albert Einstein’s⁹⁹ famous theory about relativity, which completely revolutionized the physics and the philosophy of that period. He realised that the Newtonian idea about time and space was only partial, because it considered them two separate entities that were based on Euclidean geometry. In Einstein’s theory time and space are replaced by an entity called space-time, where space and time influence each other. In Einstein’s theory time has ceased to be an objective reality, independent from men’s feelings and opinions. According to Einstein, time did not exist objectively: only a subjective perception of it can be possible. In his theory of special relativity, the German scientist showed that travel in the future could be theoretically possible, confirming what H. G. Wells had anticipated in his novel *The Time Machine* (1895); what ten years earlier was considered impossible by the laws of classical physics could now become a possibility thanks to Einstein’s revolutionary approach to relativity, as Briggs’ following words confirm: “one consequence of his theory was that a limited travel into the future became theoretically possible”¹⁰⁰.

Consequently, it is no accident that Edith Nesbit, only one year later, published her novel *The Story of the Amulet* (1906), in which she pays attention to the problems derived from time travel and shows a great interest in the different ways that time might be experienced and measured.

In an easier and “lighter” version, Nesbit also alludes to Immanuel Kant’s thought about time¹⁰¹, as in the following dialogue between the Psammead and the children:

⁹⁹ Albert Einstein began his career in the Patent Office at Zurich, where he examined applications for coordinating clocks for railway timetables. During this period he produced many among his most remarkable works. In 1905 he published the Special Theory of Relativity, asserting that time and space were a continuum in which the position and the velocity of the observer had influence in perceiving light and phenomena.

¹⁰⁰ BRIGGS, Julia, “*The Amulet and Other Stories of Time*”, in *E. Nesbit’s Psammead Trilogy. A Children’s Classic at 100*, edited by Raymond E. Jones, The Scarecrow Press, Lanham, 2006, pp. 219.

¹⁰¹ In his Transcendental Aesthetic in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), the German philosopher wonders what time and space are. He asserts that time and space are entities with an intuitive nature that cannot derive

“If you would find it”, said the voice, “you must seek it where it still is, perfect as ever”.

“I don't understand”, said Cyril.

“In the Past you may find it”, said the voice.

“I wish we may find it”, said Cyril.

The Psammead whispered crossly, “Don't you understand? The thing existed in the Past, if you were in the Past, too, you could find it. It's very difficult to make you understand things. Time and space are only forms of thought”¹⁰².

Undoubtedly, these changes in physics and in philosophy had also a large impact on literature. The fact that time could now look increasingly relative, led writers to give a more complex meaning to time-travel in literature, so that a real literary subgenre was created.

2.1.2. Main Features of Time-travel as Literary Subgenre

The importance of travel to and from the past in the study of fantasy seems to have a lot to do with the fact that time travel is recognized as an archetypal impulse, strictly linked to the essence of modern fantasy¹⁰³.

As already stated, the sciences of archaeology, anthropology and philology played a fundamental role in the development of time travel as a fantasy subgenre; they encouraged the wish to explore the past, so that visits to previous ages and different historical periods have been frequently associated to the dream dimension.

In fact, as the analysis of some of Edith Nesbit's time-travel fantasies will show further on, the device of the dream is often used by writers who tell stories about journeys in time; the protagonist sometimes mistakes the true reality of dislocation in time for a dream and wonders whether he/she has really travelled through time and space or he/she has only dreamed it all. Some critics agree that the introduction of a device like the dream

from experience. Kant rejects the empiricist, objectivist and conceptualistic theories, as he thinks that time and space belong to the subjectivity of people and depend on it.

¹⁰² NESBIT, Edith, *The Story of the Amulet*, Penguin, London, 1996, p. 52.

¹⁰³ MATHEWS, Richard, *Fantasy. The Liberation of Imagination*, Routledge, New York and London, 2002, p. 26.

to explain extraordinary events in a time-travel text could be seen as a way out for a writer who is not very interested in the psychological changes that occur during a journey in time; on the other hand, to many writers of fantasy, time dislocation is a means to allow a psychological and moral evolution to happen¹⁰⁴. Mistaking a travel in time for a dream is seen by other critics as a means for authors to create suspense in the reader, who has also the opportunity to discover other sides of the characters' personality.

It is just in the last two centuries that a specific subcategory of texts has emerged, where the characters are temporarily dislocated in a secondary time, reached through the passage of a threshold (a door, a magic arch), a magic object (a ring, an amulet), a helper (the Psammead or the learned gentleman, in the case of E. Nesbit) or simply through the power of dreams and imagination.

All time-travel fantasies (or time-slip stories, as they are sometimes named) show many secondary times: in some cases, as in Edith Nesbit's fantasy, the author describes the visits the characters make in different ages (see *The Story of the Amulet*, for example); differently, the journey is sometimes completed within a single historical period, as happens in A. Uttley's *A Traveller in Time* (1939), where Penelope travels back in time to live in the Elizabethan era.

Primary and secondary time do not always coincide. Unlike Edith Nesbit's time fantasies, where the primary time stands still while the child protagonists are in another historical period, *Peter Pan*, for instance, treats time differently. The fact that time stands still or passes in time fantasies has consequences on the different narrative patterns in a fantasy text. For example, while in some time fantasies adults do not notice the children's absence, because primary time is still, on the contrary, in other texts, the children are missed as in the case of *Peter Pan*. In J. M. Barrie's novel it is unclear how long the children stay away from home to live their adventures in Neverland, where measurable time is abolished and chronological time is calculated by "moons and suns"; the protagonist Peter himself, lacks the sense of time.

It can be certainly asserted that important similarities occur between the so-called time fantasies and the novels involving a secondary world, as Nikolajeva points out. According to the Russian critic, if we analyse the narrative structure of various texts, we observe that time distortion, the principal feature of time fantasy which is often expressed by analepsis (primary time stands still while secondary time passes), is also present in

¹⁰⁴ NIKOLAJEVA, Maria, *From mythic to linear. Time in Children's Literature*, The Scarecrow Press, Lanham and London, 2000, pp. 156-157.

secondary world fantasy. On the other hand, travelling through different worlds as a typical pattern of the secondary world fantasy, also exists in time fantasy¹⁰⁵. Moreover, both literary genres show a great interest in the impact of travelling through time and space.

The characters who take a journey back in time go from a realistic setting to a magic world, as Carroll's Alice, for instance, who finds herself in Wonderland after she has left her house in London.

In other cases, it is the magic world itself which intervenes in the characters' everyday life through its magic creatures (Psammead, the sand-fairy in *Five Children and It* or the Phoenix in *The Phoenix and the Carpet*). As Nikolajeva observes, the fact that the characters belong to a well recognizable reality, before their departure, is perhaps the most important difference between fantasy and fairy tale, in which actions take place in an indefinite past (characterized by the incipit "Once upon a time..")¹⁰⁶.

The motif of time-travel fulfills a wide range of functions in literature. It is certainly used by writers for different aims, depending on whether we are talking about children's literature (fantasy, in this particular case) or about adult literature (science fiction, for instance, as we will see in the following paragraph).

As Tosi argues, time-travelling in fantasy plays a fundamental role in the question of identity. When characters in a fantasy novel enter a different time or a secondary world, they discover a reality different from theirs and also the role they have in their own society is decontextualised. While they are travelling through different ages, the characters also make an introspective journey and on their return their identity has changed. Through time-travelling, used as a vehicle for adventure and key of self-discovery, the protagonists can be transported into the past, where they can find relief and protection, as if it could give them something that they lack in their own time.

Moreover, time-travelling offers characters the possibility to fulfill their dreams or wishes in the extra time it gives them (see Edith Nesbit's Psammead trilogy), adding suspense to narration and as a vehicle for expressing political views and influencing public opinion.

This use of time-travelling in fantasy will be illustrated through a discussion of Edith Nesbit's time-travel fantasies, where the characters make a journey into the past which will prove to be a social criticism of their own society and everyday life (this happens when the

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 133.

¹⁰⁶ This quotation is taken from Maria Nikolajeva's "Fairy Tale and Fantasy: From Archaic to Postmodern", in *Marvels and Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, XVII (2003): p. 142.

Queen of Babylon arrives in London, for instance, when she mistakes working-people for slaves; or when the four children meet the expelled boy, who likes school and describes it as a lovely place).

2.2. Time-travel in Science Fiction: H. G. Wells and his Influence on Edith Nesbit's Time-travel Fantasy

2.2.1. A Brief History of Time-travel in Literature

It is not easy to establish which text can be considered the earliest example of a time-travel story, since many early works show elements which could be connected to the motif of time-travel.

Something similar to travelling back in time can even be recognized in some ancient tales and myths, coming from every part of the world. The Hindu mythology, for example, narrates the story of a king who travels to heaven and discovers that many ages have passed on his return to the Earth. *The Chronicles of Japan* (720), one of the books of classical Japanese history, contains a tale about a fisherman who comes back home after a three-day-visit to an undersea palace and finds himself three hundred years in the future¹⁰⁷.

In the following centuries there are no works worthy of being mentioned for what concerns time-travelling, until you get to *A Christmas Carol* (1843), the brief and short novel by Charles Dickens. This famous masterpiece tells the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, a surly and selfish man, who hates Christmas and the atmosphere of kindness and compassion related to it. The story is set on Christmas Eve, when Scrooge refuses his nephew's invitation to dinner and drives out two gentlemen who have asked him for a donation for poor people. When the man returns home from his gloomy office, he receives the visit of Marley's ghost, his business partner, who died seven years before. The apparition is described by the character as follows:

Marley's face. It was not on impenetrable shadow as the other objects in the yard were, but had a dismal light about it, like a bad lobster in a dark

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in D. Rosenberg, *Folklore, Myths, and Legends: a World Perspective*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 2001, p. 421.

cellar. It was not angry or ferocious, but looked at Scrooge as Marley used to look: with ghostly spectacles turned up on its ghostly forehead¹⁰⁸.

The ghost announces to Scrooge that he will be visited by other Three Spirits, the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. The first Ghost arrives and asks him to follow him. The spectre takes him to the countryside where Scrooge spent his childhood; he sees his old school, where a solitary boy, a young Ebenezer, was left there to spend Christmas alone. The Ghost accompanies Scrooge through more Christmases of the past but the sobbing Scrooge can no longer bear those touching visions of his past and prays the Ghost to take him back to his time.

After a heavy sleep, Scrooge awakes and waits for the second Ghost, whose robe, touching it, transports both of them to London on Christmas morning. Here, Scrooge sees people buying things for Christmas dinner and the feast in Cratchit's poor house, the clerk to whom Scrooge had refused to pay a decent wage; the miser and the Ghost of Christmas Present visit Scrooge's nephew's party. At twelve the Ghost disappears.

The third Spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, approaches Scrooge and takes him to different places. The silent spectre takes the old man to the London Stock Exchange, where he hears some businessmen talking about the death of a man. Then, Scrooge visits again Cratchit's house, where the family is mourning Tiny Tim's death, their youngest son. Scrooge's curiosity about the identity of the dead man is satisfied: he finds himself in a churchyard where a grave shows his name on its headstone. Turned pale, Scrooge begs the Ghost to break this vision, making the following promise:

“Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life!”. [...] “I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shutout the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone!”¹⁰⁹.

Scrooge finds himself in his bed, completely transformed by this extraordinary experience. He has Christmas dinner at his nephew's house and becomes a second father to

¹⁰⁸ DICKENS, Charles, *A Christmas Carol*, Kindle edition, location 129.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, locations 971 and 977.

Tiny Tim. Scrooge has now become a different man and behaves with compassion, kindness and sensitivity.

The brilliant novella, divided into five chapters by the author, can be considered one of the earliest time-travel fantasies.

Time is very important in *A Christmas Carol*. It focuses on the three fundamental components of Past, Present and Future. The story begins on Christmas Eve, when Marley's ghost tells Scrooge he will receive the visit of three different ghosts on three successive nights. But when Scrooge awakes it is Christmas morning and he has already been visited by all three ghosts. This time discrepancy (the three nights are compressed into one) is the device Dickens uses to highlight the extraordinary powers of the three Spirits, whose presence invalidates the standard notion of time.

In the novel the motif of time-travelling also plays a central pedagogical role. Scrooge's visits to the past and to the future are crucial for the growth and improvement of his personality; from being a grim and heartless old man at the beginning of the narration, he turns into a compassionate and generous person, who is now susceptible to the Christmas spirit and human values.

According to Julia Briggs, Charles Dickens had great influence on Edith Nesbit's writing, for whom he appears to be one of the most significant literary models. Edith admired Dickens' novels and knew them by heart. His influence is evident in *Harding's Luck* (one of Nesbit's novels discussed by this thesis), which shares some aspects with *Oliver Twist* in its plot. Both Oliver and Dickie are orphans, who participate in a burglary, fail to escape and end up in the care of the lady they are supposed to rob. Like Oliver, the hero of *Harding's Luck* seems to have been born into a very poor family, but then is eventually recognized as a boy of good family¹¹⁰.

2.2.2. H. G. Wells and *The Time Machine*

According to Tosi, time-travelling raises many questions and complications, as for instance: how will the contemporary traveller interact with the human beings of the past or the future? And what happens if he gets stuck in secondary time? The first work which

¹¹⁰ BRIGGS, Julia, *Edith Nesbit: A Woman of Passion*, Tempus, Gloucestershire, 2006, p. 313.

faced these problems was *The Time Machine* (1895) by H. G. Wells¹¹¹. Although he belongs to a different literary genre (he is considered one of the initiators of science fiction), he had great influence on Edith Nesbit and her writing. Both Wells and Nesbit were members of the Fabian Society, a British socialist organization founded in 1884, which encouraged social justice and promoted a series of reforms concerning the improvement of poor people's life conditions.

Julia Briggs informs the reader about a deep friendship between Wells and Nesbit, also reinforced by a great mutual admiration.

Edith and H. G. got on very well. They were both extravert and full of fun – both of them loved long walks and arguments, parties, games of all kinds and charades. Edith borrowed a number of ideas from Wells's books – at first openly and, after their estrangement, covertly, while he may have learned from her something of the art of party giving¹¹².

The great influence H. G. Wells's writing had on Edith Nesbit especially for what concerns time-travel in literature was particularly important and it will be highlighted further on in this thesis.

H. G. Wells, who is nowadays considered one of the fathers of science fiction genre, was born in 1866 in London to a quite poor family. For this reason, he was forced to leave the Thomas Morley's Academy to become an apprentice to a draper at the age of fourteen. In 1883 he won a scholarship to the Normal School of Science in London where he discovered great interest for science, which would serve him in his writing; he studied biology and Darwinism under Thomas Henry Huxley and he soon proved to be interested in a possible reformation of society. He was very active in politics.

H. G. Wells was a prolific writer in different genres, including contemporary novels, political and social commentaries but his biggest literary contribution was given by his science fiction works such as *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898).

His scientific novel *The Time Machine* can be viewed as one of the most innovative time-travel works, in which a machine is built to travel to the future. Before Wells, other writers had written novels about time-travel, but Wells was the first to introduce a strong

¹¹¹ TOSI, Laura, "Time is a very confusing thing: la time fantasy", in *Dall'ABC a Harry Potter*, edited by Laura Tosi and Alessandra Petrina, Bononia University Press, Bologna, 2011, p. 209.

¹¹² BRIGGS, *Edith Nesbit: A Woman of Passion*, p. 321.

dose of scientific speculation into science fiction genre. His character discusses the fourth dimension and the strange astronomy and evolutionary changes he observes while he is travelling through time (for what concerns this aspect Wells was influenced by his teacher Thomas Henry Huxley).

At the beginning of the story Wells's Time Traveller, whose name is never given throughout the narration, is in his room while speaking to his guests about the scientific principles of the journey in the fourth dimension, that is, Time.

“Any real body must have extension in *four* directions: it must have Length, Breadth, Thickness and – Duration. But through natural infirmity of the flesh, which I will explain to you in a moment, we incline to overlook this fact. There are really four dimensions, three which we call the three planes of Space, and a fourth, Time¹¹³. [...]

“Really this is what is meant by the Fourth Dimension, though some people who talk about the Fourth Dimension do not know they mean it, It is only another way of looking Time. There is no difference between Time and any of the three dimensions of Space except that our consciousness moves along it. But some foolish people have got hold of the wrong side of that idea. You have all heard what they have to say about this Fourth Dimension?”¹¹⁴.

Many of the men whom the Time Traveller is speaking to (a Medical Man, a Psychologist) react with scepticism, judging his intention to experiment “all humbug”.

In order to persuade his guests, the inventor shows them a miniature time machine made of ivory and crystal. At its disappearance the astonished men ask why they cannot see the machine and the Time Traveller answers that the small machine, the size of a clock, is now travelling into time and is moving too quickly to be seen.

The Time Traveller, then, leads his guests to his laboratory where they all behold a larger model of the small mechanism they have seen vanish before their eyes, a big time machine, almost a futuristic bike with many levers. At this point of the narration the narrator reports the sceptical reaction of the group of men, who do not believe the Time Traveller, as he is too intelligent a man:

¹¹³ WELLS, Herbert George, *The Time Machine*, Kindle edition, location 17.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*, locations 18 and 25.

I think that at that time none of us quite believed in the Time Machine. The fact is, the Time Traveller was one of those men who are too clever to be believed. [...]. Had Filby shown the model and explained the matter in the Time Traveller's words, we should have shown him far less scepticism. [...]. But the Time Traveller had more than a touch of whim among his elements, and we distrusted him¹¹⁵.

The following week, the men meet at the Time Traveller's house together with some new guests (an editor, a journalist, etc.) but the inventor is absent. He appears after dinner, dusty and dishevelled. After washing and dressing, the Time Traveller is ready to tell his story about his travelling in time to the incredulous audience.

These first two chapters of *The Time Machine* provide the frame to the entire book. In the text Wells introduces a *story within a story* to create suspense (aroused by the scepticism of the guests) and inform the reader about the setting of the story, Victorian England, towards which the author directs his social criticism throughout the narration.

The real time-travel begins in the third chapter, when the Time Traveller, after operating the machine, describes the strange sensations of time travelling:

They are excessively unpleasant. There is a feeling exactly like that one has upon a switchback – of a helpless headlong motion! I felt the same horrible anticipation, too, of an imminent smash. As I put on pace, night followed day like the flapping of a black wing. The dim suggestion of the laboratory seemed presently to fall away from me, and I saw the sun hopping swiftly across the sky, leaping it every minute, and every minute marking a day. I supposed the laboratory had been destroyed and I had come into the open air¹¹⁶.

After having stopped the machine, the man finds himself in front of a giant statue made of white marble and begins to wonder “what might not have happened to men? What if cruelty had grown into a common passion?”¹¹⁷. Panic and fear increase more and more. Near the White Sphinx some creatures are observing him and in a moment the Time Traveller stands face to face with one of them, “a very beautiful and graceful creature, but

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*, Kindle edition, location 126.

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*, Kindle edition, location 214.

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem*, Kindle edition, location 256.

indescribably frail”¹¹⁸. The man is surrounded by other creatures, speaking in a “strange and very sweet and liquid tongue” and is led to one of their huge buildings. Here, the Time Traveller is offered some delightful fruits (is he perhaps in a kind of Eden?) and tries to learn a few words of the language of these unknown creatures. At this point of the story the reader is given immediate access to one of the most important problems about time-travelling in different ages: how can we understand each other if we speak different languages in different eras?

The Time Traveller tries to learn the language of the Eloi (the new creatures he has met) who at his attempts react with laughter, as the in following passage:

I determined to make a resolute attempt to learn the speech of these new men of mine. [...]. I had some considerable difficulty in conveying my meaning. [...]. My first attempts to make the exquisite little sounds of their language caused an immense amount of amusement. However, I felt like a schoolmaster amidst children, and persisted, and presently I had a score of noun substantives at least at my command¹¹⁹.

Unlike Edith Nesbit in her time-travel fantasy *The Story of the Amulet*, Wells focuses his attention on the fact that if a character finds himself/herself in another time, he/she inevitably runs into big language problems.

In addition to this theme, this central part of Wells's story is very significant for the use Wells makes of time-travelling as vehicle of his social criticism of Victorian age.

Instead of finally finding an advanced society (the Time Traveller becomes less and less optimistic in the course of his journey) he discovers that the human race has evolved into two different social classes: the Eloi, childish and graceful beings, and the Morlocks, ape-like creatures and predators. The dystopian hypothesis is that the Eloi are the result of the evolution of the aristocracy but also the food of the Morlocks, the evolution of the working class¹²⁰.

At his arrival in the new world of future, looking around him, the Time Traveller discovers a landscape that makes him think he is in a “communist” paradise, where people live at ease and in safety.

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*, Kindle edition, location 278.

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*, Kindle edition, locations 330 and 337.

¹²⁰ TOSI, Laura, “*Time is a very confusing thing: la time fantasy*”, in *Dall'ABC a Harry Potter*, edited by Laura Tosi and Alessandra Petrina, Bononia University Press, Bologna, 2011, pp. 209-210.

Looking round with a sudden thought from a terrace on which I rested for a while, I realized that there were no small houses to be seen. Apparently the single house, and possibly even the household, had vanished. Here and there among the greenery were palace-like buildings, but the house and the cottage, which form such characteristic features of our own English landscape, had disappeared. "Communism", said I to myself¹²¹.

Exploring the world of 802,701 AD where he now finds himself, the Time Traveller notices that the Eloi live in huge splendid buildings, "gloriously clothed" and "engaged in no toil"¹²². He reflects upon how human intelligence, used in his own time to make life easier, could have led to the birth of these frail and lazy creatures; it is hardship that keeps men intelligent. Differently, "under the new conditions of perfect comfort and security, that restless energy, that with us is strength, would become weakness"¹²³. Here, the author uses his story to make negative comments on communism as he will do later to show the problems of capitalism.

At the same time, in these lines the author is probably criticising progress when it is excessive. The Victorian period was an age of great technical progress and many people agreed that it was a positive thing. With reference to the idea of progress, Wells thought that too much progress led to an over comfortable lifestyle which softened human beings.

The fifth chapter, the central part of the whole book, opens with the disappearance of the time machine and the consequent Time Traveller's feelings of terror and bewilderment. He is sure that no one has travelled in time because on his arrival he had removed the levers of the machine: so, it could only have been moved in space. But where?

Deciding to be patient, the Time Traveller thinks it is a good idea to learn more about the creatures he has just met. He explores the area and tries to learn something new about their simple language and their customs, even about the matter of sepulture, for example: is Wells maybe alluding to Darwin and his theory of extinction? Wells's devotion to Darwinism is even more clear at the end of his novel, when the Time Traveller takes part in a process of involution, which brings him to chaos and destruction.

This chapter is at the centre of Wells's novel. It is in this chapter that the Time Traveller makes friends with Weena, an Eloi creature he rescues from drowning in a river; it is in this chapter that he meets for the first time the Morlocks. And this is the chapter

¹²¹ WELLS, Kindle edition, locations 353 and 360.

¹²² *Ibidem*, Kindle edition, location 401.

¹²³ *Ibidem*, Kindle edition, location 408.

which contains much of the political message of the entire book. Weena, like all the Eloi, is very afraid of the dark and feels safe only at daylight. She behaves like a child and immediately grows fond of the Time Traveller, trying to follow him everywhere and finding protection in sleeping next to him.

On his fourth morning in this world of the future, the Time Traveller finds a narrow gallery and, on entering it, he notices that two eyes, "luminous by reflection against the daylight without", are watching him. It is his first encounter with one of the creatures belonging to the population of the Morlocks; the man guesses that they live underground and come out only at night.

The invention of these two very different types of living beings, the Eloi and the Morlocks, gives the writer the opportunity to introduce his most brilliant lines of social and political criticism:

What so natural, then, as to assume that it was in this artificial Underworld that such work as was necessary to the comfort of the daylight race was done? The notion was so plausible that I at once accepted it, and went on to assume the how of this splitting of the human species. I dare say you will anticipate the shape of my theory; though, for myself, I very soon felt that it fell far short of the truth. At first, proceeding from the problems of our own age, it seemed clear as daylight to me that the gradual widening of the present merely temporary and social difference between the Capitalist and the Labourer, was the key to the whole position. No doubt it will seem grotesque enough to you – and wildly incredible! – and yet even now there are existing circumstances to point that way. There is a tendency to utilize underground space for the less ornamental purposes of civilization; there is the Metropolitan Railway in London, for instance, there are new electric railways, there are subways, there are underground workrooms and restaurants, and they increase and multiply. Evidently, I thought, this tendency had increased till Industry had gradually lost its birthright in the sky¹²⁴.

While Wells has previously criticised communism through an analysis of Eloi society, in this central part of his work the writer attacks capitalism, as the cause of tension between the Eloi and the Morlocks. Wells uses these lines to criticise his society and make

¹²⁴ *Ibidem*, Kindle edition, locations 628 and 635.

a kind of transposition of the Eloi and the Morlocks into society of London in his own time.

In the nineteenth century, London was the emblem of an industrialized city, filled with miserable workers and rich industrialists. The sympathy the Time Traveller feels for the Eloi rather than for the Morlocks, despite his aversion for the Eloi's fragility, allows the reader to understand whom the writer took sides with in his life. Wells attended a school where the working class was prominent and he allied himself with the upper classes, whose decadence, however, turned him off.

In the two following chapters, the Time Traveller makes a journey into the dark Underworld to look for his time machine. He describes it as a "very stuffy and oppressive place", where the Morlocks work as mechanical servants for the Upperworld people, the Eloi. These "nauseatingly inhuman" creatures frighten, hunt and eat the Eloi, as if they wanted to take revenge on them for their submission. The breaking between workers and masters caused by capitalism leads to an inevitable uprising as an evolutionary consequence. Wells's criticism, initially addressed to communism and then to capitalism, is now formulated through a third theory, which includes the idea of class warfare, a key element referring to the well-known Marxism.

The tenth chapter of *The Time Machine* puts an end to the Time Traveller's adventures in 802,701 AD. After escaping the attacks of the Morlocks and finding again his time machine, the Time Traveller operates it and travels into the future, faster than the first time. When he stops the machine, he finds himself on a sloping beach, where he notices the presence of giant crabs. He moves on every hundred years in the future but the landscape he sees is always the same. At last, he stops the time machine thirty million years into the future: the only evidence of life, here, is a "round thing, the size of a football perhaps, or, it may be, bigger, and tentacles trailed down from it". All around, stillness.

The more the Traveller moves into the future, the more the reader goes back in the chain of evolution, until the era of giant crabs and, finally, of an uninhabited land. The direction of travel is towards chaos, disorder, and ultimately, nothing.

The last chapter opens with the Time Traveller's account of his return to his own time and to his laboratory. The audience is speechless and sceptical about the whole story: he has really travelled through time and he is about to do it again. But this time he will never come back.

In this final part of his work Wells, after the tale about Time Traveller's adventures with the Eloi and the Morlocks, turns his character to adventures more directly connected

to time travel. Here, the writer takes pleasure in describing the Time Traveller's journey into the future more scientifically than in the previous pages, in terms of evolution and astronomy; many of the elements of the universe are analysed in the eleventh chapter, as the moon, the circling of the stars, the alternations of night and day, the solar eclipse and the passage of the planet Mercury across the sun's disk, etc...

The Time Machine closes with a brief epilogue in which Wells's pessimistic view of the future softens in a light glimmer of hope:

He, I know – for the question had been discussed among us long before the Time Machine was made – thought but cheerlessly of the Advancement of Mankind, and saw in the growing pile of civilization only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its markers in the end. If that is so, it remains for us to live as though it were not so. But to me the future is still black and blank – is a vast ignorance, lit at a few casual places by the memory of his story. And I have by me, for my comfort, two strange white flowers – shrivelled now, and brown and flat and brittle – to witness that even when mind and strength had gone, gratitude and a mutual tenderness still lived on in the heart of man¹²⁵.

The book, rewritten by Wells six times in a decade, is connected to the author's life experiences and, for this reason, it can be even evaluated according to a socio-psychological approach (the choice of a psychologist among the characters is not made at random). Wells's reaction to his own time society is a clear example of social alienation; he thought the privileged class was a mass of useless people without understanding, whom he refused to belong to.

On this basis, it is evident that the theory of evolution of human species becomes the theory of its involution: the human race has become extinct for self-destruction and the end turns out to be the triumph of darkness.

¹²⁵ *Ibidem*, Kindle edition, locations 1209 and 1216.

2.2.3. Wells vs. Nesbit: Time-travel in Science fiction vs. Time-Travel in Fantasy

According to Rodiek, time-travel is a classic theme in children's literature, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries. It was not very popular before the twentieth century, unless we consider rudimentary examples, such as the classic fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty* or the legendary story about King Arthur.

With the publication of Wells's *The Time Machine*, time-travel begins to be an important motif also in science fiction genre. This novel had a direct influence on children's literature, if we consider, for instance, the good relationship Wells established with Edith Nesbit. She probably used Wells's book as a model for her time-travel stories, especially for *The House of Arden* (1908) and its sequel *Harding's Luck* (1909)¹²⁶.

The motif of time-travel in literature is used in different ways and with different functions, according as it deals with science fiction or fantasy and, consequently, according as the work at issue addresses an adult audience or speaks to children.

While in adult literature time-travel is "rationally-explained" because the protagonist of the story generally travels through time by means of a machine and his journey is scientifically proved, in children's literature the incomprehensible adventures the characters have in time are justified through magical devices (a magic formula, an amulet etc..). Moreover, fantastic and non-fantastic elements are more difficult to distinguish in children's than in adult literature and in Rodiek's opinion this can be considered one of the major differences between these two literary "categories"¹²⁷.

As regards the theme of time-travelling, a main feature distinguishes science fiction from children's fantasy.

While in the former, the time traveller is in general an adult who is transferred into the future, in children's fantasy the protagonist of the journey in time is usually a child or a group of children (see Nesbit's writing), who travel mostly (even if not necessarily) into the past. In children's literature, time-travelling occurs more likely into the past because the past really existed and has the quality of fascinating and satisfying the children's interest in history.

However, children appear interested more in "everyday" history than in extraordinary historical events. Even when they face a "great" event, they pay more attention to the human values the event transmits than in the greatness of the event itself;

¹²⁶ LEHNERT-RODIEK, p. 61.

¹²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

this is maybe in order to enable children to more easily understand history and make it more accessible to them¹²⁸.

In comparison to young readers' literature, time-travel in adult literature seldom allows the characters to be involved in historical adventures. When the characters travel into the past (it rarely happens, as in general in adult literature the writer prefers them to travel into the future) it is a distant past that, as Rodiek asserts, "only clichés can be used to describe it". Adult literature writers believe time-travelling is a literary technique too fanciful to describe history, unlike children's literature, in which the limit between "serious" and "fanciful" is sometimes light and imperceptible.

The two different literary categories, children's literature and adult literature, mainly differ in the aims they assign to time-travelling.

The characters that travel in time in books for children are more involved psychologically in their journey: they learn something and through time-travel they have experiences that help them face difficult situations. Therefore, the motif of time-travel in children's literature has a more specific pedagogical purpose than in adult literature, as the protagonists learn something about human nature and about history.

While in fantasy time-travel is used as an expedient for personal growth, with a didactic function, in science fiction, on the contrary, it often occurs as a vehicle of social criticism; time travellers visit a distant future as a possible projection of their own present and foresee a future which, according to the author's view, is beautiful (utopia) or detestable (dystopia). Although in fantasy characters generally travel into the past, their rare travelling into the future brings fantasy closer to science fiction. Edith Nesbit's *The Story of the Amulet*, as we will see later, is a clear example: the author criticises the London of her own time giving a glimpse of a happy socialist future¹²⁹ (even the school seems to be pleasant in the future, in the episode of the expelled little boy).

But unlike science fiction, Nesbit does not want to foresee the future. She only wants to let her characters learn history in an entertaining manner; this is the reason why she makes the children go back to ages of the past (ancient Egypt, Babylon, Atlantis and Roman Britain).

One of the most relevant features of time-travelling introduced by Nesbit concerns the different levels in which time goes by.

¹²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

¹²⁹ NIKOLAJEVA, Maria, *The Magic Code. The Use of Magical Patterns in Fantasy for Children*, Almqvist and Wiksell, Stockholm, 1988, p. 70.

In *The Story of the Amulet* every time the children return from their travels in time, they find themselves at exactly the same moment they went through the arch created by the amulet, so primary time stands still while they are travelling. Thanks to the expedient of magic, Nesbit can solve this “temporal gap” and get the adults in the story not to notice that the children are missing.

It is the Psammead himself that provides the explanation of Nesbit's treatment of past and present:

“What's the matter? Don't you understand? You come back through the charm-arch at the same time as you go through it. This isn't tomorrow!”

“Is it still yesterday?” asked Jane.

“No, it's today. The same as it's always been. It wouldn't do to go mixing up the present and the Past, and cutting bits out of one to fit into the other”.

“Then all that adventure took no time at all?”

“You can call it that if you like”, said the Psammead.

“It took none of the modern time, anyhow”¹³⁰.

On the contrary, in Wells's *The Time Machine* the Traveller does not need to come back home in time for something; in this science fiction novel primary and secondary time are parallel. As we have previously examined, Wells' Traveller has to learn the language of the secondary time he visits. Nesbit's characters, on their arrival in ancient Egypt in 6000 B.C., do not have problems in understanding other people, even if the epoch is different from theirs; once again, the author uses magic to justify the absence of problems with communication. The four children meet a little girl in Egypt and Anthea is the first to approach her. The narrator gives us his point of view about the problem of language in different ages.

Now, once for all, I am not going to be bothered to tell you how it was that the girl could understand Anthea and Anthea could understand the girl. You, at any rate, would not understand me, if I tried to explain it, any more than you can understand about time and space being only forms of thought. You may think what you like. Perhaps the children had found out the universal language which everyone can understand, and which

¹³⁰ NESBIT, *The Story of the Amulet*, p. 88.

wise men so far have not found. [...] The fact remains that in all their adventures the muddle-headed inventions which we call foreign languages never bothered them in the least. They could always understand and be understood. If you can explain this, please do. I daresay I could understand your explanation, though you could never understand mine¹³¹.

Although Wells and Nesbit write to different audiences, they both address a new generation, sharing the idea that time-travel has to provide a temporal objectivity necessary to introduce a cultural reform in the present. While Nesbit considers the forays into the past the best way to give lessons to her readers and to recover lost stability, Wells thinks it is more useful to throw the Time Traveller into a distant future in order to warn late Victorians against the destruction of society.

2.3. Time-travel in Nesbit's Time-travel fantasies

2.3.1. *The Story of the Amulet*

The Story of the Amulet was published in 1906 but Edith Nesbit had started writing it in 1903. It is Nesbit's first time-travel story and it will be followed by *The House of Arden* and its sequel *Harding's Luck*, both analysed in the following paragraph.

In the opening pages of *The Story of the Amulet*, the writer herself makes reference to the other two works that make up the Psammead Trilogy, *Five Children and It* (1902) and *The Phoenix and the Carpet* (1904).

The characters in *The Story of the Amulet* are the same the reader has already met in the other two volumes. The four children (the children's baby brother, the Lamb, as they call him, is absent in this book because he is away with his mother in Madeira) are spending their summer holidays at their old nurse's house in Fitzroy Street, near the British Museum (which will be an important setting in the novel). While they are wandering in the neighbourhood, they enter a pet shop where they surprisingly find the Psammead, the

¹³¹ *Ibidem*, pp.63-64.

important “tutor” that had granted them the fulfillment of their wishes in *Five Children and It*. This Psammead’s magical ability becomes now secondary to the power of the charm the children buy in the same shop where they find the Psammead himself. The charm is half of a magical Egyptian Amulet that can grant their “hearts’ desire” – their parents’ returning home – if they succeed in finding the missing half. The sand creature tells the children that the part they already own “has the power to take you anywhere you like to look for the other half”¹³². So the children begin their quest, making several journeys in different historical periods and, finally, achieving their purpose: the two halves of the Amulet are rejoined and the family is reunited.

The Story of the Amulet opens with Nesbit’s dedication to her friend (and then lover) Wallis Budge, “as a small token of gratitude for his unfailing kindness and help in the making of it”¹³³. He was the Keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities at the British Museum and suggested to Nesbit the shape for the Amulet – similar to the Isis knot – the hieroglyphics and the words of power written on it “Ur-Hekau-Setchek”.

After the purchase of the Psammead (he can no longer fulfill wishes but it can be a useful and experienced guide) and of the Amulet, the children ask their nurse’s neighbour, the learned gentleman, for help. He will accompany them in some of their time-travelling adventures and will help them understand the inscription on the Amulet (Nesbit is an innovative writer in introducing an adult in time travelling, as in time-travel fantasies only children are generally transported into different ages). The man, whose room is certainly inspired by Wallis Budge’s room at the British Museum¹³⁴, analyses the magical object and tells the children the words the Amulet relates. Once they are alone, they immediately pronounce the magical formula: the room turns dark, a beautiful light appears and a voice begins to speak:

“If you would find it”, said the voice, “you must seek it where it still is, perfect as ever”.

“I don’t understand”, said Cyril.

“In the Past you may find it”, said the voice.

“I wish we may find it”, said Cyril.

The Psammead whispered crossly, “Don’t you understand? The thing existed in the Past. If you were in the Past, too, you could find it. It’s very

¹³² *Ibidem*, p. 40.

¹³³ Opening page of *The Story of the Amulet*.

¹³⁴ BRIGGS, *Edith Nesbit: A Woman of Passion*, p. 273.

difficult to make you understand things. Time and space are only forms of thought"¹³⁵.

The Psammead's account is a reference to Immanuel Kant's idea of time expressed in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), where the philosopher asserts that time and space are constructs of our mind, intuitions of our sensibility, rather than "facts". Later, other philosophers and writers will argue about the different ways of considering time (Henri Bergson, Marcel Proust etc.) and *The Story of the Amulet* evidently stresses the problems time travel arouses in experiencing time.

Two days after meeting the Psammead and buying the Amulet, when "even London looked pretty"¹³⁶, "the little ragged children" begin their adventure and, after going through the red arch the magical words pronounced by Cyril have created, they find themselves in the Ancient Egypt in the year 6000 B.C. Here, the children meet a girl who at first does not see them and gets scared. Anthea tries to calm her, saying they are only children who want to see the place she lives in; the girl seems to trust them and speaks in turn.

This is the first episode of the entire book in which the narrator feels the need to underline that there are not problems in communication, even if the children find themselves in an epoch different from their own. Unlike *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, where the phoenix must translate and sometimes suggest to the children what they must say in order to be understood, in *The Story of the Amulet* the children seem to have found a universal language and adapt themselves to all languages everywhere (they will be further able to speak to the Queen of Babylon, too).

The girl shows the children the village, their way of building houses and trapping fish and "the most wonderful things made of flint and different sorts of stone, beads, and ornaments, and tools and weapons of all sorts and kinds"¹³⁷. The children are delighted at what they see and begin "to see how very few of the things they had always thought they could not do without were really not at all necessary to life"¹³⁸. The didactic purpose of the motif of time-travel is revealed: thanks to their journeys into the past the children deal with a process of growth that teaches them something. When Robert says "what a lot we could

¹³⁵ NESBIT, *The Story of the Amulet*, p. 52.

¹³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 58.

¹³⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 70-71.

¹³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

teach them if we stayed here!” referring to the Egyptian inhabitants of the village, his brother promptly replies “I expect they could teach us something too¹³⁹”.

The girl reveals that the Amulet they are looking for is in a secret sacred place but, as they are attacked by enemies, the children are forced to leave: the charm is held up towards the East, the word of power is spoken and the Amulet grows into a great arch. The children find themselves in Regent's Park, surrounded by “the dull, faint, greeny-brown of London grass and trees”¹⁴⁰.

Their second adventure is one of the most exciting of the whole book and gives the writer many elements to develop her social criticism to London, as the children visit Babylon, which is seen as the “antagonist” of the British capital of their own time.

The sixth chapter, entitled *The way to Babylon*, opens with a stanza of a ballad Jane is singing to her doll “How many miles to Babylon”. The sound draws the learned gentleman's attention and, after a few verses said together, he talks about Babylon, “a great and beautiful city, and the centre of learning and Art”¹⁴¹ and suggests that the missing half of the Amulet could be there. The children decide to follow his advice and their second journey to the Past, to Babylon, begins.

The narrator gives a vivid description of the beautiful ancient city and the people who live in it:

There were scattered houses of wood and stone here and there among green orchards, and beyond these a great wall that shone red in the early morning sun. [...] Beyond the wall were more towers and houses, gleaming with gold and bright colours. Away to the left ran the steel-blue swirl of a great river. [...] There were terraces, and gardens, and balconies and open spaces with trees. [...] Then the people – there were no black frock-coats and tall hats; no dingy coats and skirts of good, useful, ugly stuffs warranted to wear. Everyone's clothes were bright and beautiful with blue and scarlet and green and gold. [...] The children had never seen half so many beautiful things together, even at Liberty's¹⁴².

The children are welcomed by the splendid Queen of Babylon who, however, shows herself to be unmerciful when the children ask her for the Amulet and sends them to the

¹³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 86.

¹⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 95.

¹⁴² *Ibidem*, pp. 99, 104 and 105.

dungeons, showing them the dark side of Babylon civilization. Only by invoking the Babylonian god Nisroch (perhaps Wallis Budge's contribution to the story) the children can be reunited to Jane and the Psammead (who had disappeared until that moment with the Amulet) and come back to Fitzroy Street.

The eighth chapter *The Queen in London* describes the Babylonian Queen's visit to London; she instantly expresses her disgust for that "hideous city" and for the "horrid, ignorant people" who live in it¹⁴³. The children take her to the British Museum but their visit is a disaster, since the Queen claims that the necklaces and earrings in the glass cases are hers. The group leaves the Museum and heads toward Throgmorton Street, the center of London's financial district. On their way, the Queen is very surprised by the conditions of working-people, treated as slaves, in her opinion. The children object to the word "slaves" and she answers:

"Do you suppose I don't know a slave's face when I see it? Why don't their masters see that they're better fed and better clothed? Tell me in three words".

No one answered. The wage-system of modern England is a little difficult to explain in three words even if you understand it – which the children didn't¹⁴⁴.

As the narration proceeds, Nesbit's social criticism becomes increasingly stronger and sharper. In the extract above, the writer points out the bad economic reality the working people live in, because of capitalism of her own time. The Queen worries about those "slaves" more than the powerful society of their own time and wishes that "all slaves may have in their hands this moment their fill of their favourite meat and drink"¹⁴⁵. And so it is. The children and the Queen finally arrive to the Stock Exchange. Here, as they are threatened by the police, the Babylonian Queen disappears and goes back to her own time.

The ugliness of London totally clashes with the beauty of Atlantis, the place the children reach in their third travel, accompanied this time by the learned gentleman, Jimmy, as he wants to be called. Nesbit gives the reader a brilliant description of the city, using colours and light.

¹⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 141.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 148.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 149.

The blue sea sparkled in soft sunlight; little white-capped waves broke softly against the marble breakwaters that guarded the shipping of a great city from the wilderness of winter winds and seas. The quay was of marble, white and sparking with a veining bright as gold. The city was of marble, red and white. The greater buildings that seemed to be temples and places were roofed with what looked like gold and silver, but most of the roofs were of copper that glowed golden-red on the houses on the hills among which the city stood, and shaded into marvelous tints of green and blue and purple where they had been touched by the salt sea spray and the fumes of the dyeing and smelting works of the lower town¹⁴⁶.

Unlike Babylon, Atlantis seems perfect; it shows neither signs of torture, nor slavery, nor imprisonment and “seems to indicate a far higher level of civilization than the Egyptian or Babylonish”¹⁴⁷. This journey reveals itself to be unsuccessful: the whole city is flooded by a huge wave and the children, without finding the Amulet, come back home together with the learned gentleman, who thinks it is all a dream.

The following chapter focuses on Nesbit's social criticism. Again, the writer condemns London's social institutions, but this time she pays attention to the difficult situation of a single child, a little black girl, Imogen (inspired by the heroine of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*) whom the children find in St. James's Park. Her parents are dead and the following day she is doomed to be sent to the Workhouse. The children do not want to abandon her and when the learned gentleman wishes to find a place where someone is happy to have her (the Psammead fulfills his wish), they all find themselves in the Britain of 55 B.C. The children ask the Psammead why they are there at that moment and the sand fairy replies as follows:

“You don't suppose anyone would want a child like that in *your* times – in *your* towns?” said the Psammead in irritated tones. “You've got your country into such a mess that there's no room for half your children – and no one to want them”¹⁴⁸.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 160.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 167.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 183.

Like Atlantis, Ancient Britain is described by Nesbit as an example of utopia; here, she focuses her attention on the value Britons attribute to children, as the narrator underlines in the following extract:

I wish you could have seen all the honours and kindnesses lavished on the children and the learned gentleman by those ancient Britons. You would have thought, to see them, that a child was something to make a fuss about, not a bit of rubbish to be hustled about the streets and hidden away in the Workhouse. It wasn't as grand as the entertainment at Babylon, but somehow it was more satisfying¹⁴⁹.

As Tosi underlines, one of the most distinguishing features of the Edwardian period is the decrease in child mortality, with the consequent increase of parents' economical and emotional care for their children. However, the conditions of the children of the working class were extremely unstable. In *The Story of the Amulet*, the poor Imogen succeeds in finding a loving mother only in the Queen of Ancient Britain, at a time when children were lovingly treated; all the past civilizations the four children visit in their travels in time take better care for children than contemporary Britain does¹⁵⁰.

After Imogen happily finds a loving mother in Ancient Britain, Cyril suggests coming back home before the fighting starts. Her sister Jane does not understand what he is talking about, but presently it is disclosed: they all find themselves in Caesar's camp. Anthea thinks they could change history by asking him not to invade Britain (as they have learnt in history books). So, the children tell him they "come from the country where the sun never sets" and ask him "not to trouble about conquering Britain"¹⁵¹. Paradoxically, their request has an opposite effect: what the children tell Caesar about Britain of their own time (what guns are, how a pistol works), makes the General decide to invade it, although he previously thought Britain was not worthy to be conquered.

Through the adventures of Imogen and Caesar, this chapter lays stress on one of the most substantial problems about time travel, that is the influence the past has on the children and, vice versa, the effect the children have on the past: is it possible for a girl, like Imogen, to primarily live in London in the twentieth century and then lead her life in

¹⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 187.

¹⁵⁰ TOSI, Laura, "Time is a very confusing thing: la time fantasy", in *Dall'ABC a Harry Potter*, edited by Laura Tosi and Alessandra Petrina, Bononia University Press, Bologna, 2011, p. 211.

¹⁵¹ NESBIT, *The Story of the Amulet*, p. 189.

such a distant past? Do the children run risks while they are in the past? Can they change the past? They try to persuade Caesar not to invade Britain in vain, as they well know the deeds the great General accomplished from their school lessons. When they come back to their own time, the children share their opinions about what has happened in the Britain of 55 B.C. and their power to change the course of history:

“And If you hadn't told Caesar all that about how things are now, he'd never have invaded Britain”, said Robert to Jane as they sat down to tea.

“Oh, nonsense”, said Anthea, pouring out; “it was all settled hundreds of years ago”.

“I don't know”, said Cyril. “Jam, please. This about time being only a thingummy of thought is very confusing. If everything happens as the same time”.

“It can't!” said Anthea stoutly, “the present's the present ad the past's the past”¹⁵².

The following journey the four children make may appear less significant than the other. It is surely less impressive in the descriptions of the new Egyptian society, but it functions as a transient but preparatory element for the quest of the Amulet.

Once again, they visit Egypt, in a different age. The Egyptian city they arrive in is very far from being a utopian place, unlike Atlantis and Babylonian. The children find themselves in a crowd of working people who are striking for better conditions and then are welcomed by the Pharaoh. He is curious about the creature that is moving in the children's sack and he thinks it is “a very curious monkey”¹⁵³, so that the Psammead is carried away by the Pharaoh's guards for his beast collection and the children are imprisoned. Their special animal guide, the Psammead, is soon recovered in exchange for “a bit of magic”¹⁵⁴: the floor is covered with gold and precious stones and the children can now hold up the Amulet and come back home. However, without the missing Amulet.

At this point of the story, the reader is led to a new direction. This new negative experience of the four characters leads him/her to realise that the solutions to society's problems cannot be found in the Past, from which we can certainly draw the best features

¹⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 193.

¹⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 210.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 214.

and combine them with a new society. The reader and the characters, too, are now ready to look into the future¹⁵⁵.

Now that the children have learnt how to travel through time, their quest for the Amulet changes.

In the twelfth chapter Cyril proposes a new plan:

“It’s really not any good our going into the Past looking for the Amulet. The Past’s as full of different times as – as the sea is of sand. We’re simply bound to hit upon the wrong time. We might spend our lives looking for the Amulet and never see a sight of it”¹⁵⁶.

“If”, said Cyril, very slowly indeed, “we go into the future – after we’ve found the Amulet” [...] “There will be a time *after* we’ve found it. Let’s go into *that* time – and then we shall remember *how* we found it. And then we can go back and do the finding really”¹⁵⁷.

The children walk through the arch of the Amulet and immediately find themselves in the British Museum. The complete Amulet lies in a glass case with the name of their learned gentleman. Unfortunately, they cannot remember why the Amulet is there yet. The London of the future that the children can now admire is “like a lovely picture”, as Anthea says: there is no sign of pollution and the image the author gives is that of an ideal city.

The houses opposite the Museum were gone. Instead there was a big garden, with trees and flowers and smooth green law, and not a single notice to tell you not to walk on the grass and not to destroy the trees and shrubs and not to pick the flowers. [...] A good many people were sitting on the seats, and on the grass babies were rolling and kicking and playing – with very little on indeed. Men, as well as women, seemed to be in charge of the babies and were playing with them¹⁵⁸.

¹⁵⁵ RAHN, Suzanne, “*The Story of the Amulet* and the Socialist Utopia”, in *E. Nesbit’s Psammead Trilogy. A Children’s Classic at 100*, edited by Raymond E. Jones, Children’s literature association and The Scarecrow Press, Lanham, 2006, p. 197.

¹⁵⁶ NESBIT, *The Story of the Amulet*, p. 217.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 220-221.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 223-224.

It is in this perfect and utopian London (that reminds us of the Britons in their taking care of the children) that the children meet the expelled little boy. He is sad because he has been expelled from school for a day for throwing a sheet of paper in the playground. In the future school is a nice place, “the loveliest place there is”¹⁵⁹, where you can choose your own subjects. The children hardly understand his discomfort, as school is only a boring thing for them. Wells – this is the name of the little boy, after Nesbit's great Fabian friend H. G. Wells, whom the little boy's mother mentions as Robert asks her why she has chosen this name for him – brings the children to his house. They are surprised when they enter a room deliberately built and furnished for children, where there is no fireplace, so that they do not hurt themselves (on the contrary, in the London of their own time, “more than 3,000 children are burned to death every year”¹⁶⁰, as Robert observes, increasing Wells's mother's amazement, who wonders what a frightful place they must live in).

In this idyllic future, where people attend classes to learn how to be good citizens, there are no class distinctions. Thanks to the Amulet Wells's mother has a look at the children's world and notices it is “a hateful, dark, ugly place!”¹⁶¹. So she is instantly sent back to her time, “where London is clean and beautiful and the Thames runs clear and bright, and the green trees grown, and no one is afraid, or anxious, or in a hurry”¹⁶².

Many critics agree that Nesbit's vision of the perfect city was inspired by two earlier works, William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) and H. G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905), both parodied exactly in the XII chapter of *The Story of the Amulet*, “The Sorry-Present and the Expelled Little Boy”. Both Morris and Nesbit, for instance, use the British Museum as important setting for their stories and many of Morris's descriptions remind us of the places the four children visit. On the contrary, both Nesbit and Wells stress the importance of children as future citizens and they share the literary device of the juxtaposition of present and future, which perfectly works in Wells as in Nesbit.

When the children decide to travel again into the future, they find themselves at the learned gentleman's house. Here, they recognise themselves as grown-ups in some photos and suddenly realise the changes time leads to:

The learned gentleman pointed to a frame with four photographs in it.
“There you are” he said. The children saw four grown up people's

¹⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 226.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 229.

¹⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 232.

¹⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 232.

portraits – two ladies, two gentlemen – and looked on them with loathing. “Shall we grow up like that?” whispered Jane. “How perfectly horrid!”. “If we’re like that, we shan’t know it’s horrid. I expect”, Anthea with some insight whispered back. “You see, you get used to yourself while you’re changing. It’s – it’s being so sudden make it seem so frightful now”¹⁶³.

The learned gentleman recalls how they were when they were children and tells them their nurse is dead. When they hear this news, they decide to immediately come back home to their time, but not before asking him the most important thing: where did he get the Amulet he had in his hands? The gentleman answers that the children gave it to him on 3rd December, 1905, but he does not know where they got it, because they never told him.

The last two chapters are the turning-point of the whole story. The children make a journey to ancient Tyre where they meet Rekh-mara again, the Priest who had led them to the palace of Pharaoh on their second journey to ancient Egypt. On his neck a half-amulet exactly like theirs is gleaming and he is looking for the missing half, too. The children come back to their own time, but Rekh-mara reappears in London, while they are visiting the Egyptian Hall with their nurse. They bring him into their bedroom and the Priest suggests recomposing the two halves of the Amulet. However, Robert retorts that Rekh-mara’s is the same half as theirs (the children had previously asked the Amulet “Take us where you are¹⁶⁴” and so they were transported to Tyre).

Next morning, the four characters find Rekh-mara in the learned gentleman’s room: the two men are studying together and they have become good friends. Jimmy suggests that the Priest and the children should go “back into the Past at a moment when the Amulet is unwatched¹⁶⁵” and, after uttering the Name of Power, they find themselves in a small and dark chamber of a Temple. The whole Amulet is there. Jane takes it and they all quickly come back to their time and their house. Now, their heart’s desire is fulfilled: the children’s nurse announces to them that their parents are returning home.

However, the joy for the news is dimmed by a dilemma: now that the Amulet is whole it has no longer the power to transport them into time.. What can the children do with Rekh-mara, still there, in their own time? The beautiful voice of the Amulet gives them the answer:

¹⁶³ *Ibidem*, pp. 234-235.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 240.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 270.

“Nobody can continue to live in a land and in a time not appointed”, said the voice of glorious sweetness. “But a soul may live, if in that other time and land there be found a soul so akin to it as to offer it refuge, in the body of that land and time, that thus they two may be one soul in one body”.

The children exchanged discouraged glances. But the eyes of Rekh-mara and the learned gentleman met, and were kind to each other, and promised each other many things, secret and sacred and very beautiful¹⁶⁶.

After Jane holds up the Amulet between the learned gentleman and Rekh-mara and says the word of Power, two arches grow and something extraordinary happens: the two men find themselves under the double arch, close to one another, as they were drawn to a magnet. Rekh-mara disappears into the learned gentleman and the two men's souls melt into the body of the learned gentleman himself. Robert notices that a centipede is crawling on his foot and the wise Psammead explains to the children that the animal is “the evil in the soul of Rekh-mara”¹⁶⁷ and that they are going to have their heart's desire. The children give Jimmy the Amulet as a gift and go downstairs to hail and hug their parents.

This final chapter proves that the quest for a socialist utopia goes hand in hand with the pursuit of an ideal personal growth.

What is good in the past – Rekh-mara's deep knowledge of the ancient world – joins what is good in the present, Jimmy, and the bad side is rejected (the centipede); the social rebirth *The Story of the Amulet* praises, is analogous to the regeneration of the individual, which is well illustrated by the union of Rekh-mara's soul to Jimmy.

According to some critics, the Amulet, besides being a reminder of mortality (see the children's nurse's death), is a “technological” device which has the power to prove Nesbit's immanentist perspective: life and death cannot be clearly disconnected, because the body and the spirit are joined together¹⁶⁸. The incomplete Amulet brings fertility (“it can make the corn grow, and the waters flow, and the trees bear fruit, and the little new beautiful babies come”¹⁶⁹, the Psammead says) and makes the children travel through time.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 277-278.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 279.

¹⁶⁸ WOOD, Naomi, “Materiality, the Wish and the Marvelous: E. Nesbit's Comic Spirituality in the Psammead Trilogy” in *E. Nesbit's Psammead Trilogy. A Children's Classic at 100*, edited by Raymond E. Jones, Children's literature association and The Scarecrow Press, Lanham, 2006, p. 101.

¹⁶⁹ NESBIT, *The Story of the Amulet*, p. 39.

The whole Amulet, however, can give the children their heart's desire and make the two men "pass through the perfect charm to the perfect union"¹⁷⁰.

The great double arch glowed in and through the green light that had been there since the Name of Power had first been spoken – it glowed with a light more bright yet more soft than the other light – a glory and splendour and sweetness unspeakable. [...]

Rekh-mara, Divine Father of the Temple of Amen-Ra, was drawn into, slipped into, disappeared into, and was one with Jimmy, the good, the beloved, the learned gentleman¹⁷¹.

2.3.2. *The House of Arden* and its Sequel *Harding's Luck*

Nesbit's later time-travel fantasies, *The House of Arden* (1908) and its sequel *Harding's Luck* (1909) seem to be more complex, as they analyse the theme of time-travel in greater detail. Unlike *The Story of the Amulet*, in which the children characters are the same in their past journeys as in their own present, in these two works Edred, Elfrida and Richard/Dickie Arden have double identities and their travels in time are certainly necessary for their process of inner growth.

In *The House of Arden* the two brothers Edred and Elfrida Arden, heirs to an ancient castle, have the possibility to travel in time only if they behave and do not argue. The magical white mole, the Mouldiwarp, whose help is fundamental to time travel, puts them on their guard: only if they will act properly they will find "the door" of the room. In the attic of their house, unexpectedly, the children do not find the treasure they are looking for to restore the castle, but only chests with clothes inside, clothes from different ages of the past. They have to change into them before leaving. Every time they wear different clothes they also change identities.

"What I mean is how to find the treasure, and make Edred brave and wise and kind". [...] "Make you brave and wise? That can't be done all in a minute. That's a long job, that is", said the mole viciously. [...] "Well,

¹⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 276.

¹⁷¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 278-279.

I'll give you a piece of advice. Don't you be nasty to each other for a whole day, and then". [...] "What is it we are to do when we've been nice to each other for a whole day?" "Well, when you've done that", said the mole, "look for the door. "What door?" asked Elfrida. "*The* door", said the mole. [...] "Oh!", said Edred. "I'm kind and wise now. I feel it inside me. So now we've got the treasure. We'll rebuild the castle". [...] "And in all the chests there was no treasure at all, only clothes. Clothes and more clothes again. "Well, never mind", said Elfrida, trying to speak comfortably. "They'll be splendid for dressing up in". "That's all very well", said Edred, "but I want the treasure". "Perhaps", said Elfrida, with some want of tact, "perhaps you're not 'good and wise' yet. Not quite, I mean"¹⁷².

However, after Edred and Elfrida's fourth journey into the past, the real treasure the children are looking for turns out to be Lord Arden's return home, the father they thought dispersed in South America with their uncle Jim. Thanks to Richard/Dickie's help (their cousin, who becomes the protagonist of the sequel *Harding's Luck*), Edred and Elfrida understand what is important in life and learn to do without the material treasure – the hidden money to properly restore the castle and the glory of the family – and without magic¹⁷³. Richard/Dickie strongly scolds his cousins for not realising that the most important search for them is to find their lost father, instead of the treasure that they have persisted in seeking in their various journeys.

"Tell me, what did you mean about my father?" Edred said again.

"I tried to find you, I asked for Lord Arden. What I found wasn't you, it was your father. And the time was your time, July, 1908!"

"What!" cried Edred and Elfrida together.

"Your father, he's alive, don't you understand? And you've been bothering about finding treasure instead of finding him.

"Daddy, alive!" Elfrida clung to her brother. "Oh, it's not right, mixing him up with magic and things. Oh, you're cruel, I hate you!"¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² NESBIT, Edith, *The House of Arden*, Kindle edition, locations 414, 427, 430 and 491.

¹⁷³ LEHNERT-RODIEK, p. 64.

¹⁷⁴ NESBIT, *The House of Arden*, Kindle edition, location 2528.

Edred and Elfrida's process of personal improvement is now complete. Their travels in the different periods of the past occur only to allow the development of their personalities and they are the author's means of reinforcing a didactic function. It is worth noting that the historical ages the children visit are not described in detail and the historical events are in the background to allow the characters to achieve their inner growth rather than to pay attention to the plain historical happenings.

In the sequel *Harding's Luck*, the development of the protagonist's personality is more important than the process of growth of the Arden cousins in *The House of Arden*.

In *Harding's Luck* Nesbit tells the story of Dickie, a lame boy who lives with his aunt at New Cross (she is not really his aunt, but just the woman of the house where his father had lodged before dying). As Dickie is to leave this cruel woman, he agrees to follow Beale, a tramp he meets and offers him to be his dad. So he begins to wander with him, until one day, after arranging the Tinkler his real father has given him before dying and the seeds from the moonflowers he has planted in his neighbour's garden in crossed triangles, magic begins. Thanks to this magic, a healthy Dickie awakes in the Jacobean time (in the seventeenth century he is not lame), in a room he has never seen before. In this 'other' life he enjoys unknown privileges – he learns to fence, to carve wood, he studies Greek and Latin – and turns out to be Richard, Edred and Elfrida's noble cousin and the true heir of the noble Arden family.

More than once Dickie/Richard moves through time from the Edwardian age to the seventeenth century and lives alternately two different realities, always doubting he is dreaming every time he finds himself in the "other" reality (dreaming is a recurrent dimension in *The Story of the Amulet*, too, as the learned gentleman thinks to live in a dream every time he travels into the past with the four children).

It was all so difficult. Was the Dickie Harding who had lived at New Cross [...] and taken the open road with Mr. Beale? Or was he that boy with the other name whose father was a knight, and who lived in a house in Deptford with the green trees outside the windows¹⁷⁵?

¹⁷⁵ NESBIT, Edith, *Harding's Luck*, Kindle edition, location 1069.

For Dickie, dream and reality are indistinguishable throughout the narration and only at the end of the story the reader understands that Dickie's "dreams" are only an integral part of his process of growing up¹⁷⁶:

"When I was a little boy, nurse, I had mighty strange dreams – of another life than this".

"Forget them", she says; "dreams go to the making of all proper men. But now thou art a man; forget the dreams of thy childhood, and play the man to the glory of God and of the House of Arden. And let thy dreams be of the life to come, compared to which all lives on earth are only dreams. And in that life all those who have loved shall meet and be together forevermore, in that life when all the dear and noble dreams of the earthly life shall at last and forever be something more than dreams"¹⁷⁷.

The idealization of childhood as the more innocent phase of life in an adult's existence that Nesbit underlines in *The House of Arden*, is replaced in *Harding's Luck* by an awareness embodied in the character of Dickie.

After helping Beale to come back to the straight and narrow path (thanks to Dickie, the tramp/burglar finds his father again and marries the housekeeper Amelia), the boy decides to go back to the past, where he is healthy and loved, and will leave to Edred and Elfrida's father the inheritance of the rich Arden family.

The lessons that Dickie learns in the Jacobean past are very useful in his present and he seems to have already absorbed what his cousins are trying to learn¹⁷⁸. In all his generosity, the boy takes on the responsibility of an adult, Beale, who has acted as a father to him for a while, turning upside down the ordinary rules and decides to give up his noble title.

He felt rather heroic. He did not want the treasure. It was not for him. He was going to help Edred and Elfrida to get it. He did not want the life at Lavender Terrace. He was going to help Mr. Beale to live it. So let him feel a little bit of a hero, since that was what indeed he was, even though,

¹⁷⁶ LEHNERT-RODIEK, p. 64.

¹⁷⁷ NESBIT, *Harding's Luck*, Kindle edition, locations 3497 and 3504.

¹⁷⁸ FRANK, Catherine, "Tinklers and Time Machines: Time Travel in the Social Fantasy of E. Nesbit and H.G. Wells" in *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, edited by Carrie Hintz and Elaine Ostry, Routledge, New York and London, 2003, p. 78.

of course, all right-minded children are modest and humble, and fully sensible of their own intense unimportance, no matter how heroically they may happen to be behaving¹⁷⁹.

While in *The Story of the Amulet* the children visit ancient civilizations (Babylon, Atlantis, Ancient Egypt, as we have seen before), in *The House of Arden* and its sequel Nesbit makes her characters travel in different ages of the English history. The fourth journeys in time Edred and his sister Elfrida undertake in *The House of Arden* occur in four different centuries. At first they are transported to 1807, in Napoleon's time, when the French war is going to break out. Then, Elfrida alone finds herself in 1707, during Queen Anne's reign (in the meantime Edred is sitting on the second hand of the daisy clock to stop time, which otherwise goes forward). Chapter eight describes the two brothers' journey at the time of James I in 1605: it's 5th November, Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot is going to take place; the children are imprisoned for high treason in the Tower of London with Lord and Lady Arden. The last Elfrida and Edred's time travel transports them to 1535, when they meet, on May-day, Henry VIII and his second wife Anne Boleyn; Elfrida wants to warn her about her destiny but the Queen only bursts into tears for Elfrida's warning.

Both *The House of Arden* and *Harding's Luck* are strongly connected with English history and more specifically with the Arden family's story and its manor house¹⁸⁰, whose description fills the opening page *The House of Arden*:

It had been a great house once, with farms and fields, money and jewels – with tenants and squires and men-at-arms. [...] There had been Ardens in Saxon times, and there were Ardens still, but few and impoverished. The lands were gone, and the squires and men-at-arms; the castle itself was roofless, and its unglazed windows stared blankly across the fields of strangers, that stretched right up to the foot of its grey, weather-worn walls¹⁸¹.

¹⁷⁹ NESBIT, *Harding's Luck*, Kindle edition, location 2388.

¹⁸⁰ Although Edith Nesbit was a fervent socialist in Fabian Society, she showed a particular sympathy for the aristocratic features of old houses. In later time-travel fantasies, the ancient noble residence will be an important Leitmotiv.

¹⁸¹ NESBIT, *The House of Arden*, Kindle edition, location 7.

Edred and Elfrida travel backwards into time, taking the place of their past cousins, thanks to the Mouldiwarp's magic, a white mole whose image is stamped on the family's coat of arms (and on the cover of the book the two children are reading when the creature appears, entitled *The History of the Ardens of Arden*) and thanks to the help of their nurse, which turns out to be a witch, they meet in every age they visit.

While in *The Story of the Amulet* time stands still and the children returning from their journeys in the past find things exactly as they have left them, in *The House of Arden* the protagonists have to stop the clock in their present to prevent time from passing and people from noticing their absence. The Mouldiwarp makes a daisy clock appear:

“They’re making a sort of pattern”, said Edred. “Look! There’s a big ring all round, a sort of pattern”.

“I should think they were!” cried Elfrida. “Look” Look” It’s the clock”.

It was. On the pure green face of the lawn was an enormous circle marked by a thick line of closely packed white daisies. Within it were the figures that are on the face of a clock, all twelve of them. The hands were of white daisies, too, both the minute hand and the hand that marks the hours, and between the VI and the centre was a smaller circle, also white and of daisies – round which they could see a second hand move – a white second hand formed of daisies wheeling with a precision that would have made the haughtiest general in the land shed tears of pure admiration¹⁸².

Edred and Elfrida's travels through time have an important purpose: the children want to find a hidden treasure to restore the old house and improve the family's financial resources. For this reason, the two protagonists try not to forget the façade of the house every time they see it in the different ages they visit, in order to restore it to its former glory. Therefore, before leaving for their third journey in time, the children decide to go back to the time when the castle was new and take with them their Brownie (their camera) so they can take some photos of the perfect castle back to the present. When they come back to the Edwardian age they develop the photos and “more magic”¹⁸³ happens: the photos come alive and become living pictures. As in a film, the children see the castle and

¹⁸² *Ibidem*, Kindle edition, locations 862 and 869.

¹⁸³ *Ibidem*, Kindle edition, location 2069.

the grown-ups who embrace them. Suddenly, they also see the treasure they will find at the end of their adventure.

Before leaving for their journeys, Edred and Elfrida have to wear suitable clothes to be able to impersonate “the Edred and the Elfrida” of the different periods; but the children learn to their cost that it is not easy to live in ages so distant from their own and give Nesbit the chance to use humour on many occasions. In their first journey, for instance, they have to learn by heart Isaac Watt's hymns as a punishment because they do not bow spontaneously to their grandmother:

“Hoity-toity”, said the old lady very severely; “we forget our manners, I think. Make your curtsy, miss”. Elfrida made one as well as she could. “To teach you respect for your elders”, said the old gentleman, “you had best get by heart one of Dr. Watts's Divine and Moral Songs. I leave you to see to it, my lady”. [...] “And you will be deprived of pudding with your dinners”, remarked the old lady¹⁸⁴.

Even when Nesbit deals with important historical events, humour does not disappear; on the contrary, the author's irony is often used to soften the terror aroused by some events, as when, for example, she describes the fear for a possible French invasion in 1807.

It is not easy for us to understand the frantic terror of those times, when, from day to day, every man, woman, and child trembled in its shoes for fear lest “the French should come” – the French led by Boney. Boney, to us, is Napoleon Buonaparte, a little person in a cocked hat out of the history book. To those who lived in England when he was a man alive, he was “the Terror that walked by night”¹⁸⁵.

However, there are also episodes that Nesbit introduces with a more serious tone. In Edred and Elfrida's third journey to the time of King James I, both the children and Lord and Lady Arden are charged with high treason and imprisoned in the Tower of London. Edred is allowed to play in the garden of the lieutenant of the Tower, where one morning he meets “an old gentleman dressed in very handsome clothes, and, what is more, the

¹⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, Kindle edition, locations 509 and 516.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, Kindle edition, locations 713 and 720.

clothes blazed with jewels”¹⁸⁶; they daily comfort each other and Edred is fascinated by the stories the famous explorer Sir Walter Raleigh tells him. It is exactly in this experience that the children begin to wonder whether the past can affect the course of history.

Did their being in past times make any difference to the other people in past times? In other words, when you were taking part in historical scenes, did it matter what you said or did? Of course, it seemed to matter extremely-at the time. But then if this going into the past was only a sort of dream, then, of course, the people in the past would know nothing it, unless they had dreamed the same sort of dream. [...] And with that knowledge they could have revealed plots, shown the issue of wars and the fate of kings, and, as Elfrida put it, “made history turn out quite different”¹⁸⁷.

The question about the influence that the past has on the future is one of the biggest problems issued by time-travel and, as we have already seen, it is fundamental in *The Story of the Amulet*, too. In *The House of Arden* the same subject is proposed again in Edred and Elfrida's subsequent journey. When the children meet King Henry VIII and his wife Anne Boleyn, the children try to warn her about her destiny in vain; while they are singing in honour of the King, Elfrida remembers “the old question”:

Could anything they did have any effect on the past? It seemed impossible that it should not be so. If one could get a word that happy, stately lady on the white horse, if one could warn her, could help somehow¹⁸⁸!

Unfortunately (or fortunately?), the two brothers fail their deed and Betty Lovell, the nurse/witch, suggests to them immediately that they should escape from the Tudor age and coming back to their present before the Queen starts to cry; once again, the brothers are forced to return to the present – they always get into trouble when they are transported to the past – but Richard, the cousin that they have discovered to be a time traveller, too, is unwilling to go to their present, as he finds it cruel and painful.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, Kindle edition, location 1632.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, Kindle edition, locations 1673 and 1680.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, Kindle edition, location 2427.

“Why don't you want to come with us to our times?”

“I hate your times. They're ugly, they're cruel”, said Richard.

“They don't cut your head off for nothing anyhow in our times”, said Edred, “and shut you up in the Tower”.

“They do worse things”, Richard said. “I know. They make people work fourteen hours a day for nine shillings a week, so that they never have enough to eat or wear, and no time to sleep or to be happy in”¹⁸⁹.

These are probably the most important lines of *The House of Arden*, where Nesbit expresses her severe social criticism, emerging from the contraposition between the different ages; like in her earlier time-travel fantasy *The Story of the Amulet*, Nesbit's harsh but ironic criticism of her society is one of the crucial points of the Arden stories, whose the author gives many examples throughout the narration both in *The House of Arden* and in *Harding's Luck*. In both works, Nesbit's use of time-travel has the aim to condemn the Edwardian society and to stress that the only way to positively change the present is to make reference to the past, restoring communal social principles¹⁹⁰.

The opening lines of *Harding's Luck* immediately compare the London of Dickie's present to the London of the past:

Dickie lived at New Cross. At least the address was New Cross, but really the house where he lived was one of a row of horrid little houses built on the slope where once green fields ran down the hill to the river, and the old houses of the Deptford merchants stood stately in their pleasant gardens and fruitful orchards¹⁹¹.

Dickie's handicap is clearly an element introduced by Nesbit to underline the social criticism which permeates this work, too: his real disability is a metaphor of the moral and social problems which distress her society. In this work, the welfare of the Jacobean age strongly contrasts with the ugliness of Edwardian England and this is significantly underlined by Nesbit's introduction of two very different figures belonging to the two different periods in which Dickie lives: the pawnbroker and the ship-builder who teaches him all about ships.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, Kindle edition, location 2499.

¹⁹⁰ FRANK, p. 79.

¹⁹¹ NESBIT, *The House of Arden*, Kindle edition, location 59.

In his Edwardian present, Dickie, after being in hospital, comes back home and finds he has been robbed: his Tinkler has disappeared. Instead the boy finds next day a pawn-ticket, from which he understands he can have his rattle back only in exchange for something. Then, Dickie decides to go to the pawnbroker's and asks him to accept his moonflowers – they will become magical elements that move between the two realities – as a pledge to have his Tinkler back. On the contrary, when Dickie awakes in the seventeenth century in a room and in a life he does not know (he thinks he is dreaming, while adults tell him he has forgotten everything after a bad fever), he enjoys an easier life and has the possibility to learn to fence, dance and take lessons about ship building (what he learns in his “second” life will be a source of income in his Edwardian life with Beale). In expressing her nostalgia for a pre-industrial England, the author distinguishes between the two different eras using these two different characters; while the men of the twentieth century are manipulators of people and money (see the pawnbroker), the men of the Jacobean time are craftsmen of skill and integrity¹⁹².

Harding's Luck ends with the recovery of the secret treasure of Arden and the castle and the estates can be restored: however, the misery of the Deptford slums cannot be removed with magic and Dickie chooses to live in the past, where he is not rich but sane and beloved. The book was widely admired for its moral and social message, which Nesbit reinforces with the contrast between Dickie's past health and his disability in the present.

According to some critics, the success of Nesbit's more mature time-travel fantasies also lies in the ability to mix her social and aesthetic vision¹⁹³. More than in *The Story of the Amulet*, in *The House of Arden* and *Harding's Luck* reading, creating and literature play a very important role. There are many references to writers and books: Elfrida, for instance, receives *The Story of the Amulet* as a birthday gift, there are references to Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* and to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Elfrida and his brother have to learn by heart Isaac Watt's hymns.

The Mouldiwarp himself can be recalled only by means of children's poetry and he has the ability to speak the language of other creatures. He is a mole, therefore connected with the earth; however, he can summon pigeons and swans (in *Harding's Luck* the children come back to their present by a swan carriage). He well combines the physical and the spiritual. Moreover, his unexpected complexity is confirmed by the existence of other

¹⁹² PRICKETT, pp. 225-226.

¹⁹³ MOSS, Anita, “E. Nesbit's Romantic Child in Modern Dress”, in *Romanticism and Children's Literature in Nineteenth-Century England*, edited by James Holt McGavran, The University of Georgia Press, Athens and London, 1991, p. 240.

two moles, who collaborate with him so that the magic is fulfilled: the Mouldiwarp works the magic of time, his brother, the Mouldierwarp, controls space and the Mouldiestwarp supervises both magical brothers.

In *Harding's Luck* Dickie from being an ordinary boy becomes an artist: he reads and grows magical moonflowers, his power of imagination grows enormously. If the reader moves from this narrative level to the higher metaphorical one, he/she can observe that the author pays particular attention to the imaginative immersion in the past to defend it, as the only way to build an ideal society, where all the social barriers are demolished¹⁹⁴.

In *The House of Arden* Edred and Elfrida themselves express their reverence for a familiar past: the castle is “the cradle of their race” and the visit to the castle they are going to make is “their pilgrimage”. It is no accident that “the children liked the big basement parlour room best, because there all the furniture had belonged to dead—and-gone Ardens, and all the pictures on the walls were of Ardens dead and gone”¹⁹⁵. However, the past is sometimes criticised by the narrator to give a useful lesson to build a better future. The narration in *The House of Arden*, for example, is interrupted to tell the reader about witchcraft past practices (Dickie's nurse is also a witch and this explains why she can understand about time-travel, unlike what happens in *The Story of the Amulet*, in which only the children know about it).

It's almost impossible for even the most grown up and clever of us to know how women used to be treated – and not so very ago either – if they were once suspected of being witches. It generally began by the old woman's being cleverer than her neighbours, having more wit to find out what was the matter with sick people, and more still to cure them. [...] And in those long-ago days – which really aren't so very long ago – your being so much cleverer than your neighbours would be quite enough¹⁹⁶.

The power of time and imagination, the powerful motif of time-travel, both as a vehicle of personal growth and as a means to criticise contemporary society, surely represent the core of *The House of Arden* and its follow-up *Harding's Luck*. Thanks to these two novels, time-travel becomes a central subject of many children's books – from Alison Uttley's *A Traveller in Time* to Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden*, etc. –

¹⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 241.

¹⁹⁵ NESBIT, *The House of Arden*, Kindle edition, location 36.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, Kindle edition, locations 644 and 651.

whose authors will draw inspiration from Nesbit's ability to skillfully balance the ordinary world with magical elements.

3. Mystical magic in Edith Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle* and *The Magic City*

3.1. The Rules of Magic in Children's Fantasy and in Nesbit's Magic Books

The concept of time-travelling and the idea of magic are strictly connected to each other in children's fantasy.

The reason why time-travelling has become such a recurring theme in children's fantasy is the fact that many writers in their works treat time as if it was not linear and the child character does not perceive time as an abstract entity.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, for example, primary time in *The Story of the Amulet* stands still while the children are travelling into a secondary time and every time they come back home exactly at the same moment when they left. Moreover, the simultaneity of primary and secondary time is even more evident in *The House of Arden*, as the Mouldiwarp asks Edred to sit on the second hand of the daisy clock to stop primary time, while Elfrida is away in an adventure in Arden Hill and Edred does not notice her absence.

She ran upstairs, through the attic and the pigeons noises, back into her own times, and went down and found Edred sitting on the second hand of the daisy-clock; and he did not believe that she had been away at all. For all the time she had been away seemed no time to him. [...]

Elfrida told Edred the whole story, and at first he did not believe a word of it. "But it's true, I tell you", said she. "You don't suppose I should make up a whole tale like that, do you?" "No", said Edred. "Of course, you're not clever enough. But you might have read it in a book"¹⁹⁷.

By making primary time stand still while the characters experience a new world in a secondary time, Nesbit, like other writers of time-travel fantasies, avoids the problems that

¹⁹⁷ NESBIT, Edith, *The House of Arden*, Kindle edition, locations 1127 and 1134.

can arise from the characters' absence (in Lewis's 1950 later fantasy *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, for instance, Lucy goes to Narnia and when she comes back home she thinks her family is worried about her absence; however, her brothers have not noticed it and make fun of her, because she cannot play hide and seek well).

Visits in secondary times into alternative worlds occur by means of magic and, more specifically, of magic thresholds and magic objects.

According to Nikolajeva, the most important passage "fantaseme" in children's fantasy is the door, which enables the writer to establish a connection between the primary and the secondary world¹⁹⁸. The device of the door plays a fundamental role especially in time fantasy.

In the *Story of the Amulet* the four characters have to pass through the arch created by the half amulet to be transported to a different age, while in *The House of Arden*, Edred and Elfrida can travel in time only if they find *the* door and pass through it; the narrator tells the reader that there are fifty-seven doors in the Arden castle, but only one allows the children to reach the secondary world. However, this door is not always there and, in order to find it, the brothers have to behave well towards each other for three days.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* – the series of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which was certainly influenced by Nesbit's stories – what makes the passage into the secondary world possible is a wardrobe, which is not always open to everyone. When Lucy comes back from her first adventure in Narnia, after crossing the magical door of the wardrobe, nobody believes her and as her brothers get a look into it they only find clothes and a back panel; later, however, the four siblings enter the wardrobe and they all finally arrive in Narnia.

Death and dream can be considered the "metaphorical variation" of the device of the door. In some works, the characters experience a different world in a different time only after being dead, even if it is often a temporary death; it is the case of Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1863), where the young Tom drowns into a river and can explore the magic underwater world, before returning, finally, to his human form.

¹⁹⁸ NIKOLAJEVA, Maria, *The Magic Code. The Use of Magical Patterns in Fantasy for Children*, Almqvist and Wiksell, Stockholm, 1988, p. 76. In her work, where Nikolajeva describes the fantasy genre from a morphological perspective, she gives the reader her definition of the word "fantaseme". The Russian critic tells us it is a literary device used to introduce the extraordinary into the narrative, which sometimes coincides with what other critics call "motif" or "function".

As Nikolajeva observes, a “less extreme” variant of death as passage from the primary to the secondary world is the dream¹⁹⁹, which is a frequent theme in time-travel fantasy, too.

In many novels, the dream is used only at the very end of a story to make a character leave the secondary world and come back to his/her own reality – this happens, for instance, in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

In other cases, however, the dream is recurrent more than once throughout the narration of a story in a novel. As we have seen previously, the learned gentleman of *The Story of the Amulet* often doubts his travels in time with the four children and wonders whether he has dreamt or not.

Nesbit's *The Magic City* provides a very significant example of the use of the dream as door/passage to another world. When Philip is in the magic city he has built and wishes his sister Helen were there, she appears and explains to him how she has got in that reality, where only Philip and his stepsister Lucy are allowed to be. The following passage gives the reader Helen's explanation:

“But how did you get here”, said Philip in Helen's arms on the island. “I just walked at the other side of a dream”, she said; “how could I not come, when the door was open and you wanted me so?”. [...]

“Oh, Helen! Where is Mr. Graham; won't he hate your coming away from him?”. “He's gone through a dream door too”, she said, “to see Lucy. Only he doesn't know he's really gone. He'll think it's a dream, and he'll tell me about it when we both wake up”. “When did you go to sleep?” said Philip. “At Brussels. That telegram hasn't come yet”. “I don't understand about time”, said Philip firmly, “and I never shall”²⁰⁰.

The magic passage between the real and the alternative world is often possible only by means of a messenger or a guide, who helps the characters travel into time and space; the intermediary²⁰¹ between the two different worlds can be a fairy or a talking animal (Nesbit's fantasies give the reader many examples of talking animals, if we only remember the Phoenix of *The Phoenix and the Carpet* and the two dachshunds, the parrot and the camel in *The Magic City*).

¹⁹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 80.

²⁰⁰ NESBIT, Edith, *The Magic City*, Jane Nissen Books, London, 2010, pp. 226-227.

²⁰¹ NIKOLAJEVA, p. 82.

Peter Pan, for instance, comes from Neverland and visits Wendy and her brothers to take them away from their real life; in MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), the poor and young boy Diamond is led to an enchanted world by North Wind, a girl who has extraordinary powers and visits him as Diamond is dreaming. In *The Story of the Amulet* it is the Psammead who has the task of guiding the children on their travelling. However, only the amulet has the power of transporting the children into the different historical ages. In *The House of Arden* and in its sequel *Harding's Luck*, the magical Mouldiwarp is a valid messenger to Edred and Elfrida, but the effect of its magic depends on magical objects (moonflowers seeds, a baby rattle and white daisies).

The magic objects used by writers in their novels are generally everyday life objects (a coin, for instance, which makes magic happen in *Half Magic*, a 1954 work by Edward Eager, who was strongly influenced by Edith Nesbit's fantasy novels; or a book, in 1962 Eager's *Seven-Day Magic*, which records what the children say in its empty pages).

Only thanks to the combination of the messenger "fantaseme" and the use of a magic object can the characters in Nesbit's time fantasies experience alternative worlds.

In *The Story of the Amulet*, it is only the half amulet that, turning into a huge arch, enables the children to travel in time; in this novel, Edith Nesbit uses the magic amulet as a kind of time machine, showing the limits of magic. Indeed, the children can decide *when* they want to leave for a journey on time, by uttering the Word of Power and passing through the arch. However, they cannot decide *where* they want to go, as it is the amulet that chooses for them, being attracted to its other half (the children's inability to choose the destination of their journey can be regarded as one of the restrictions of Nesbit's magic).

In this story, the borderline between the device of the magic object (the amulet) and the expedient of the magic passage (the arch) is almost imperceptible (like, for example, in Lewis's novel, where the wardrobe can be considered both a material object and a door to Narnia), unlike what happens in other works, where the magic objects are material objects which do not have connection with a *passage* (the ring in *The Enchanted Castle* or the flying carpet in *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, for example).

Among all the powers that magic has in children's fantasy (the possibility of granting a protagonist's wish, first of all), one of the most frequent roles magic plays is to bestow invisibility on the characters. Like flying, invisibility has always been at the centre of many fairy tales, as a quality which enables the characters to enter secondary magic worlds. In Nesbit's fantasy novels, where a nurse can serve an invisible dinner and the children have to pretend to eat delicious things even if their dishes are empty –in *Five Children and It*

Robert “eats” a piece of invisible mutton –, there are many episodes where characters become invisible, above all in *The Enchanted Castle*, where a magic ring makes invisible whoever wears it. However, this invisibility²⁰² does not always lead to positive results: if the ring is misused the consequences are frightful and a heap of rags can come to life and complicate the events of the story. Therefore, the effects that magic has on the events or on the characters in a story can be really strong: magic can tear down the linguistic barriers (in *The Story of the Amulet* the children can speak any language), or it can affect the psyche and the identity of a character (Dickie in the Arden books turns out to be Richard).

As a modern writer, one of Nesbit's greatest strengths is the ability to set a perfect balance between magic and realism. The objects her characters use are ordinary objects which surprisingly reveal their magic power, but which eventually remain mere objects of ordinary life. Furthermore, in Nesbit's magic books characters keep on being extremely human and real²⁰³, as the following dialogue between Robert and Cyril²⁰⁴ in *Five Children and It* shows:

“Friends, Roman, countryman – and women – we found a Sammyadd. We have had wishes. [...] But we're no forrader. We haven't really got anything worth having for our wishes”. “We've had things happening”, said Robert; “that's always something”. “It's not enough, unless they're the right things”, said Cyril firmly. “Now I've been thinking”. “Not really?” whispered Robert. “In the silent what's-its-names of the night. It's like suddenly being asked something out of history. [...] Ladies and gentlemen, you know jolly well that when we're all rotting about in the usual way heaps of things keep cropping up, and then real earnest wishes come into the heads of the beholder”. “Hear, hear!” said Robert. “– of the beholder, however stupid he is”, Cyril went on. “Why, even Robert might happen to think of a really useful wish if he didn't injure his poor little brains trying so hard to think”²⁰⁵.

In *The Magic Code* Nikolajeva examines the principal features of Nesbit's magic. The critic underlines that whenever Nesbit deals with magic, she rarely explains how it

²⁰² According to Briggs, for what concerns Nesbit's use of invisibility, the writer drew inspiration from H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* (1897).

²⁰³ MANLOVE, Colin, *Fantasy as Witty Conceit: E. Nesbit*, p.121.

²⁰⁴ Even if Cyril is younger than Robert, in Nesbit's Psammead Trilogy he is depicted as the cleverest of the brothers and he is often the leader of the group.

²⁰⁵ NESBIT, Edith, *Five Children and It*, pp. 155-156.

works and lets the reader find it out, intensifying the suspense. She definitely discusses magic, but she does not want it to be combined with too much rationalism²⁰⁶, because “once magic is explained all the magic is gone, like the scent out of the scent when you leave the cork out of the bottle”²⁰⁷.

The critic stresses one of Nesbit's most peculiar aspects, that is, the fact that her magic is limited. If we observe how magic works in her novels, it may be noticed that there are always restrictions to it. In *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, for instance, the wishing carpet, which can be used for the children's trips only three times a day, is damaged by Cyril and Anthea so that its magic power fails and Robert and Jane fall from a tower top. In *Five Children and It*, the sand-fairy can fulfill only one wish a day and the magic only lasts until dawn. In the fourth chapter, when the children wish for wings to fly, the Psammead tells them about how magic worked in the times of Megatheriums, when wishes were turned into stone and hints to a further limit of magic, which must be consistent²⁰⁸, as the last part of the following extract shows:

“In the old days people wished for good solid everyday gifts – Mammoths and Pterodactyls and things – and those could be turned into stone as easy as not. But people wish such high-flying fanciful things nowadays. How are you going to turn being beautiful as the day, or being wanted by everybody, into stone? You see it can't be done. And it would never do to have two rules, so they simply vanish”²⁰⁹.

Another limit of Nesbit's magic in her works is the fact that adults do not take notice of what magic creates. In *Five Children and It*, for instance, the Psammead decides that “the servants should never notice any change brought about by the wishes of the children”²¹⁰, so that, for instance, when in one of the episodes the children wish that their younger brother would grow up and the wish is granted, their nurse Martha takes him in her arms, without noticing she is carrying an adult, rather than a baby. Anyway, even when adults are involved in magic (like the learned gentleman in *The Story of the Amulet*, for example) they usually think that they are mad or they are dreaming.

²⁰⁶ NIKOLAJEVA, p. 28.

²⁰⁷ NESBIT, *The House of Arden*, location 2561.

²⁰⁸ NIKOLAJEVA, p. 31.

²⁰⁹ NESBIT, *Five Children and it*, p. 91.

²¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 200.

In Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle* the limits of magic are even more complicated. At the beginning, the children do not understand how the magic ring works: it can make the bearer invisible or taller, but at first they cannot control its power. Only when they realise how they have to use it, the children can deal with it properly. The ring works in a strange way: its power lasts twenty-one hours, then fourteen, then seven; most importantly, the wearer cannot take it off until the effect of magic wears off. After Gerald and Mabel conjure in the fair to gain some money, Mabel wants her ring back, but the invisible Gerald cannot take it off:

“How horrid!” cried Mabel; “you did make me jump! Take the ring off; it makes me feel quite creepy, you being nothing but a voice”. [...] “Oh, stow it!” said the weary voice of Gerald beside her. “What’s the use of jawing?” “I want the ring”, said Mabel, rather mulishly. “Want” – the words came out of the still evening air – “want must be your master. You can’t have the ring. *I can’t get it off!*”²¹¹.

Compared to Nesbit's Psammead Trilogy, in her later magic novels, *The Enchanted Castle* and *The Magic City*, magic has undergone important changes. As Manlove points out, in Nesbit's first novels, magic is useful to satisfy the children's curiosity – the journeys the children make in the ancient ages, for instance, enable them to watch how a volcano can destroy a civilization in Atlantis – and leads them to their family's reunion. On the contrary, in Nesbit's later magic books, magic achieves a more complex and more profound purpose: the writer approaches a supernatural and mystical sphere, which involves spiritual considerations²¹².

3.2. Edith Nesbit's Later Magic Books: *The Enchanted Castle* and *The Magic City*

The Enchanted Castle (1907) and *The Magic City* (1910) are Edith Nesbit's later magic books. Compared to the Psammead Trilogy, these works are more complex,

²¹¹ NESBIT, *The Enchanted Castle*, pp. 72-73.

²¹² MANLOVE, Colin, *Fantasy as Witty Conceit: E. Nesbit*, p.117 and 119.

visionary and mystical; for this reason, they are often considered among Nesbit's least successful works.

They have a complicated philosophical structure and deal with themes that her earlier novels do not treat. *The Enchanted Castle* praises the power of the human imagination, which can transform everything and make the borderline between magic and reality vague: the housekeeper's daughter can be a princess, a girl can turn into a statue, and old rags can give life to creatures that can move. *The Magic City* is about making and highlights the role of the arts as an important value in human civilization²¹³.

Moreover, in these books the writer introduces characters that are more interested in helping others than in enjoying themselves. Indeed, unlike Nesbit's previous novels (we may think to *Five Children and It*, for instance, where the children only care about having their wishes fulfilled), in *The Enchanted Castle* the children take care of Mabel as they rescue her from pretending to be a princess and from her aunt's indifference (in an episode, she hardly notices that Mabel has disappeared). In *The Magic City*, the protagonist Philip has to accomplish seven deeds to rescue Lucy and free "his city" from the tyranny of their nurse.

Neither in *The Enchanted Castle* nor in *The Magic City* there are magic creatures that intervene on the protagonists' world (like the Psammead in the Trilogy or the Mouldiwarp in the Arden books), but the children discover a magic "other world" that is parallel to their everyday life and where magic creatures are a figment of their imagination.

3.2.1. *The Enchanted Castle*

The first episode of *The Enchanted Castle* appeared in December 1906 in *The Strand* and was published in book form in 1907.

In this novel magic is more mystical and frightening than in any other Nesbit's novel. The writer was very attracted by the macabre, which played a fundamental role in her earlier horror and ghosts stories – *Something Wrong* and *Grim Tales*, for instance, both published in 1893 – and reveals itself in the sinister dummies, the Ugly-Wuglies, in *The Enchanted Castle*.

²¹³ MOSS, Anita, "E. Nesbit's Romantic Child in Modern Dress", in *Romanticism and Children's Literature in Nineteenth-Century England*, edited by James Holt McGavran, The University of Georgia Press, Athens and London, 1991, p. 234.

As many critics observe, in this novel Nesbit explores the deeper religious side of her existence with a supernatural and almost platonic vision, as she refuses to be involved in the ordinary outer world, preferring a profound analysis of the inner world of the spirit²¹⁴; indeed, it may be noticed that the story in *The Enchanted Castle* takes place only in the house and in its gardens, whereas in Nesbit's previous works the adventures of the characters occur in broader spaces, even in foreign countries (see *The Story of the Amulet*).

The Enchanted Castle tells the story of Gerald, Kathleen and Jimmy, three brothers who are forced to spend their holidays at Kathleen's school instead of staying at their aunt's house, where they usually go to play with their cousin Betty. One day, they decide to explore the neighbourhood and after Mademoiselle, Kathleen's French mistress, has given them her permission, the three children leave for a trip in the woods. Surrounded by a beautiful landscape with groves of trees and marble statues, they discover an enchanted castle:

"It is an enchanted castle", said Kathleen. "I don't see any castle", said Jimmy. "What do you call that, then?" Gerald pointed to where, beyond a belt of lime-trees, white towers and turrets broke the blue of the sky. "There doesn't seem to be anyone about", said Kathleen, "and yet it's all so tidy. I believe it is magic". [...]

"Perhaps there's given up being magic because people don't believe in it any more", said Kathleen. "Well, don't let's spoil the show with any silly old not believing", said Gerald with decision. "I'm going to believe in magic as hard as I can. This is an enchanted garden, and that's an enchanted castle, and I'm jolly well going to explore²¹⁵."

In this beautiful garden the children find a sleeping princess and decide to awaken her by means of Jimmy's kiss (here, there is Nesbit's explicit reference to *Sleeping Beauty*). When she wakes up, the princess asks the children to follow her to the castle that is "crammed with magic"²¹⁶ and invites them to eat food pretending it is what they desire most. The scene that follows is maybe one of the funniest in the whole novel and it clearly emphasises the principal theme of this novel, that is the power of imagination, which can make real what is not and demolish the barriers between reality and imagination:

²¹⁴ MANLOVE, Colin, *From Alice to Harry Potter: Children's Fantasy in England*, Cybereditions, Christchurch, 2003, p. 45.

²¹⁵ NESBIT, Edith, *The Enchanted Castle*, Penguin, London, 1994, pp. 16-17.

²¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

I couldn't find anything but bread and cheese – but it doesn't matter, because everything's magic here, and unless you have some dreadful secret fault the bread and cheese will turn into anything you like. What would you like?" she asked Kathleen.

"Roast chicken", said Kathleen, without hesitation. [...] The others asked for roast beef and cabbage – and got it, she supposed, though to her it only looked like dry bread and Dutch cheese. [...]

"It's a game, isn't it?" asked Jimmy suddenly. "What's a game?" asked the Princess, frowning. "Pretending it's beef – the bread and cheese, I mean". "A game? But is it beef. Look at it", said the Princess, opening her eyes very wide²¹⁷.

After this unusual lunch, the princess shows the children her treasure chamber, but the brothers cannot see the jewels. Only after that the princess utters a charm, they all can see beautiful jewels, diamonds and precious stones: these stunning objects have all magic powers – a brooch that can fulfill wishes, a bracelet that makes you speak the truth, a chain that makes you as strong as ten men, a ring that makes anyone who wears it invisible. The children are curious to see how these magic objects act and the princess proposes showing them how the ring makes her invisible: she disappears and the children can only hear her speaking. The princess thinks the children are only making fun of her and does not believe she is really invisible. When she realises it by looking in a mirror, she gets despaired.

"But it *can't* be the ring; rings don't make you invisible". "You said this one did", said Kathleen, "and it has". "But it can't", said the Princess. "I was only playing at magic. I just hid in the secret cupboard – it was only a game. Oh, whatever *shall* I do?". "A game?" said Gerald slowly; "but you *can* do magic – the invisible jewels, and you made them visible". "Oh, it's only a secret spring and the paneling slides up"²¹⁸.

The girl reveals that she is not a princess, but only Mabel, the castle housekeeper's niece. It was only a game; anyway, now her invisibility is real. In order to justify her absence at home, she decides to write a letter to her aunt to tell her she has run away with a lady in a motor-car who has adopted her. When the children go to Mabel's aunt to tell her

²¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 29-30.

²¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

the truth, they are shocked, as the woman is not worried about Mabel's disappearance at all. However, Mabel is not surprised by her aunt's reaction and explains "she's not mad, only she's always reading novelettes"²¹⁹ – what we now call romantic novels.

This critical attitude towards this kind of writing definitely is contrasted with the importance of literature, as one of the central themes of *The Enchanted Castle*. In this novel, Gerald is described as a boy who reads a lot; he shows a great ability in storytelling and often refers to literary works, like *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* or *Robinson Crusoe*, for example. In both *The Enchanted Castle* and *The Magic City*, Nesbit praises the power of creative activities, such as writing, reading and building and associates them to magic; as a modern writer, what worries her is that the contemporary world, with all its innovations in communication, might neglect literature. It is Jimmy who speaks for Nesbit in the novel:

"I think magic went out when people began to have steam-engines",
Jimmy insisted, "and newspaper, and telephones and wireless
telegraphing"²²⁰.

In order to earn some money, the children decide to go to a fair not far from the castle and do magic tricks. With the help of invisible Mabel, Gerald succeeds in fascinating the crowd and earning some money. However, his last trick takes the children by surprise: Gerald, who has worn the enchanted ring, is now invisible and Mabel is not.

Suddenly, the children remember that they have left the paneled-room door open; therefore, the invisible Gerald and Mabel decide to go to the castle and shut it, whereas Kathleen and Jimmy come back home to Mademoiselle. The magic atmosphere of the enchanted gardens around the castle and the Temple of Flora, with its magnificent marble statues, captures Gerald:

Only now a new feeling came to him as he walked through those gardens;
by day those gardens were like dreams, at night they were like visions.
He could not see his feet as he walked, but he saw the movement of the
dewy grass-blades that his feet displaced. And he had that extraordinary
feeling so difficult to describe, and yet so real and so unforgettable – the
feeling that he was in another world, that had covered up and hidden the

²¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 61.

²²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

old world as a carpet covers a floor [...] and the carpet was drenched in magic, as the turf was drenched in dew²²¹.

Unlike in the Psammead Trilogy, where the wishes fulfilled by the Psammead last all day and dissolve at sunset, in *The Enchanted Castle* magic grows in the dark, as the night wraps all in mystery.

The enchantment of the garden held him. "I'll not go in yet", he told himself; "it's too early. And perhaps I shall never be here at night again. I suppose it is the night that makes everything look so different. [...] Gerald was not afraid. That was the most wonderful thing of all, though he would never have owned it. [...] Gerald saw that it was the pedestal of a statue – empty. "They come alive", he said: and another white shape came out of the Temple of Flora and disappeared in the laurels. "The statues come alive"²²².

After this extraordinary vision and after discovering a burglary while he was in the castle, Gerald comes back home and goes to bed. The next morning, when Eliza, the housemaid, calls him, he is visible but there is no trace of the ring; Eliza has borrowed it on her day-off to make a good impression on her rich boyfriend and she is now invisible. The four children bring her to the enchanted garden; here, the housemaid sees the statues come alive and swim into the water; the children cannot see them moving, because, as Gerald explains, "the statues come alive when the sun goes down – and you can't see them unless you're invisible"²²³. Eliza enjoys these beautiful visions but, then, the magic is over and she is visible again.

One day, the children decide to stage a play for Mademoiselle and Eliza, *Beauty and the Beast*. As there are few adults in the audience, Mabel and the three brothers make up ordinary objects, in order to provide other members to the audience for their play. The following passage describes this unusual audience:

The seven members of the audience seated among the wilderness of chairs had, indeed, no insides to speak of. Their bodies were bolsters and rolled-up blankets, and their arm and leg bones were hockey sticks and

²²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 84.

²²² *Ibidem*, p. 85.

²²³ *Ibidem*, p. 116.

umbrellas. Their shoulders were the wooden crosspieces that Mademoiselle used for keeping her jackets in shape; their hands were gloves stuffed out with handkerchiefs; and their faces were the paper masks painted in the afternoon by the untutored brush of Gerald, tied on to the round heads made of the ends of stuffed bolster-cases. The faces were really rather dreadful. [...] Their eyebrows were furious with lamp-black frowns²²⁴.

While the children are acting, Mabel, who is playing the role of the Beauty, wears the ring. The play is a great success, but when she wishes “those creatures we made were alive”²²⁵, the disaster is inevitable.

Mademoiselle began it: she applauded the garden scene – with hurried little clappings of her quick French hands. Eliza's fat red palms followed heavily, and then – someone else was clapping, six or seven people, and their clapping made a dull padded sound. Nine faces instead of two were turned towards the stage, and seven out of the nine were painted, pointed paper faces. And every hand and every face was alive. [...] But the hall was crowded with live things, strange things – all horribly short as broom sticks and umbrellas are short. [...] “Aa oo ré o me me oo a oo ho el?” said the voice again. And it had said it four times before Gerald could collect himself sufficiently to understand that this horror – alive, and most likely quite uncontrollable – was saying, with a dreadful calm, polite persistence: “Can you recommend me to a good hotel?”²²⁶.

At first, these sinister dummies, that the children call Ugly-Wuglies, seem to be harmless and Gerald is “not frightened of the Ugly-Wuglies. They're as harmless as tame rabbits”²²⁷. However, when they are shut in a tunnel behind the Temple of Flora – is this tunnel maybe suggestive of the unconscious?²²⁸ – the ugly dummies turn out to be dangerous and vengeful and when the bailiff, a newcomer who helps the children capture the Ugly-Wuglies, opens accidentally the door, the alive manikins strike him down.

²²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 137 and 139.

²²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 143.

²²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 143, 145 and 146.

²²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 156.

²²⁸ BRIGGS, *Edith Nesbit: A Woman of Passion*, p. 291.

According to Briggs, the Ugly-Wuglies symbolise a “social and political horror”: the fact that they lack roofs in their mouth certainly suggests the real emptiness of the puppets, but, metaphorically, it also stands for the emptiness of the bourgeoisie, as they “utter meaningless noises and display, in their search of a good hotel, a complex mixture of credulity and suspicion”²²⁹.

The children wonder how long the charm will last: every time the ring seems to work seven hours less than in its previous charm (Mabel was invisible for twenty-hours, Gerald for fourteen hours and Eliza for seven hours), but its “time-switch” mechanism seems to be very confusing²³⁰.

Fortunately, the spell is broken and the Ugly-Wuglies become old clothes and ordinary objects again: all except one. The still-human Ugly-Wugly turns out to be an elderly rich gentleman and Jimmy, the most materialistic of the three brothers, is very fascinated by him and wishes to be rich, too. Since he is wearing the magic ring, his desire is fulfilled very quickly:

By quick but perfectly plain-to-be-seen degrees Jimmy became rich. [...] The whole thing was over in a few seconds. Yet in those few seconds they saw him grow to a youth, a young man, a middle-aged man; and then, with a sort of shivering shock, unspeakably horrible and definite, he seems to settle down into an elderly gentleman, handsomely but rather dowdily dressed, who was looking down at them through spectacles and asking them the nearest way to the railway station²³¹.

That-which-had-been-Jimmy, as the children call now their brother, no longer recognises them; anyway, he knows the Ugly-Wugly very well. When the two men arrive in London, Gerald, who is following them, learns that both his brother and the Ugly-Wugly are well-known men, who have offices in the City and are rivals in business. The news totally surprises Gerald:

Gerald wildly wondered what magic and how much had been needed to give history and a past to these two things of yesterday, the rich Jimmy and the Ugly-Wugly. If he could get them away would all memory of

²²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 291.

²³⁰ PRICKETT, p. 90.

²³¹ NESBIT, *The Enchanted Castle*, p. 183.

them fade – in this boy's mind, for instance, in the minds of all the people who did business with them in the City²³²?

When Gerald gets the ring back, after it slipped from the hand of the Ugly-Wugly, he wishes to be inside the door behind the Temple of Flora with Jimmy and so it happens: the two brothers find themselves there and Jimmy is no more a businessman of the City, but the “real” Jimmy again.

By means of a fascinating metaphor, the following chapter prepares the reader for the “visionary climax” which leads him/her to the end of the novel:

There is a curtain, thin as gossamer, clear as glass, strong as iron, that hangs for ever between the world of magic and the world that seems to us to be real. And when once people have found one of the little weak spots in that curtain which are marked by magic rings, and amulets, and the like, almost anything may happen²³³.

In the Temple of Flora, Jimmy and Gerald find Kathleen and Mabel and decide to go to the castle and put the ring back where they found it. But when they are there, while they are talking about the power of the ring, Mabel alludes to its making the wearer four yards high: once again, the ring is the agent of magic and Mabel becomes twelve feet high. After a delicious meal, Kathleen decides to go to the great stone dinosaurs and get back the objects the Ugly-Wuglies were made of, which she had previously hidden inside the stone. When she finds herself inside the dinosaur, she wishes to be a statue and, having pulled away the ring from Mabel's huge hand and wearing it now, she instantly is: her hands, her clothes, her shoes turn into white marble.

At moonlight, the enchantment occurs: as the statues come alive at night, the dinosaur begins to move, with the statuesque Kathleen inside. While the beast is moving towards the water, the girl comes out from its hollow stomach and is approached by the alive statue of Phoebus:

“You are new”, said Phoebus over his graceful shoulder. “I should not have forgotten you if once I had seen you”. “I am”, said Kathleen, “quite, quite new. And I didn't know you could talk”. “Why not?” Phoebus

²³² *Ibidem*, p. 193.

²³³ *Ibidem*, p. 202.

laughed. "You can talk". " But I'm alive". "Am not I" he asked. "Oh, yes, I suppose so", said Kathleen, distracted, but not afraid; "only I thought you had to have the ring on before one could even see you move". Phoebus seemed to understand her, which was rather to his credit, for she had certainly no expressed herself with clearness. "Ah! That's for mortals", he said. "We can hear and see each other in the few moments when life is ours. This is a part of the beautiful enchantment"²³⁴.

It is not so clear how the magic works in *The Enchanted Castle*. As the quotation above shows, although the marble Gods understand the power of the ring, they do not need it to come alive and this increases the mystery which permeates the story.

After Kathleen's unusual talk with Phoebus and after she has told Mabel (who in the meantime has returned to her proper size) about it, the two girls head towards the enchanted garden, where Kathleen introduces Mabel to Phoebus; the Greek god invites her to become a statue so that she can join the other gods in their feast. So Mabel becomes a statue, just as Kathleen is. Phoebus guides them to "the most lovely place to swim in"²³⁵ and the girls are astonished, as they have never seen such a beautiful place. The narrator's description of the marvellous atmosphere in which the characters find themselves, glorifies the beauty of nature and contributes to strengthening the mysticism which accompanies the whole story.

The water-lilies, whose long, snaky stalks are so inconvenient to ordinary swimmers, did not in the least interfere with the movements of marble arms and legs. The moon was high in the clear sky-dome. The weeping willows, cypresses, temples, terraces, banks of trees and shrubs, and the wonderful old house, all added to the romantic charm of the scene. [...]
And the enclosed space of water and marble and grass was lighted with a clear, white, radiant light, seven times stronger than the whitest moonlight, and in the still waters of the pool seven moons lay reflected²³⁶.

Number seven recurs more than once in *The Enchanted Castle* and it is likely that Nesbit's introduction of this particular number in her story is not a random choice. Gerald

²³⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 220, 221 and 222.

²³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 229.

²³⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 229, 230 and 231.

tells Mabel that “the magic goes in seven-hour lots”²³⁷, in the magic world of the alive statues there are seven moons and as Phoebus says, “everything in our world is seven times as much so as in yours”²³⁸.

Since ancient times number seven has been regarded as a magic and mysterious number; many civilizations have attributed a strong symbolism to it, so that it was seen as a sacred number.

The colours of the rainbow are seven, the musical notes are seven as well as the Wonders of the Ancient World listed by the ancient Greeks. In the Bible, God created the world in seven days, and the Catholic Sacraments in the New Testament are seven. The number is the symbol of fullness, perfection and completion.

Some critics have observed the strong influence that both Plato and the Bible have had on English literature. Moreover, Prickett underlines the impact that they specifically have on fantasy, as they both admit the existence of other worlds, and suggests that Nesbit can be considered one of the greatest Platonist among contemporary writers²³⁹. Therefore, her recurring use of number seven in *The Enchanted Castle* probably derives from these philosophical and metaphysical theories and it is an additional element which enables the writer to intensify the mysticism in her magic novel.

Phoebus leads the two girls to an enchanted island, where Mabel and Kathleen are welcomed by other alive statues – Hebe, Eros, Psyche and Hermes – representing characters of Greek and Roman mythology. The figure of Phoebus Apollo plays a fundamental role in this magic scene, as he symbolises the achievement of human civilization and cooperates with the dinosaur statue in order to allude to the Apollonian and Dionysian parts of the human psyche²⁴⁰.

The girls take part in a “celestial picnic”²⁴¹ with all the gods' alive statues and, after Kathleen has wished her brothers were there, the four children are raptured by Apollo's harmonious music and lose contact with reality, entering a supernatural dimension.

Then Phoebus struck the strings and softly plucked melody from them, and all the beautiful dreams of all the world came fluttering close with wings like doves' wings; and all the lovely thoughts that sometimes hover near, but not so near that you can catch them, now came home as to

²³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 216.

²³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 231.

²³⁹ PRICKETT, p. 232.

²⁴⁰ MOSS, p. 235.

²⁴¹ NESBIT, *The Enchanted Castle*, p. 233.

their nests in the hearts of those who listened. And those who listened forgot time and space, and how to be sad, and how to be naughty, and it seemed that the whole world lay like a magic apple in the hand of each listener, and that the whole world was good and beautiful²⁴².

Unfortunately, at dawn the spell is broken and, at Phoebus' warning, all the statues return to their pedestals and the children change back into flesh. While they are exploring the island, Gerald falls into a passage and his brothers follow him. The passage leads them to the Temple of Flora and at the end they find themselves "in a great hall, whose arched roof was held up by two rows of round pillars, and whose every corner was filled with a soft, searching, lovely flight, filling every cranny, as waters fills the rocky secrecies of hidden sea-caves"²⁴³.

Through the arches of this cave the children can admire alive scenes from different eras and each of them experiences them differently: "Kathleen saw them as Moorish, Mabel as Tudor, Gerald as Norman, and Jimmy as Churchwarden Gothic"²⁴⁴. There, in that cave, the four find the statue of Psyche, on whose finger they see the ring that Kathleen had given to Psyche before, when she was an alive statue. Gerald removes the ring from Psyche's hand and gives it to Kathleen, who wishes that they all were in their own beds.

The scene in Psyche's cave underlines the power of creation and imagination. The narrator tells us that the children find themselves in "the most beautiful place in the world"²⁴⁵, but he declares he "will not describe it, because it does not look the same to any two people, and you wouldn't understand me if I tried to tell you how it looked to anyone of these four"²⁴⁶. Imagination enables each one of them to perceive the scenes through the arches differently and to visualise "the most perfect thing possible"²⁴⁷, recognising the centralization of arts in human culture.

The following pages of *The Enchanted Castle* lead the story to a turning point. The three brothers go and visit Mabel at the Yalding Castle (Kathleen had erroneously wished that they all were "in their own beds"²⁴⁸ and Mabel's own bed was at Yalding Towers), where they meet the bailiff. Jimmy tells him about the night they spent in the enchanted castle, when the statues came alive, but the man does not believe the children.

²⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 239.

²⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 246.

²⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 247.

²⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 246.

²⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 246-247.

²⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 247.

²⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 249.

Therefore, they decide to give the man the magic ring and make him wish for something he really wants. The bailiff wishes his friend were there and Mademoiselle appears. The children do not understand: why did Mademoiselle appear, instead of the bailiff's friend? The mystery is soon revealed: the friend that the bailiff wishes so much to meet *is* Mademoiselle. The bailiff was Lord Yalding in the past and they were lovers.

The whole company heads towards the castle. When they get there, the children ask Lord Yalding for the permission to visit it and, while exploring it, they meet another visitor: he is the American millionaire, who would like to rent the castle and live there. Mabel shows him around the whole castle and, hearing from him that he would definitely take it if he saw a ghost, she tells him he really has the chance to see it, if he spends a night in the castle. With the help of the magic ring, a ghost appears during the night (this is another reference to Nesbit's attraction to the macabre and to her former ghosts stories), in the bedroom where the American and Jimmy and Gerald are sleeping.

There was the American in shirt and trousers, a smoking pistol in his hand; and there, advancing from the door of the powdering-room, a figure in doublet and hose, a ruff round its neck – and no head! The head, sure enough, was there; but it was under the right arm, held close in the slashed-velvet sleeve of the doublet. The face looking from under the arm wore a pleasant smile. Both boys, I am sorry to say, screamed. The American fired again²⁴⁹.

The next morning the rich man leaves the castle to go to London and get rid of his other house, so he can buy the castle. After the children show Lord Yalding and Mademoiselle the paneled room with the precious jewels and tell them about the enchanted ring, Lord Yalding asks for it and draws it away from Gerald's finger.

After supper, Gerald hears the sad Mademoiselle crying desperately: she has already talked to Lord Yalding, who has told her he will not marry her. The woman tells Gerald that, while the man, who was wearing the ring, was walking in the park the night before, he saw the marble statues come alive and wished to become a statue himself. He has become mad and has decided not to marry her. Gerald, who understands that the ring has shown its power once again, tries to comfort the hopeless woman and asks her if Lord Yalding has talked to the alive marble gods. The woman replies that he said that the god Mercure has

²⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 271.

proposed him a meeting in the Temple of Flora. Gerald tries to comfort her and suggests that they should go to the temple together the day after: there, she will “understand all about everything”²⁵⁰.

The very last pages of *The Enchanted Castle* are soaked with magic and mysticism, which doubtless reach the highest level in the entire novel.

When the children and Mademoiselle reach the Temple of Flora at night, they find Lord Yalding. Mademoiselle shows him all her love and, when he puts the ring on her finger, the atmosphere totally changes.

The moonbeam slants more and more; now it touches the far end of the stone, now it draws nearer and nearer the middle of it, now at last it touches the very heart and centre of that central stone. And then it is as though a spring were touched, a fountain of light released. Everything changes. Or, rather, everything is revealed. There are no more secrets. The plan of the world seems plain, like an easy sum that one writes in big figures on a child's slate. One wonders how one can ever have wondered about anything. Space is not; every place that one has seen or dreamed of is here. Time is not; into this instant is crowded all that one has ever done or dreamed of doing. It is a moment and it is eternity. It is the centre of the universe and it is the universe itself. The eternal light rests on and illuminates the eternal heart of things²⁵¹.

The passage definitely describes the most mystical moment of the whole book and shows the true essence of life from a platonic perspective. The ring is responsible for all the magic events of the story, but when the children use it to get material things – when they take advantage of it to earn money at the fair, for instance, or when Jimmy wishes to be rich and in few seconds he becomes an old businessman – the consequences are often negative, considering that “adventures are not always profitable”²⁵².

Only at the end of the story, can the reader understand the great value of the ring: its noteworthy power lies in giving a mystical vision of the chain of being and in unveiling an

²⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 283.

²⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 286.

²⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 62.

imaginary world, which is too extraordinary to be accepted by the conventions of Victorian realism²⁵³.

Thanks to the magic ring, the children not only can experience magic adventures but they can also make the reunion between Lord Yalding and his beloved Mademoiselle possible; symbolically, their reunion stands for the universal harmony of all things and emphasises the profound knowledge and awareness that the characters of the novel can reach with the help of this magic object.

In these lines magic reaches its highest point. The statues come alive again and a bright light spreads over the whole scene. The six characters keep silent and are wrapped in an atmosphere which is almost supernatural and where time seems to have stopped.

The children had thought to ask many questions. And it had been promised that the questions should be answered. Yet now no one spoke a word, because all had come into the circle of the real magic where all things are understood without speech. Afterwards none of them could ever remember at all what had happened. But they never forgot that they had been somewhere where everything was easy and beautiful²⁵⁴.

From the Temple of Flora the characters move towards the Hall of Granted Wishes (that is the Hall of Psyche), where Mademoiselle reveals the history of the ring and expresses her last wish: “that all the magic this ring has wrought may be undone, and that the ring itself may be no more and no less than a charm to bind thee and me together for evermore”²⁵⁵. For the last time, the ring reveals its power and magic ceases: the magic light fades, the windows of granted wishes close and Psyche is nothing more but a cold marble statue.

Next morning, all has disappeared: there are no more jewels in the paneled room, there is no way to the Temple of Flora or the Psyche's cave and the magic ring cannot be found. However, when Mademoiselle wakes up, she notices a wedding gold ring on her finger, which “could be no other than the magic ring, turned, by that last wish, into a charm to keep him (Lord Yalding) and his wife (Mademoiselle) together for ever”²⁵⁶.

²⁵³ TOSI, Laura, “Alla scoperta dei mondi della meraviglia: la *fantasy* vittoriana”, in *Dall'ABC a Harry Potter*, edited by Laura Tosi and Alessandra Petrina, Bononia University Press, Bologna, 2011, p. 202.

²⁵⁴ NESBIT, *The Enchanted Castle*, p. 287.

²⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 289.

²⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 290.

The Enchanted Castle ends with a reference to Mr. Ugly Wugly's disappearance by means of the publication of a newspaper article, which announces that there is no trace of the businessman, whose clothes were found on the floor of his office, together with other ordinary objects.

Even here, Nesbit does not lose the opportunity to express again her humorous and funny side and restores the balance between reality and magic. The narrator instils in the reader the doubt that the whole story may never have happened and contributes to increasing the suspense.

That respected gentleman was the Ugly-Wugly who became real when, in search of a really good hotel, he got into the Hall of Grant Wishes. And if none of this story ever happened, how is it that those four children are such friends with Lord and Lady Yalding, and stay at The Towers almost every holidays? It is all very well for all of them to pretend that the whole of this story is my own invention: facts are facts, and you can't explain them away²⁵⁷.

3.2.2. *The Magic City*

Julia Briggs's biography dedicates chapter twelve to *The Magic City* (1910)²⁵⁸, one of Nesbit's most neglected and less analysed books. Unlike many other critics, who consider this novel among Nesbit's less noteworthy works, the biographer underscores Nesbit's modernism mostly in introducing a female character, who proves to be stronger and braver than the male one. However, on Nesbit's own admission, this magic book was so unsuccessful as to put her off.

I am still not at well: the failure of *The Magic City* has quite knocked me over. You know, really, I am a person who has never quite grown up,

²⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 291.

²⁵⁸ In some way *The Magic City* anticipates Nesbit's later work *Wings and the Child* (1913), where the writer praises the power of imagination in children and the importance of playing and building in childhood. The book describes in detail the construction of the magic city at Olympia.

(that is why I am able to write for children!) and I feel this blow as though I were a disappointed child²⁵⁹.

The failure of *The Magic City* was probably due to its complicated structure and to the strong symbolism hidden behind its plot and its characters.

The novel, which was first published as *The Temple City*, appeared in *The Strand* in January 1910. It tells the story of Philip Haldane²⁶⁰, an orphan boy who lives with his beloved sister Helen. He is fond of her and feels very unhappy when she leaves for her honeymoon with her husband Peter, leaving him alone. Therefore, Philip is sent to live at The Grange, Peter and his daughter Lucy's house. Here, being attracted by Lucy's many toys, the boy builds a city with all the things he finds in the nursery – books, dominoes, toys and other ordinary objects –, but he is severely scolded by Lucy's nurse, who threatens to destroy his creation. That night Philip awakes and goes to see his city: the toys have magically disappeared and he has now become the right size to enter his city, a real one. There, the boy faces many magic adventures and is asked to fulfil seven tasks with Lucy's help (a fight against a dragon, for instance, or the capture of some lions which frighten the city's population), in order to save his city from invaders and from the Pretenderette, who turns out to be Lucy's evil nurse.

As in many other Nesbit's books, the final scene of *The Magic City* shows the reunion of Philip's family and spreads a positive final message about the future and the abilities of human beings to morally changing and improving.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator focuses on the possessive relationship between Philip and Helen and to the love that deeply binds them, as follows:

Their parents were dead, and Helen, who was twenty years older than Philip and was really his half-sister, was all the mother he had ever known. And he had never envied other boys their mothers, because Helen was so kind and clever and dear. She gave up almost all her time to him; she taught him all the lessons he learned; she played with him, inventing the most wonderful new games and adventures. So that every morning when Philip woke he knew that he was waking to a new day of joyous

²⁵⁹ BRIGGS, *Edith Nesbit: A Woman of Passion*, p. 373.

²⁶⁰ This surname was probably chosen by Nesbit in honour of Lord Haldane, a Liberal politician whom her husband Hubert Bland really admired.

and interesting happenings. And this went on till Philip was ten years old, and he had no least shadow of a doubt that it would go on for ever²⁶¹.

The announcement of Helen's imminent wedding with Peter Graham really upsets Philip, who immediately shows his sister his hatred towards "that man"²⁶² and his jealousy towards his daughter Lucy. The boy feels guilty, as he knows he should be happy for Helen; however, he feels such a strong hostility²⁶³ towards the man who has "stolen" her beloved sister and has damaged their strong relationship, that he begins to misbehave. Everybody at The Grange complains about Philip's behaviour; both the servants and Lucy herself find him disagreeable and stupid, and the nurse shows all her aversion towards this "cantankerous little pig"²⁶⁴, as she calls him.

At the beginning of *The Magic City* Philip stands for the emblem of the typical Edwardian boy, who has received an education aimed to fortify the personality of a male child. He knows how to behave in order to be considered "a real man"; and he feels at a loss when he realises he cannot control his negative reaction to the consequences of her sister's wedding.

Left alone with Lucy at her house, while Helen and Peter are in honeymoon, Philip takes comfort in building a city with all the toys he finds in the nursery. It is a game he has very often enjoyed with her sister, as it has allowed them to let their imagination run wild and to share cheerful days.

He cleared a big writing-table of such useless and unimportant objects as blotting-pad, silver inkstand, and red-backed books, and there was a clear space for his city. He began to build. [...] "I'll build you a temple". [...] He brought up twenty-seven volumes bound in white vellum with marbled boards, a set of Shakespeare, ten volumes in green morocco. These made pillars and cloisters, dark, mysterious, and attractive. More Noah's Ark animals added an Egyptian-looking finish to the building. [...] He put everything you can think of into it: the dominoes, and the domino-box; bricks and books; cotton-reels that he begged from Susan, and a collar-box and some cake-tins contributed by the cook²⁶⁵.

²⁶¹ NESBIT, Edith, *The Magic City*, Jane Nissen Books, London, 2010, pp. 1-2.

²⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 8.

²⁶³ It may be noticed that Philip's strong dislike for her sister's husband can hide an oedipal feeling: it is very likely that he regards Peter as a rival and feels he is in competition with him.

²⁶⁴ NESBIT, *The Magic City*, p. 11.

²⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 15, 16 and 19.

However, at first the creation of the magic city turns out to be a punishment rather than a pleasant pastime: when the nurse sees what Philip has done, she harshly scolds him and sends him to bed without supper. The unhappy boy falls asleep but when he awakes at night, his city has become real and he can enter it; it is moonlight that enables magic events to happen, as in *The Enchanted Castle*, when the statues come alive at night. Here, in the so called Polistopolis, toys become real buildings, real persons and real animals.

Philip's entrance to his city seems to hide a more symbolical and metaphorical meaning. He enters a magic space, where only the laws of fantasy are in force and where he can compensate the fragilities he has in real life. Philip is involved in magic adventures because he has momentarily lost faith in his sister and he has to accomplish his process of growth: it is no accident that he is forced to deal with male characters throughout the seven deeds he is asked to accomplish, in order to save his city and to learn to care for Lucy.

Throughout the story, the narrator frequently hints at the attitude Philip should take in order to be regarded as the "right" good boy. When he arrives in his city and decides to wander around it,

He did not feel exactly frightened. But he did not feel exactly brave either. But he wished and intended to be brave, so he said, "I will explore these doors. At least I think I will", he added, for one must not only be brave but truthful²⁶⁶.

Lost in these thoughts, Philip falls asleep. He is awakened by a man who brings him to a guard-room, where a military captain asks him why and how he has come there. The captain tells him that trespassers are prosecuted in that city and reveals to him a prophecy: someone is going to come to free the city, the Deliverer.

In such a pleasant place, where sweet cocoa-nut milk is served with delicious food – as in any magic world, everything is exciting and positive, as it is the projection of a character's desires – Philip begins to feel better and to forget the unhappiness of his real life: in *his* town he is treated like a real man by a military captain and he is proud of this.

He now felt that the captain was talking with him as man to man. Helen had gone away and left him; well, he was learning to do without Helen.

²⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 28-29.

And he had got away from the Grange, and Lucy, and that nurse. He was a man among men²⁶⁷.

Exactly at that moment, someone knocks at the door and, surprisingly, Lucy enters. Philip immediately shows his discontent: the girl has followed him and has entered the magic city. Now, they both are trespassers and, as trespassers, they have to be judged before the court, the Hall of Justice. Once there, the two children are found guilty and are sent to prison, where a friendly jailer, who acts like a butler, welcomes them. In this magic world even a prison is a pleasant place.

Here, Philip's rage towards Lucy bursts, as he thinks it is her fault if they are now imprisoned. The girl reacts to the "hatefullest, disagreeablest, horridest boy in all the world"²⁶⁸ but, a moment later, after a breathing space, Philip proposes making peace: nevertheless, they find themselves in the same unfortunate situation with the same purpose of escaping from there.

The smart girl, reassured by the fact that Philip is beginning to be nicer to her, tells him her thoughts about the city. The boy listens to her carefully and Lucy's explanation leads him to think she is perfectly right.

"Don't you see?" It's your own city we're in, your own city that you built on the table in the drawing-room? It's all got big by magic, so that we could get in". [...] "The insides are part of the magic, I suppose", Lucy said; "and I saw the cities you built when Auntie brought me home last night, after you'd been sent to bed. And I did love them". [...] "Then you were there – did you notice how the magic began?" "No, but it all changed to grass; and then I saw you a long way off, going up a ladder. And so I went after you"²⁶⁹.

The proof of Lucy's reflections is given to the children when Mr. Noah – the judge originated from a statuette of a Noah's Ark toy – comes to visit them and tells Philip he is the Deliverer. The boy asks Mr. Noah if the city is magic and the man promptly answers that "everything in the world is magic, until you understand it"²⁷⁰. After telling Philip and Lucy the history of the city, both Mr. Noah and the jailer tell the children how they can

²⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 38.

²⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 47.

²⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 50-51.

²⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 53.

leave the city. They undoubtedly rejoice at the idea of coming back to their real world and, with no time to lose, they begin to run faster and faster. Suddenly, Philip finds himself hidden under the table of the drawing-room, where the nurse is destroying his city, and thinks he has had a beautiful dream.

By depicting a female character like Lucy, Nesbit subverts the common opinion about men's superiority over women. Like all Nesbit's female characters, Lucy is a heroine – she is adventurous, clever, emotionally stronger and more courageous than Philip. At first, the boy hates her and thinks she is a nuisance, but, throughout the course of their adventures, he has to admit that she is intelligent and has to accept her help in accomplishing two of the seven deeds he has to accomplish (the unraveling of the carpet, for instance, is possible only thanks to Lucy, who knows crochet).

Although it is inevitable to regard Philip as the protagonist of *The Magic City*, the reader does not have to underestimate the importance of Lucy in the story, as her presence is essential to allow Philip's moral growth. Besides, Lucy's peculiar traits recall Nesbit's feminism and transgression and the introduction of such a character is perhaps one of the reasons why Nesbit is considered one of the most important modern writers of children's literature.

The third chapter of *The Magic City* opens with Philip's awakening after the magic adventure. He finds himself alone in the house and thinks that other magic has made the whole household invisible. While he is having breakfast, he recollects the events of the previous night and begins to think it was not a dream, as the narrator observes:

His mind went back to his dream, which began to seem more and more real. Suppose it really had happened? It might have; magic things did happen, it seemed. Look how all the people had vanished out of the house – out of the world too, perhaps²⁷¹.

Shortly afterwards all the servants reappear and Philip soon realises that something bad has happened: the cook tells him Lucy is lost! He feels guilty: it is his fault if Lucy has disappeared, as he has left her in his magic city, while they were escaping from the soldiers.

²⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 68.

He had promised to be Lucy's noble friend, and they had run together to escape from the galloping soldiers. And he had run faster than she. And at the top of the ladder – the ladder of safety – *he had not waited for her*. “Any old hero would have waited for her, and let her go first”, he told himself. “Any gentleman would – even any *man* – let alone a hero. And I just bunked down the ladder and forgot her. I *left* her there”²⁷².

One again, Philip thinks over his behaviour and admits he has not been chivalrous to Lucy. At this very moment, Philip's psychological transformation begins²⁷³: he seems he has accepted that his reality is different now – Lucy is part of his family and his life has changed – and now the boy tries to find a way to save her again. Thus, he enters the drawing-room and, surprisingly, he hears the voice of Mr. Noah, who tells him that Lucy is in his magic city and that, if he wants to find her again, he has to build something new and go back to that magic space. Philip wonders how it is possible that Mr. Noah is in the magic city and at the same time in the drawing-room: it is thanks to Philip's weeping if the small toy statuette has come alive, as “tears are a strong magic”²⁷⁴, although Philip thinks that a “real” boy should never cry.

Thus, Philip builds once again a part of his city quickly and when he opens his eyes he finds himself in the magic city. Here, he begins to look for Lucy and, in his wanderings, he reaches a building very similar to Stonehenge, where he finds Mr. Perrin, the carpenter who made the bricks the boy has used to build the city. Philip asks the man how he arrived there, in the city *he* himself has created, and the carpenter answers as follows:

“All the people who helped to make all the things you used to build with, they're all here too. D'you see? *Making's* the thing. If it was no more than the lad that turned the handle of the grindstone to sharp the knife that carved a bit of a cabinet or what not, or a child that picked a teazle to finish a bit of the cloth that's glued on to the bottom of a chessman – they're all here. They're what's called the population of your cities”²⁷⁵.

²⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 76.

²⁷³ KUZNETS, Lois Rostow, *When Toys Come Alive: Narratives of Animation, Metamorphosis, and Development*, Yale University Press, London, 1994, p. 131.

²⁷⁴ NESBIT, *The Magic City*, p. 83.

²⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 98.

The passage above points out the central theme of the novel, that is, the power of imagination and the importance of creativity. Nesbit praises the ability of creating something beautiful and magic out of nothing, which is a skill belonging more to children than to adults. Unlike in *The Enchanted Castle*, where creativity has only caused negative events to happen (see the Ugly-Wuglies, for instance), in *The Magic City* the creative art of building enables Philip to enter a magic space and, consequently, to experience adventures which enable him to reach his maturity.

The magic city is what makes Philip's growth possible and it is not by chance that it is made of books, too, which are themselves products of a writer's imagination. In this novel, Nesbit's references to reading and to literature are even more evident than in *The Enchanted Castle*: Philip often hints at some poetry that Helen made for him and even the parrot which accompanies him in his adventures in the city sings a poetry. Besides, at the end of the story the invaders and the legions of Caesar come out from the pages of *De Bello Gallico*. Less obvious are Nesbit's allusions to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: for instance, the reference to Philip's wrong size when he has to enter the city or his weeping. Undoubtedly, all these examples stress the value that Nesbit confers to literature as a chance to find magic in everyday life²⁷⁶, by writing, reading or performing any other act of creation.

Mr. Perrin informs Philip about how he can become a Deliverer: he has to kill a dragon and, afterwards, if he succeeds, he has to accomplish another six deeds. Only by being successful in them, he will be the king of the city. However, if he does not want to be the Deliverer he will be the Destroyer. Although he is frightened of the seven tasks he has been assigned, Philip decides to be the Deliverer: a hero cannot fail in killing a dragon, so he informs Mr. Perrin of his choice. During Philip's oath to be the Deliverer of the city, a veiled lady declares she wants to be the Deliverer, too. Mr. Noah tells her this will be possible only if Philip fails in his deeds: in the meantime, she will be the Pretenderette.

The first deed is soon achieved. The green dragon is the clockwork lizard Philip received at Christmas; by removing the key, the boy makes the dragon sleep and can fasten it with some ropes. When the animal awakes, it succeeds in freeing itself and heads toward the princess. But Philip is faster than him and with a stroke of his sword he kills the dragon and rescues the princess, who, unexpectedly, turns out to be Lucy.

²⁷⁶ TOSI, Laura, "Alla scoperta dei mondi della meraviglia: la *fantasy* vittoriana", in *Dall'ABC a Harry Potter*, edited by Laura Tosi and Alessandra Petrina, Bononia University Press, Bologna, 2011, p. 202.

The seven tasks Philip has to deal with are not just one of Nesbit's devices to fill her novel with adventures and magic events. Above all, they are Philip's occasion to be close to Lucy and learn a moral lesson: to love her. The deeds are more and more difficult and they increasingly require Philip's self-sacrifice, going hand in hand with his growth and representing the different steps towards it. Every time the boy is successful in one of the tasks, a title is conferred on him – he becomes Baron, Earl and Duke, until he becomes king of the city – and, as the story goes on, Philip even succeeds in accomplishing a deed before Mr. Noah assigns it to him (eventually, he supplies Polistarchia with fruits, without knowing that this is the fifth task he has to perform).

Once Philip has found Lucy again, the two children are invited to a banquet in Philip's honour. In announcing to the boy the second deed, Mr. Noah says it may take him a long time to realise it and Philip immediately expresses his concern about his family's reaction to his absence. Mr. Noah replies as follows:

“It's all right”, said Mr. Noah. “However long you stay here time won't move with them. I thought I'd explained that to you”. “But you said”, “I said you'd set our clocks to the time of *your* world when you deserted your little friend. But when you had come back for her, and rescued her from the dragon, the clocks went their own time again. There's only just that time missing that happened between your coming here the second time and your killing the dragon”²⁷⁷.

Mr. Noah explains that the real world and the magic one coexist and that Philip's actions influence the flow of time. For what concerns the treatment of time in *The Magic City* Nesbit probably goes one step further; unlike in the Arden's books, where the children have an active role in stopping the clock hands, in this novel Philip is unconscious of the power he has on controlling time.

Like the first one, Philip's second deed is not difficult to accomplish. The boy is asked to disentangle a carpet whose thickness prevents people from using the hall in which it has been laid. With Lucy's help, Philip unravels the carpet and is proclaimed a baronet.

The scene that follows reveals the other important meaning of the magic city. Mr. Noah takes the children for a walk and shows them the factories in the neighbourhood.

²⁷⁷ NESBIT, *The Magic City*, p. 137.

This surprised Philip, who had been taught not to build factories with his bricks because factories were so ugly, but the factories turned out to be pleasant, long, low houses, with tall French windows opening into gardens of roses, where people of all nations made beautiful and useful things, and loved making them. And all the people who were making them looked clean and happy. "I wish we had factories like those", Philip said. "Our factories *are* so ugly. Helen says so". "That's because all you factories are *money* factories", said Mr. Noah, "though they're called by all sorts of different names. Everyone here has to make something that isn't just money or *for* money – something useful *and* beautiful"²⁷⁸.

Like in her other previous works, in this novel Nesbit expresses her social criticism towards industrialized England. Inspired by Wells's *The Modern Utopia* (according to Briggs Wells was similarly fascinated by building cities in miniature and often played at it with his sons)²⁷⁹, in this novel Nesbit shows her longings for a socialist Utopia, which is skilfully reproduced in Philip's magic city. Here, even factories are beautiful (like the school of the future in *The Story of the Amulet*) and the magic space shrinks to Philip's size to enable him to visit this imaginary world: it seems as though the writer wanted to tell the reader that the ideal society is the one meeting the citizen's wishes.

Mr. Noah goes on telling Philip about the beautiful laws he makes for the city and, then, he explains to the boy his third task: he has to reach the land of the Dwellers by the Sea and kill the two lions that are scaring its citizens. By riding a talking camel, which is called Humpty (it is a probable reference to the Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking-Glass* Philip and Lucy begin their journey towards the land, accompanied by other three talking animals: a parrot, Polly, and two dogs, Max and Brenda²⁸⁰. Once arrived in the land, at night they finally see the lions and wonder how they can kill them. It is Lucy who suggests a curious and funny way of getting rid of them: as the lions are toys from Noah's Ark, the dogs can lick the paint off of them, while they are asleep and tied: once the paint is off, the lions are weaker and their legs can be broken off.

It is obviously a very strange way of killing a lion and certainly only a child's mind can conceive such an idea. However, in the magic city, where everything is a projection of

²⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 149.

²⁷⁹ BRIGGS, *Edith Nesbit: A Woman of Passion*, p. 347.

²⁸⁰ In *When Toys come alive*, the critic Kuznets recognises in the personalities of the two dachshunds the parody of the principal features of women and men: Max stands for the indulgent man, while Brenda reminds us the pampered woman.

Philip's imagination, the deed is accomplished and the lions turn into wood. After driving the Pretenderette out, who has reached them on a Hippogriff's back, the children head towards the land of the Dwellers by the Sea. Meanwhile, Lucy asks the parrot how the Hippogriff came out of a book Philip used to build his city and Polly answers as follows:

“It's a long story”, said the parrot, “so I'll tell it shortly. That's a very good rule. Tell short stories longly and long stories shortly. Many years ago, in repairing one of the buildings, the masons removed the supports of one of the books which are part of the architecture. The book fell. It fell open, and out came the Hippogriff”²⁸¹.

When the children and the animals arrive on the beach inhabited by the Dwellers by the Sea, they are welcomed by the Lord High Islander, who shows them the island where the Dwellers are not allowed to go. They are afraid that the sea will sweep away their sand-houses and their castle; however, they cannot live far from it. Philip carefully thinks about what he can do to help the Dwellers and, with Mr. Noah's permission, decides to build an ark to transport them to the island. Unfortunately, during the celebration of the ark's building, Philip is kidnapped by the evil Pretenderette, who flies away on the Hippogriff's back, carrying with her Philip and Polly, entrapped into a cage. In spite of the sorrow for Philip's absence, Mr. Noah, Lucy, the Dwellers and the animals manage to embark and the ark led by Lucy reaches the harbour near the island. Meanwhile, the Hippogriff with Philip and the Pretenderette arrive in it (Polly has been dropped in the sea by the woman, but it will be set free by some gulls).

It is here that Philip surprisingly finds the Pretenderette's real identity: she is “the only really unpleasant person Philip had ever met in the world. It was Lucy's nurse, the nurse with the grey eyes and the big fat feet, who had been so cross to him and had pulled down his city”²⁸².

Left alone, while the Pretenderette-nurse has flown away on the Hippogriff's back, Philip explores the island and realises that it is the same island he had once built with Helen: they decided that no one else was allowed to stay there and that is why the Pretenderette must have run away from it. In his wandering in that place, where everything reminds him of Helen, Philip unexpectedly meets his sister, who has come there out of a

²⁸¹ NESBIT, *The Magic City*, p. 174.

²⁸² *Ibidem*, p. 221.

dream. Unfortunately, Helen cannot stay long in the island, as the ark with Lucy and the others on board has luckily reached it and Philip has to give up his sister's presence there, if he wants to rescue his friends. Thus, Helen kisses Philip and once all who were on the ark have landed on the island, she disappears²⁸³.

Afterwards, Mr. Noah tells Philip the next task to accomplish, introducing it to him in the way that follows:

“In the extreme north of Polistarchia”, said Mr. Noah instructively, “lies a town called Somnolentia. It used to be called Briskford in happier days. A river then ran through the town, a rapid river that brought much gold from the mountains. [...] The inhabitants were cheerful and happy. But when the Hippogriff was let out of the book, a Great Sloth got out too. [...] He is a very large and striking animal, and by some means, either fear or admiration, he obtained a complete ascendancy over the inhabitants of Briskford. He induced them to build him a temple of solid gold, and while they were doing this the river bed became choked up and the stream was diverted to another channel far from the town. Since then the place is fallen into decay²⁸⁴.

As the inhabitants of Somnolentia sleep when the Great Sloth sleeps, Philip and Lucy have to find the way of keeping the animal awake, so that the Somnolentians can work to restore to their city its original splendor.

The Great Sloth, which reminds us of the dinosaurs in *The Enchanted Castle*, is certainly the symbol of laziness par excellence. In this novel, however, it has a deeper meaning: it is the emblem of a society which refuses to make progress, as it spends “its useful life in eating, sleeping and listening to music”²⁸⁵. When Philip and Lucy succeed in reaching Somnolentia and the temple of the Great Sloth – they travel on board of the “Lightning Loose”, that is, a yacht which Helen built for Philip's city and, then, they arrive in Somnolentia by being lifted up one by one in a big bucket – the huge animal appears and Lucy makes him wish for a drawing machine “to draw up water for eight hours a day”²⁸⁶. The machine suddenly appears in the Great Sloth's room and the animal creature is forced

²⁸³ At this point of the story, Philip is able to accept Helen's vanishing from the island as his process of growth is almost complete.

²⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 239-240.

²⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 271.

²⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 272.

to pump water eight hours every day in order to give back the Somnolentians their river – after all, this magic space can only exist as a consequence of creative acts, like Philip's building his city. Meanwhile, the inhabitants recover their lost industriousness and begin to restore their city: Philip's sixth task is performed.

After making a Somnolentian man wish for a motor car in order to use it to come back to Polistopolis (in the magic city once you wish a thing you have to keep on using it), Philip and Lucy arrive in Polistopolis, where the Captain of the Old Guard offers them a safe place to sleep in, far from the dangerous Pretenderette: she leads a group of soldiers out from a book entitled *De Bello Gallico* and has the power to control them by opening and closing the book anytime.

In order to free Polistopolis from the wicked Pretenderette – this is Philip's seventh and last task to perform – the boy hatches out a plan, that is, a night attack to her army. Thus, he asks the Captain for twenty men in order to raise the book's cover: from the open book Caesar walks out, followed by his legions, who march towards Polistopolis' main gate to face the barbarians led by the Pretenderette. During the fight, Caesar's legions prevail and the enemies disappear one by one into the book. The children thank the Roman general for his help, while the men of his army enter the book and vanish. Meanwhile, the Pretenderette, watched over by a guard, heads towards Caesar, who plays the part of a judge and pronounces a sentence on her:

“You will be taken to Briskford, where you will teach the Great Sloth to like his work and keep him awake for eight play-hours a day. In the intervals of your toil you must try to get fond of some one. The Halma people are kind and gentle. You will not find them hard to love. And when the Great Sloth loves his work and the Halma people are so fond of you that they feel they cannot bear to lose you, your penance will be over and you can go where you will”²⁸⁷.

The Pretenderette is condemned to serve an unusual term of imprisonment: she has to learn to love the inhabitants of Somnolentia and to get the Great Sloth to like its work.

²⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 300-301.

In some way, in the magic city the Pretenderette²⁸⁸ has the chance to redeem her poor conditions in real life, where she is only a nurse; on the contrary, in the imaginary world she heads up an army and everyone complies with her orders.

At the end of the novel, shortly before being punished by Caesar, it is the Pretenderette herself who explains the reasons why she has become so evil. At first, she thought it was all a dream, so that her actions would not have had any influence on the primary world. Secondly, she has always considered her job unpleasant, because of the way she was treated by her superiors and because she hated to be “a servant, to see other people get all fat and you all the bones”²⁸⁹; it is very likely that the narrator's mention of the Pretenderette-nurse's living conditions alludes once again to Nesbit's social criticism towards the twentieth-century English society, which leads a nurse to hate her job with such a resentment as to look for redemption.

The Pretenderette, who has finally proved to be the Destroyer, is led away. At this point of the story, the reader enjoys a turning and charming scene: Caesar seems to resemble Lucy's father (that is, Peter Graham, Philip's step-father) and a bright light blinds them before he disappears into the book, too.

And now Caesar stood facing the children, his hands held out in farewell. The growing light of early morning transfigured his face, and to Philip it suddenly seemed to be most remarkably like the face of That Man, Mr. Peter Graham, whom Helen had married. He was just telling himself not to be a duffer when Lucy cried out in a loud cracked-sounding voice, “Daddy, oh, Daddy!” and sprang forward. And at that moment the sun rose above the city wall, and its rays gleamed redly on the helmet and the breastplate and the shield and the sword of Caesar. The light struck at the children's eyes like a blow. Dazzled, they closed their eyes and when they opened them, blinking and confused, Caesar was gone and the marble book was closed – for ever²⁹⁰.

²⁸⁸ According to Briggs, the word “Pretenderette” alludes to the Movement of Suffragette, which was politically very active around 1910, the year when *The Magic City* was published; Nesbit may precisely refer to Evelyn Sharp, who was known both as a suffragette and as a writer of children's fiction. Moreover, the critic points out the similarities between the Pretenderette and the writer herself: like the Pretenderette, Nesbit herself loved motor cars and wore a veil in order to protect herself from dusty roads. Both the writer and the character are dominant figures; however, they are both afraid of being unloved.

²⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 300.

²⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 301-302.

Like in *The Enchanted Castle*, in this novel the light helps to create the mystical and supernatural atmosphere typical of Nesbit's later fantasies. Prickett includes Nesbit among those writers who share the Christian Platonic philosophy in their works, such as MacDonald, Kingsley and Morris, and points out probable references to "the light" in Plato's *The Republic* and in Dante's *Paradise* in *Divine Comedy*²⁹¹. It seems that Nesbit wants to find a cosmic harmony in her magic city, reaffirming the power of human beings' creativity rather than the divine one – and in this aspect, however, she differs from Kingsley, MacDonald and Dante.

After Caesar's disappearance, Philip and Lucy are crowned king and queen of Polistopolis, as they have skilfully performed all the seven heroic tasks Mr. Noah assigned to them. The judge tells the children the only way they can come back home is by building a house and entering it. Thus, the children build it and, after nostalgically saying goodbye to Mr. Noah, get into the house and find themselves at the Grange. Like most of Nesbit's novels, *The Magic City* ends with a family reunion: when Lucy and Philip come back home Helen and Peter are there – obviously, they had been informed of the children's disappearance – with an unexpected gift: two dachshunds, the real Max and Brenda!

At the centre of *The Magic City*, which shows some of the most frequent *tòpoi* of the chivalric romance – some deeds to be performed and a Princess to be rescued, for instance –, lies the power of imagination, which is Philip's vehicle to accept the change in the relationship with his sister. The fact that at the end of the novel it is Lucy to be crowned queen rather than Helen, for example, confirms that the protagonist has learnt his lesson: now, he is no longer jealous of Helen, because he has found in the magic city he herself has built the way to overcome his weaknesses, to love Lucy and to share love with others.

Both in *The Enchanted Castle* and in *The Magic City* the characters are themselves creators of their own magic (see how the children in the first novel give life to the Ugly-Wuglies and how Philip creates his magic city in the latter); as a modern writer, in these later novels Nesbit praises the capacity of human beings to improve their inner nature and, in a wider context, to transform their contemporary society into a better one, as Philip has done in his magic city.

²⁹¹ PRICKETT, p. 238.

Conclusion

The analysis has highlighted Edith Nesbit's noteworthy contribution to Victorian children's fantasy. Since she wrote between the nineteenth and the twentieth century, she has frequently been regarded as one of the forerunners of modern²⁹² fantasy, because she infringed some of the most established Victorian conventions. Even though Nesbit began to write novels and poetry for an adult audience, nowadays critics and readers pay greater attention to her fantasy children's books, which inspired many later writers, as Nesbit introduced many innovations in her writing and renewed the previous notion of "fantasy for children".

As Julia Briggs observes in her biography, Nesbit's whole life had a strong impact on her writing. As a child, she immediately proved to be naughty and rebellious, showing her indifference to dolls and preferring spending her time in more exciting activities, like bicycling and boating, for instance – she was fundamentally a tomboy. However, Nesbit soon showed a vivid imagination, which certainly contributed to her great success in children's literature, together with her childish nature and her strong sense of humour.

The loss of her father at the tender age of four years, the continuous travels from a city to another one due to her sister's illness (she was consumptive), the places she visited and the books she read when she was a child deeply influenced Nesbit's writing: many of the buildings described in her novels remind the reader of the houses she lived in (*The Red House*, for instance) and in many of her other works family's reunion is the characters' goal, as in the Psammead Trilogy, or in the later magic novels *The Enchanted Castle* and *The Magic City*.

Nesbit's strong spirit of independence and transgression characterized all her adulthood. It is likely that her marriage to Hubert Bland in 1880 (Nesbit's mother frowned upon it, as she did not approve of the man) was a turning point in her life: Hubert was a brilliant man, whose strong personality sometimes prevailed on his wife, so that Hubert's admiration for the socialist principles led Edith to follow him in the foundation of the Fabian Society in 1884.

²⁹² In her critical essay "Realismo vittoriano: un impossibile compromesso" in *Dall'ABC a Harry Potter*, Francesca Orestano points out the modernity of Nesbit's fantasy, describing her as a "post-victorian" writer.

Following her entrance in the Society, Nesbit's life underwent important changes. In the Society, she met emancipated women who involved her in the Women's Suffrage Movement and she had the chance to express her innate spirit of freedom: she had her hair cut (an uncommon habit among women in that age) and changed her way of dressing. Besides, it was in that period that Nesbit met G. B. Shaw, with whom she had a liaison²⁹³, and Alice Hoatson, the woman who worked in Nesbit's house as a housekeeper, took care of her children and collaborated in her works (she was a journalist, too). However, Miss Hoatson would become the mistress of Nesbit's husband and would even borne him a child, whom Edith would adopt and raise as her own²⁹⁴.

In spite of the problems in her private life, Nesbit kept on writing with determination and passion. It was around the end of the nineties that she began to write her most famous children's novels. Besides more realistic works, like her first novel *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* (1899), its sequel *The Wouldbegoods* (1901), which in some aspects anticipated the central theme of the later novel *The Magic City* (that is, the importance of reading and playing in childhood), and *The Railway Children* (1905), Nesbit expressed her great talent in children's fantasy. Her literary production of fantasy novels, which can be divided into two phases (the more episodic three novels of the Psammead Trilogy belong to the first phase, while the more complicated and mystical later works *The Enchanted Castle* and *The Magic City* mark the second one) shows the several innovations the writer brought to Victorian fantasy and her new approach in a more modern fantasy genre.

In her writing, Nesbit avoids the "classic" didacticism typical of Victorian writers, who aimed to provide their young readers with the right rules to behave (indeed, books for girls often differed from books for boys) and to prepare them to be perfect men and perfect women. On the contrary, Nesbit rejects the nineteenth-century view about the child as a passive human being subjected to adults and in her works gives a portrayal of clever and lively children, who, besides being active, are also independent and creative thanks to their power of imagination, disguised as magic (Philip in *The Magic City* is the "creator" par

²⁹³ Nesbit's love affair with G. B. Shaw inspired her novel *Daphne in Fitzroy Street* (1909), which tells us about the tormented love story between the young heroine Daphne and Henry, a bad tempered and self-centred man, whose personality reminds us of Shaw himself.

²⁹⁴ In some poems from *Lays and Legends* (the first series was published in 1886 and the second one in 1892) Nesbit gives vent to her resentment towards her treacherous husband and her bitter disappointment about her marriage in crisis. Unlike the other poems included in the collection, which are works of social criticism, *The Moat House* and *Bridal Ballad* face the theme of jealousy and infidelity, whereas in other even more autobiographical works, Nesbit analyses the figures of the husband and the wife, reaffirming the power the former has on the latter.

excellence). The characters in Nesbit's novels are modern and intelligent children, who belong to middle-class families living in modern London. The fact that Nesbit sets her works in contemporary England gives her the chance to express criticism towards her society; in her works the writer shows her scepticism about progress, as she fears it may weaken the power of imagination. However, at the same time Nesbit, who was strongly influenced by her friend and writer H. G. Wells, encourages her characters and also her readers to long for a social Utopia, where society would satisfy its citizens' needs without depriving them of the magic of imagination.

Nesbit's works have often been regarded as "domestic novels"²⁹⁵ as she does not use a "high" register in them. The writer addresses her readers in a direct and informal tone, even in the scenes imbued with mysticism in the later magic books. Nesbit's fantasy bursts into realism and ordinary life enters into the magic of an alternative world, which causes trouble to the child characters, rather than solving their problems. Therefore, a strong sense of humour springs from this balance between realism and magic – Nesbit's magic occurs by means of ordinary objects –, a sense of humour which develops also through the writer's fondness for puns.

Nesbit's subversive writing influenced the whole fantasy production of the twentieth-century. Many later Edwardian writers drew inspiration from her modern novels, introducing in their works the literary innovations she brought to Victorian fantasy, like the importance of home and family (a central theme in J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*), for instance, or the idea of a group of children rather than of a single child (like in the later C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*). Furthermore, some critics agree that Nesbit can be considered the first children's fantasy writer to deal with time-travel in her novels; it is likely that she was inspired by Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), so that she decided to incline her young readers to a theme which was new in fantasy until that time. Her time-travellers' journeys are the writer's vehicle to highlight the evils of Edwardian society and to encourage the changes for a better life, contributing to strengthen Nesbit's social criticism.

In his *The Nesbit Tradition* the critic Marcus Crouch studies the impact Nesbit's writing had on later fantasists, pointing out the heritage she passed on them and stressing the fact that every contemporary fantasy writer owes his/her own success to her modern literary production. The critic observes that Nesbit

²⁹⁵ TOSI, Laura, "Alla scoperta dei mondi della meraviglia: la *fantasy* vittoriana", in *Dall'ABC a Harry Potter*, edited by Laura Tosi and Alessandra Petrina, Bononia University Press, Bologna, 2011, p. 198.

owed much to the Victorians, even if she made affectionate fun of them. She transmuted their good solid base metal into pure gold. In her hands the Victorian conscience lost its self-consciousness: their insight became sharper and more richly aware of the incongruities which make for her humour; above all, she threw away their strong, sober, essentially literary style and replaced it with the miraculously colloquial, flexible and revealing prose which was her unique contribution to the children's novel. After E. Nesbit children's literature might explore new worlds of ideas and themes; it would never return to the stuffily enclosed nurseries of the nineteenth century²⁹⁶.

Many later fantasy writers were inspired by Nesbit's stories, especially for what concerns time-travel fantasy. In 1939 Alison Uttley's *A Traveller in Time* was published: the protagonist of the novel is Penelope, a girl who, like Nesbit's characters, temporarily leaves her house and family to visit the seventeenth-century. In *The Magic Bedknob* (1943) and in its sequel *Bonfires and Broomsticks* (1947)²⁹⁷ Mary Norton, recalling Nesbit's *Five Children and It*, tells the story of a group of children who travel into the seventeenth-century by means of a magic bed. Later novels like Lucy M. Boston's *The Children of Green Knowe* (1954), Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958), or Tolkien's and Lewis's works opened the door to the so called "second golden age"²⁹⁸ of English children's literature, which showed the unforgettable mark of the Second World War: the following time-travel fantasies look back nostalgically to a pre-industrial past and reveal the fear that modernity can destroy the heritage that the past has left.

²⁹⁶ CROUCH, Marcus, *The Nesbit Tradition. The Children's Novel 1945-1970*, Benn, London, 1972, p. 16.

²⁹⁷ The two novels inspired Disney's 1971 well-known film *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*.

²⁹⁸ TOSI, Laura, "Time is a very confusing thing: la time fantasy", in *Dall'ABC a Harry Potter*, edited by Laura Tosi and Alessandra Petrina, Bononia University Press, Bologna, 2011, p. 220.

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