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SUMMARY

Nature Vs. Nurture. The Deconstruction of Children's Character in English and American Literature

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The desire to write this paper came from a mix of personal and professional convictions. As a graduate of humanities and English literature together with being a teacher for underage students, it has always been a curiosity to see how the child develops, and what specifically influences his/her personality. The educational system is challenging and challenged especially because its participants are complex human beings in a constant process of both physical and intellectual development, travelling through temperamental and behavioural changes undergone in a very short time interval. This makes the teaching process and, not the least, the nurturing process very delicate and intricate in their nature. The idea of this research started from the intention and desire to understand, as well as possible, the child psychology, and to explore the main factors that determine their development as future independent adults. In a world where there has always been a discordance between the young generation and the adult one, it is of high importance to find a connecting link between the two, so much so, that communication would be easier passed on and, later on, perceived by both parties.

First of all, the topic area that I have been investigating is 19th, 20th and 21st century English and American literature. This paper focuses on American and English novels dealing with concepts of childhood and upbringing such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, *The Vast Fields of Ordinary* by Nick Burd and *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. The aim of this paper was to examine, decipher and understand the development of various young or teenage characters considering Nature versus Nurture key elements. Furthermore, it focused on the importance of educational values instilled in teenage characters of the 19th, 20th and 21st century English and American literature, not without ignoring the ever constant change literature experiences from one decade to another.

While the bulk of literature deals mostly with mature and full-fledged characters there has always been a sub-genre that has dealt with under age, very young, or teenage characters. This has been the key aspect which led to the development of this paper. Critics and literary enthusiasts alike will surely keep their focus on adult characters from the perspective of who the adult is now, what they are doing, and what had happened to the adult in the past, but what this paper aims to do is to look at the exact same things, however not from a retrospective point of view, but from a “now” perspective. This is to say that this paper will analyse who the young character is, what influences him/her, what shapes him/her, *as it happens* while going through the narrative. Furthermore, this study will attempt to perform some sort of “anamnesis” of the characters and to find a different way

to decipher them, a way that would approach the characters from beyond their strictly implied meaning of the words used in the writing of the literary creation. The introspective manner of scouring their Self intended to find their intimate drives which, one way or another, determined the visible actions and attitudes of the studied characters. What this allows us to do is to steer away as much as possible from presuppositions and analyse the character based on actual available facts mentioned in the narrative. In order to do so, for this particular reason, this paper aims to dissect each character by using a dichotomous system. Mainly, it will observe, interpret, and react to the development of a character by implementing a Nature versus Nurture technique.

The Self versus the Other dichotomous system has been observed in many a societies/cultures/groups of people. Just as so we may begin to observe it being more and more addressed in the literature of the 21st century, a literature freer of norms and prohibitive themes. The point of using such a system is to come to aid any reader who might have difficulty understanding the need of “freak” characters existing in literature, even more so “freak children”. In this particular care it is, at a surface level, a matter of representation, while, at a deeper level, it is a matter of understanding the driving force of each character who does not identify with the Self.

The Nature versus Nurture system is meant to help us ascertain what plays the biggest part in the shaping of the young adult. Which part is more important, or which part is to hold the blame for characters who turn savage and murderous, which part is key when a character is unfit, unwell, or constantly rebellious? For all intents and purposes, it would be very easy to succumb to the idea that there is no reason to interpret or dissect characters since they are who they are because that’s how they have been constructed. As such, in the second part of this paper all characters shall be torn to pieces, deconstructed, and built back up while trying to answer the question: *Why are they like this?* Not because that is how the writer created them, but because it is either Nature or Nurture (or why not a mix of the two) that created and shaped the characters.

Deconstructionism is a literary and philosophical movement that originated in the late 20th century. It emphasises the instability and indeterminacy of meaning, and the inherent contradictions and ambiguities within language and texts. Deconstructionist writers and critics seek to expose and challenge the assumptions, structures, and power dynamics underlying a text, and to reveal the ways in which language and meaning can be manipulated and subverted. This often involves analysing the language and rhetoric of a text in order to uncover hidden meanings and implications, and to expose the limitations and biases of the text's discourse.

One key aspect of deconstructionism is its focus on the concept of “différance” a term coined by French philosopher Jacques Derrida to describe the way in which meaning is produced and deferred

through the use of language. According to Derrida, language is inherently unstable and prone to multiple interpretations, and the meaning of a text is always dependent on the context in which it is read and the assumptions and expectations of the reader. Deconstructionism has had a significant influence on literary theory and criticism, and has been applied to a wide range of texts, including novels, plays, poetry, and other forms of literature. It has also had an impact on other fields, including architecture, art, and philosophy. Overall, deconstructionism is a critical approach that seeks to challenge and subvert traditional notions of meaning and authority, and to reveal the complexity and fluidity of language and interpretation.

It is of course important that we define the two big terms that will be used throughout the entirety of this paper. As with any academic endeavour, the methodology that shall be used throughout this research exercise shall heavily focus on the two aforementioned terms. The expression “nature vs. nurture” describes the question of how much a person’s characteristics are formed by either “nature” or “nurture.” “Nature” means innate biological factors, while “nurture” can refer to upbringing or life experience more generally. Traditionally, “nature vs. nurture” has been framed as a debate between those who argue for the dominance of one source of influence or the other, but contemporary experts acknowledge that both “nature” and “nurture” play a role in psychological development and interact in complex ways.

The nature versus nurture debate involves the extent to which particular aspects of behaviour are a product of either inherited or acquired influences. Nature is what we think of as pre-wiring and is influenced by genetic inheritance and other biological factors. Nurture is generally taken as the influence of external factors after conception, e.g., the product of exposure, life experiences and learning on an individual. Behavioural genetics has enabled psychology to quantify the relative contribution of nature and nurture with regard to specific psychological traits. Instead of defending extreme nativist or nurturer views, most psychological researchers are now interested in investigating how nature and nurture interact in a host of qualitatively different ways. For example, epigenetics is an emerging area of research which shows how environmental influences affect the expression of genes.

Moving forward, in terms of methodology applied, this paper shall consist of multiple techniques used together, or in combination, in hopes of allowing us to reach certain answers to the questions posed by this endeavour. The paper shall use a historical approach in order to provide historical background. This shall be done by presenting a history of literature and education insofar as to help us understand what were the starting points, and the entire course of evolution for both education and literature.

In addition, and complementing the above, the paper, in the bulk of its chapters, shall aim for a psychological, sociological and educational approach. A very thorough analysis of the studied characters together with their educational background has been conducted. We used the method of

comparison to examine in contrast all the young characters and all the situations they have experienced. It was important to research the different points of view of well known educators, philosophers, psychologists in order to obtain the upcoming results of this paper. Ideologically, the paper will try to answer a few questions that have to do either with how a character is developed, why is it as it is, or what would be the driving factor in determining the actions of any said character. With that in mind, the point of this paper shall not be to offer a deterministic approach to character analysis, but, to a certain extent, a deconstructionist one.

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Pragmatically speaking this paper shall comprise a total of six exhaustive chapters which will deal, or at least attempt to deal, with the overarching theme of Nature versus Nurture from all possible facets of the problem. Specifically, the first chapter shall aim to provide the reader with a top-down view of the literature and theory by presenting a history of education through the ages starting with the evolution of education and how it shaped human society. Then, it will discuss the value of education in American and English literature, without leaving behind the most important events of the past three centuries which have, it is our strong conviction, shaped the literature of our time. Even though the focus of this paper is to analyse literary characters from all possible aspects, it is of great significance to try to understand the effect that education, upbringing and genetic background played in the lives of the writers who have created the characters.

Furthermore, this study will give an overview of the English and American history starting with the puritan migration followed by the U.S history from education to literature. It will also pass over the early 19th century up until the Civil War, without leaving behind the effects of the 20th and 21st century that shaped literature. We believe that a detailed preamble into the attitude towards education in the past three centuries is highly necessary as, moving further in this thesis, we shall

come to understand that attitudes have varied and changed wildly, in terms of child upbringing, during the time that has passed. As such, we may expect to look at a plentitude of writers, in the first chapter, who have found critical acclaim, be it in the 19th, 20th or 21st century, as, even if they did not have child characters, their influence over the literary word will have undoubtedly had a word to say when it came to trends, attitudes, and customs.

Lastly, this introductory chapter discussed about the theoretical perceptions of childhood in literature. It looked at how the notion of childhood was treated starting with the puritan period and what changes the notion has suffered up until. This chapter examined issues of race and racism and how said issues affect the young individual. It also debated issues of otherness and identity and their outcomes especially when discussing the implications that could influence an entire community.

The second chapter delved deep into the notion of Nature versus Nurture from a psychological approach. We observed all of the psychological implications of Nature and Nurture in the lives of characters such as Holden Caulfield, Huckleberry Finn and the children from *Lord of the Flies*. Doing so, we first of all, took a journey through the evolution of the psyche of a child and saw how this has changed from the early 19th century up until today, but not without trying to understand what adolescence entails. In this chapter, we intended to examine the interactions between the various factors that influenced an individual's personality over the course of their life and once again tried to answer the question: which carries more weight in the shaping of the aforementioned characters: Nature or Nurture? Who we are as people is determined by our genes and our environment. Saying that a combination of the two is the solution may seem like an easy way out, however it is important to consider how much of one or the other weighs and what exactly shapes who we are or who we have been predetermined to be. With that being said, this chapter looked at answering the above question, by deconstructing and trying to understand the above mentioned literary characters' youths from several works of fiction.

The third chapter has a three-layered approach to education. This is to say that we examined how education shaped the child from a philosophical, psychological, and sociological point of view. Yet, we cannot carry out this study unless we carefully analyse what the great thinkers in this field had to say about education or what is the proper way to raise a child. This is important since, as we shall see, all characters featured in this chapter had education thrust upon them from all of the three above mentioned perspectives. This chapter talked about how education was applied to Caulfield, Huck, Scout and Jem, and most importantly how philosophy, psychology, and sociology have helped in building the aforementioned characters. And lastly, the third chapter looked at the opposition between solidarity and individualism – both traits which have had a rampant presence in the 20th

century child. This part of the paper gave particular attention to how children behave in a medium with scarce opportunities and, more crucially, how vital the role of education or proper nurture is when limited resources are available. With that being said, we examined how juvenile literary characters such as Lee Harper's *Scout*, Mark Twain's *Huck and Tom*, and Salinger's *Holden*, ended up in rather uncomfortable and even dangerous situations and how they dealt with getting out of the presumably troublesome situations.

We dedicated chapter four entirely to discussing the 21st century childhood. This particular chapter talks about the latest iteration of childhood, namely, the post-modern child. Furthermore, it is going to present the powerful shift from the norm in writing as it will deal with the child as a representation of *The Other*, whilst also address matters of mental health and abuse in children. We tried to understand the literary characters' otherness, what caused it and how literary youths such as Dade from *The Vast Fields of Ordinary* and Charlie from *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, can overcome this particular otherness. While in the past mentioned centuries the young character was portrayed as an individual who desires escape or simply runs away from society in order to explore and wander, thus aiming a period of solitude, the 21st century child is usually portrayed as being a loner or an outsider from the beginning.

The fifth chapter pays close attention to the matter of social class. Does social class influence the way in which two characters of the same genotype evolve differently, provided they come from different social classes? It will also be dedicated to a case study of Utopian and Dystopian childhood. It examines how utopias/dystopias work in environments ruled by children or young adults, and how said environments may very well end up dictating the actions undertaken by the characters. This chapter also attempts to dissect and understand the theme of mental health and abuse as it is without doubt a recurrent theme in the 21st century utopian/dystopian literature. Such matters of social and mental health or post traumatic disorder, rather frequently, are caused by underlying issues of child abuse or neglect.

The final chapter of this paper discusses the interpretation and evaluation of the image of childhood in popular culture. We will consider a focal point how decisive it is for a child's future to benefit from education during the blooming years of preadolescent and teenage years. This was demonstrated through the comparison of two outstanding works of literature: *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding and *The Hunger Games* written by the American novelist Suzanne Collins. As seen, by the use of contrasting pictures, children frequently find themselves in various forms of crises in both stories. Children lose their youth and their innocence at this point as the survival instinct takes over.

Ensuing the analysis of the aforementioned novels, which have as protagonists young aged characters, from children to teenagers, we were able to examine more clearly the decisive factors that had a strong imprint in their development. The way in which the educational capital, or the lack thereof has established its mark on the characters who, at the moment of narration, express a specific type of characters will be indeed of great interest.

At the end of this paper a conclusory chapter tries to ascertain the findings, and surmise the answers to all of the paper's questions, but not without keeping in mind that while throughout our deconstructing, and reconstructing of characters we will surely reach points where the matter will still be up for debate.

All things considered, the choice of the young characters was not at all left to fate. Taking into account their different background and the fact that each one of them has been raised in a distinctive environment shows us that a common trait that bounds them, is their vast intellectual capital. Hence, while reading and analysing their experiences, it was proved that all of them had their own personal way of handling critical situations based on their own judgement and intuition.

While comparing and contrasting the importance of nurture versus nature one comes to the hypothesis that both of them play an important part in shaping the young individual, however nurture has had a greater impact and influence in the developing of the characters as future adults. With that said, while the fundamental goal of this paper was to look into the development of literary characters and whether their personalities, qualities or actions had been determined by nature or nurture, the introductory chapters 'focal point was to explore the roots of education and what important events carved it throughout history. This study aimed to investigate the conflict of Nurture and Nature and the importance of education especially during the first part of a child's infancy. In the case of this particular study, the background of characters (having the age between six and eighteen) has been thoroughly analysed from a pragmatic point of view.

The focus was directed towards the psychology of the characters, to reveal their true inner self, the elements that truly characterised them, and what influenced them to sometimes have this kind of apparent contradiction with their true nature. The child needs to feel security and protection but also emotional support within the household. A proper and carefully guided education during the first years of infancy could influence a great deal the way in which the child will become a prepared adult in a healthy society. In other words, the paper tries to emphasise the importance of a good and careful education offered to children in the first years of life, and how it considerably influences the

development of young people as future adults, but also the way they go through maturity traversing the stages of initiation.

The first fundamental objective was to make sense of Holden's behaviour and his so-called rebellion against society "a society characterised by phoniness, superficiality and wrong values" and for this, it was essential to analyse some of the actual events that occurred during the 50' and 60' America. Furthermore, it is advised to think of how the adolescent, post-adolescent or young adult attitudes of the fifties and sixties were perceived by psychologists, psychoanalyst and sociologists. Holden's confusion is caused because of the fact that he cannot understand the society in which he lives. And the main question that had to be answered was if Holden is truly a rebel, as many scholars claim him to be, or is he just a confused teenager on a quest to finding maturity? For all intents and purposes, we may continue with the idea that Holden is a rebel, a misunderstood soul, however, should we take a step back and look at this paradigm through a lens of deconstruction we may come to an altogether different deduction.

Holden is not a rebel, nor is he the black sheep of the family as most readers would perceive him, he is a teenager who is damaged. Holden sees the rite of passage into adulthood as a death, as a matter or event that must be withheld for as long as possible. He is neither willing nor ready to step into adulthood simply because – shockingly said – he is there already. From the small amount of information, we get throughout the narrative he has suffered many traumas while growing up. Distant parents and the death of his brother will have certainly left a great mark on him.

While we have previously encountered a character where nurture was, arguably, of more importance, now we shall briefly look at the effect a lack of nurture has on the literary individual. This paper once again dealt with an up-and-coming teenager, but this time, as opposed to Holden's very lavish/abundant/nurturing upbringing, this time around we encountered the very opposite; a character who's dealt with every problem life threw at him, and, in the end, considering he had neither the benefits of nature nor the ones of nurture, he managed to become an adapted individual. Quite more so, if we consider the fact that he had, by the end of the book, surpassed all levels of human decency; Huck Finn becomes a child who ends up being more civilized than the society in which he lived. Ultimately, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is not about the adventures per se, it's about the story of one boy overcoming his flawed upbringing

Furthermore, it was important to make sense of the troubled behaviour of the boys from *Lord of the Flies*. Are we humans more inclined to be good or evil? In critical situations what prevails? Human instinct or education? It is a question that philosophers and not only, have long examined and discussed this case throughout existence. On one side we consider the fact that human kind is utterly

wicked and that a civil society could save us from our instincts and on the other side we believe that human kind is in fact good. Are said characters born evil? Or do they become evil as the story unfolds? While we may be inclined to think that the boys from *Lord of the Flies* are born evil and put this debate to a rest, one must certainly look at the *emotional baggage* the characters bring to play. After reading several studies and ongoing debates about as what (nature or nurture) made the characters from *Lord of the Flies* act the way they did, and after deconstructing and analysing each of these characters' actions and behaviours it is safe to assume that education played a very important role in this story. Humans are in fact guided by instincts and they do act rather impulsive in critical situations, however with a proper nurture, received from a caregiver or a school institution, we can presume that this instinct could be tempered and we could in fact choose our own actions.

Charlie, from *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* receives the care and support he requires from his friends, instructors, and, eventually, his family, in order to begin to open up about his background of abuse and to begin the work of learning to accept himself. As a result, Charlie avoided the fate of his friend Michael, who allegedly felt he had no one to talk to about his own troubles. In this way, Chbosky displays the life-saving potential of speaking out about abuse, addressing previous traumas, and seeking assistance from others in dealing with life's hardships. As like in the case of Holden, Charlie didn't benefit from a proper nurture and instead facing his traumas or dealing with his traumas, his family chose to keep up the appearances of a happy family. As in the case of Dade, from *The Vast Fields of Ordinary*, he did not have a healthy emotional maturity and he could not function in a healthy relationship. Both characters were portrayed as being misfits or broken since this is the easy way out in terms of analysing a character. However in all actuality both Charlie and Dade have had a traumatic past (one being sexually abused while the other being a sexual outcast) which, instead of being dealt with, was rather kept a secret and as such, neither of the characters managed to develop properly.

In the case of Katniss, the words of Sapolsky sound as true as ever since teenage-hood is the period when you overthrow dictators. Moreover, I believe that this type of dystopian literature reflects the present state of mind of today's young adults. In my experience as a teacher, most teenagers fall between one of two categories. They are either distrustful and rebellious towards authority figures or they are entirely apathetic when it comes to any person/institution or government who gets to decide and shape their life.

Each of the analysed characters in this paper have more or less experienced trauma throughout their childhood, however this is not to say that their future as independent adults is compromised. Having given various examples of traumatic experiences that these characters have

encountered, it was worth indicating an example of youngsters who, with proper guidance, nurturing, have managed to pass through the initiation rite quite triumphantly: Scout and Jem Finch.

The results indicate that all of the carefully examined characters (whether Holden, Huck Finn, Scout Finch, Jack, Piggy, Ralph, Katniss, Dade, Alex, Patrick, Charlie or Sam) have been subjected to a variety of traumas during their early childhood, some more than others, a fact that leads to the understanding of their actions and why they become future troubled individuals. All of the above mentioned youngsters have had adult figures whom have been expected to be influential maternal or paternal figures in their early period of life inspiring them and implementing the proper beliefs and attitudes in order for them to develop full competence and to be assimilated in their own personal communities. However, further research shows that even though this was to be expected from the guardians who have, more or less, labeled their children as misfits, dropouts, outsiders or rebels, it was them, in this academic's opinion, who have failed into properly raising the child. This once more goes to show that Nurture is, after all, quite quintessential in terms of rearing a fully adequate adult, as, should there be a lack of it, young individuals will not be able to fully integrate.

It can be concluded that through time, it seems to have been easier to label young adults/ youngster characters as misfits or broken, instead of actually trying to understand their behaviour and how it stems from a life of trauma or parental neglect.

The fact that we have seen how children's literature started with a didactical aim, and then, went through various stages up until the point of equating dystopias and taboo subjects with children's literature, will without a doubt be of great help in tying together the discussed works. Said pieces will all help in trying to answer the overarching question of: what carries more weight in the shaping and upbringing of a child: nature or nurture? After having dedicated a certain amount of years towards trying to understand which factor plays a more important role in the rearing of a child, I am at this stage convinced that nurturing plays a relatively more important part than, in the simplest of terms, nature. This is not to say that nature does not have its own particular strong suits, it is only to say that nurturing offers a wider range of possibilities when it comes to the shaping of any young individuals. In other words, this means that while nature gives you a limited amount of traits which are more or less set in stone, nurture on the other hand, lets you work on these traits and shape them in any which direction you or your guardians consider to be appropriate.