

Reconsidering the Canon: A Critical Pedagogical and Textual Study of Classic Adventure Narratives in Primary English Textbooks

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Abstract

The practice of introducing abridged Western literary classics such as Gulliver's Travels, Rip Van Winkle, and Robinson Crusoe in primary English classrooms is frequently defended as a means of acquainting young learners with a shared global literary heritage. Yet the developmental and cultural suitability of these narratives for upper primary learners remains contested. This paper offers a revised and expanded critical study of the developmental compatibility, cultural relevance, and pedagogical implications of teaching these texts in Class V classrooms. Building on cognitive development theory, sociocultural learning theory, reader-response criticism, and postcolonial literary theory, the study incorporates close textual analysis of each narrative's satirical, allegorical, and ideological structure, situates the texts within their original historical contexts, and compares source material against textbook abridgement. It argues that all three narratives depend on interpretive resources, historical knowledge, ironic distance, symbolic reasoning, that most ten-year-old readers have not yet consolidated, so that classroom encounters with these texts frequently collapse into teacher-mediated transmission rather than independent transactional reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). The paper concludes with a set of concrete recommendations grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010) and Bruner's (1960) spiral curriculum, proposing that canonical status alone cannot justify a text's place in an early curriculum.

Keywords: Primary English education; Western literary classics; Developmental appropriateness; Cultural relevance; Reader-response theory; Postcolonial literary theory; Culturally responsive pedagogy; Spiral curriculum.

Introduction

Textbook design at the primary level significantly shapes children's linguistic growth, reading habits, and literary sensibilities. In postcolonial educational contexts such as India, English textbooks are not neutral linguistic tools; they are also sites where questions of culture, identity, and authority are continually negotiated (Said, 1978). The NCERT Class V English textbook Marigold includes adapted versions of Gulliver's Travels and Rip Van Winkle

(NCERT, 2007), while simplified versions of Robinson Crusoe circulate widely in supplementary school readers used across Indian primary schools.

While these works are routinely labelled "children's classics," their compositional history tells a different story: all three were written for adult readers and are embedded in dense historical, political, and ideological frameworks specific to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain and America (Swift, 1726/2003; Irving, 1819/1999; Defoe, 1719/2001). Their subsequent domestication into children's literature was a retrospective act of cultural reassignment, undertaken long after the texts' original satirical, religious, or economic arguments had ceased to be self-evident even to adult readers (Nodelman, 2008). This paper argues that this history of reassignment is pedagogically consequential: the interpretive keys the original texts assumed, familiarity with Anglo-Irish sectarian politics, the American Revolution, or eighteenth-century mercantile colonialism, are not restored by simplification, and their absence leaves the child reader with narrative surface but little of the meaning that originally justified the narrative's construction.

Theoretical Framework

Cognitive developmental readiness. Piaget's (1952) account of the concrete operational stage, spanning roughly ages seven to eleven, holds that children's reasoning at this age is most secure when anchored to observable, tangible relations rather than sustained symbolic abstraction. Satire, allegory, and historical irony, the three central devices operating in *Gulliver's Travels*, *Rip Van Winkle*, and *Robinson Crusoe* respectively, all require a reader to hold a literal surface and a non-literal intended meaning in mind simultaneously, a capacity that research on children's understanding of non-literal language suggests develops gradually and is not reliably stable until later childhood or early adolescence (Winner, 1988).

Sociocultural learning and scaffolding. Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development proposes that material pitched slightly above a learner's independent mastery remains productive when supported through guided interaction. Bruner's (1978) elaboration of scaffolding, and his earlier proposal of a spiral curriculum in which disciplinary material is revisited with increasing complexity across school stages (Bruner, 1960), together suggest that historically and ideologically dense texts are not inherently unsuitable for young learners, but that the degree of scaffolding required rises sharply with historical distance. When textbook treatment reduces this scaffolding to a short glossary or a single explanatory paragraph, comprehension work shifts almost entirely onto the classroom teacher, and the ZPD is exceeded rather than productively occupied.

Reader-response and transactional theory. Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional model treats meaning as an event produced jointly by reader and text, dependent on the reader's capacity to bring relevant experience into contact with textual cues. Where such experiential contact is unavailable, as when a ten-year-old Indian reader encounters a

narrative organised around Anglo-Irish religious controversy or the political aftershock of the American Revolution, the transaction Rosenblatt describes is structurally weakened, and reading tends toward what she terms efferent extraction of plot information rather than aesthetic engagement.

Postcolonial and ideological critique. Said's (1978) analysis of Orientalism demonstrates how Western narrative traditions frequently constructed non-Western peoples and spaces as objects of mastery, curiosity, or civilisational contrast. Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of colonial ambivalence extends this critique by showing that such narratives are rarely univocal; they simultaneously assert and destabilise colonial authority, a doubleness that is itself difficult for young readers to detect without guidance. Ian Watt's (1957) classic study of Robinson Crusoe as a foundational myth of economic individualism further situates Crusoe's island enterprise within the emergence of capitalist selfhood, a conceptual apparatus entirely external to a ten-year-old's frame of reference.

Culturally responsive pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2010) argue that learning is most effective when curricular content connects with students' cultural knowledge, prior experience, and frames of reference. Measured against this standard, texts organised around distinctively British or American historical experience present an additional, non-developmental barrier: cultural distance compounds cognitive distance, so that even a precocious reader may be well-equipped cognitively but under-equipped experientially.

Textual Case Studies

Gulliver's Travels: Satire Without Its Target

Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726/2003) was conceived as a sustained political and philosophical satire directed at Swift's adult contemporaries, engaging Whig-Tory party politics, the pretensions of the Royal Society, and broader Enlightenment confidence in reason. In simplified school versions, children are introduced chiefly to the fantastical scale-reversal of Lilliput, encountering description of the protagonist as taller than the tallest steeple (Swift, 1726/2003). This image is memorable and visually engaging, but it is also the satire's least meaningful surface feature; the substantive target of Swift's irony lies in the Lilliputians' court intrigues and doctrinal disputes, most famously the conflict over which end of an egg should be broken (Swift, 1726/2003), a direct allegory of the Catholic-Protestant and factional divisions that convulsed early eighteenth-century England. Removed from this referential context, the egg episode reads to a child audience merely as an amusing absurdity rather than as pointed commentary on the arbitrariness of doctrinal conflict, and the episode's satirical charge is effectively inert. Piaget's (1952) framework helps explain why: the text asks readers to treat a concrete, observable dispute as a stand-in for an abstract, historically specific controversy, a two-step symbolic operation that exceeds most ten-year-olds' independent capacity and, absent extensive teacher mediation, collapses into simple plot memorisation.

Rip Van Winkle: History as Absence

Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle* (1819/1999) is organised around a single structuring irony: a man falls asleep under colonial rule and wakes to find himself a citizen of a new republic, his two decades of sleep having elided the American Revolution entirely. Rip's disorientation on returning to his village, registered in his realisation that this was not the village he had left (Irving, 1819/1999), only carries its full weight if the reader independently supplies the historical rupture the text otherwise leaves implicit; the story never explains the Revolution, because Irving's original audience needed no such explanation. For a Class V learner without this background knowledge, Rip's confusion risks appearing as a curious personal predicament rather than as a meditation on historical discontinuity, generational change, and the instability of political identity. Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD framework is instructive here: the cognitive distance is not primarily conceptual but informational, a gap in prior historical knowledge that scaffolding could in principle close, but that abridged textbook treatment typically does not attempt to close.

Robinson Crusoe: Survival and Its Silences

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719/2001) is often introduced to children as a straightforward adventure of resourcefulness and survival, and this reading is not inaccurate so much as radically partial. Watt (1957) reads the novel as a founding narrative of economic individualism, in which Crusoe's methodical inventory-taking, cultivation, and fortification of the island model an emergent capitalist relationship to land and labour. Crusoe's own description of himself as lord of the whole manor (Defoe, 1719/2001) is not incidental colour but the ideological centre of the novel: it enacts a claim of ownership and sovereignty over territory and, later, over Friday, that is inseparable from the colonial economic order Defoe's contemporaries inhabited. Introduced to children as an uncomplicated celebration of self-reliance, the narrative's proprietary and racial hierarchies risk being absorbed uncritically rather than examined, precisely the danger Said (1978) and Bhabha (1994) identify in colonial adventure fiction more broadly. Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional model suggests that without critical framing, young readers are likely to transact with the text's most available surface content, survival and ingenuity, while remaining unaware of the more troubling ideological content operating beneath it.

Comparative Analysis: What Abridgement Removes

Across all three case studies, a consistent pattern emerges. Textbook abridgement reliably preserves plot event and vivid physical imagery, the giant among the Lilliputians, the sleeping man's overgrown beard, the solitary figure surveying his island, while reliably removing the historical or ideological apparatus that gives each image its original interpretive weight. This is not simply a matter of vocabulary simplification; it is a structural transformation in which allegory becomes anecdote, historical irony becomes personal misfortune, and ideological claim becomes adventure detail. Nodelman (2008) argues that this transformation is characteristic of the process by which adult texts are

retrospectively assigned to children's literature: the accommodation is rarely a matter of rewriting difficult content into simpler content of equivalent meaning, but rather a matter of substituting surface narrative for the interpretive frame that originally organised it. The three texts examined here differ in degree, *Gulliver's Travels* requires the most extensive restoration of ideological context, *Robinson Crusoe* raises the most ethically consequential silences, *Rip Van Winkle* is the most readily supplemented through a brief historical framing, but the underlying pattern of loss is the same in each case.

Classroom Consequences and the Limits of Teacher Mediation

In practical classroom contexts, these texts often require teachers to devote substantial instructional time to explaining unfamiliar geography, historical events, and cultural references (NCERT, 2007), converting what might otherwise be independent reading practice into teacher-centred transmission. Rosenblatt (1978) argues that when learners cannot personally connect with a text, reading becomes mechanical rather than transformative; the present analysis suggests that this risk is heightened, rather than resolved, when the text's core meaning depends on information the teacher alone possesses. Under such conditions, assessment tends to migrate toward factual recall, characters' names, plot sequence, memorable phrases, since the deeper allegorical or ideological content is rarely made available for the students' own interpretive work. Contemporary educational frameworks that emphasise culturally responsive and contextualised pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2010) are correspondingly difficult to enact when a substantial share of curricular time is absorbed by background exposition rather than guided textual engagement.

Acknowledged Pedagogical Value

Despite these concerns, these texts are not without pedagogical value. They expose learners to varied narrative structures, extend vocabulary, and stimulate imaginative engagement with unfamiliar settings and characters (Nodelman, 2008). Encounters with canonical world literature, however partial, can also serve a valuable function in later schooling, providing a point of reference when students revisit these narratives, or the literary traditions they represent, in more developmentally appropriate forms. The concern raised in this paper is not that such value is absent, but that it is currently pursued at a developmental stage where the texts' central meanings remain largely inaccessible, so that the benefits realised are narrower than the texts' canonical prestige might suggest.

Recommendations

Delay adult-oriented classics. Following Bruner's (1960) spiral curriculum, texts whose meaning depends on historical or ideological context unavailable to primary learners should be reserved for secondary stages, where the requisite background can be taught explicitly rather than assumed.

Prioritise culturally familiar narrative and folklore. Primary curricula should draw more heavily on regional and national storytelling traditions that allow the transactional process Rosenblatt (1978) describes to occur without an intervening translation of cultural context.

Use graphic and illustrated retellings as a bridge. Where canonical texts are retained, illustrated formats can restore some of the visual and contextual scaffolding lost in prose abridgement, supporting the guided interaction Vygotsky (1978) identifies as central to learning within the ZPD.

Sequence oral storytelling before textual analysis. Teacher-led oral narration, with explicit historical framing offered in advance rather than reactively, can supply the background knowledge these narratives assume before students encounter the written text independently.

Introduce critical framing alongside canonical texts. Where Robinson Crusoe or similar colonial adventure narratives are retained, brief guided discussion of ownership, power, and perspective can pre-empt the uncritical absorption of hierarchical assumptions that Said (1978) and Bhabha (1994) warn against.

Scope and Limitations

This study is a textual and theoretical analysis rather than an empirical classroom investigation, and its claims about learner comprehension are necessarily inferential, drawn from developmental and literary theory rather than direct observation of Class V classrooms. The critique offered here is not directed at NCERT's editorial choices, which operate under real constraints of textbook length, syllabus continuity, and the practical need to expose learners to a range of literary traditions (NCERT, 2007). Nor does this paper suggest that culturally distant texts should be excluded from primary education altogether; the argument is narrower, that the specific texts examined depend on interpretive resources not yet available to most ten-year-old readers, and that this dependency is not adequately addressed by vocabulary simplification alone. Future research combining classroom observation, learner interviews, and comparative comprehension assessment across abridged and scaffolded versions of these texts would substantially strengthen the claims advanced here.

Conclusion

Gulliver's Travels, Rip Van Winkle, and Robinson Crusoe occupy secure and significant positions in world literature, and their canonical stature is not in dispute. What this paper questions is the assumption that canonical prestige translates directly into curricular suitability for Class V learners. Each narrative depends on interpretive resources, historical knowledge, ironic distance, critical awareness of ideological structure, that most ten-year-old readers have not yet developed, and abridgement for classroom use typically preserves narrative surface while discarding the very apparatus that gives each text its meaning. A child-centred curriculum must privilege comprehension, empathy, and

imaginative engagement over canonical prestige, sequencing culturally and cognitively demanding texts to periods of schooling in which learners possess the interpretive resources such texts require (Bruner, 1960; Rosenblatt, 1978).

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