

Katharine Kittredge

Ithaca College

From Aspirational Perfection to Practical Charity: Goodness in Children's Literature 1770-1830

The instructive fiction published for children between 1770 and 1830 showed a clear evolution in both the definition of what it meant to be "moral" and in its depiction of children's capacity to learn moral lessons. Late eighteenth-century texts like *Giles Gingerbread* and *Goody Two-shoes* showed exemplary protagonists grow from morally irreproachable children to financially successful adults, while later texts focused on the repercussions of children's acts within the "child world." Early nineteenth-century texts became more specialized, tailoring their messages for children from a variety of social backgrounds and utilizing diverse settings: family circle, boarding or day schools, and (for young servants) the workplace. While texts for working-class youth continued to show dramatic punishments for non-moral behavior, tales for privileged children increasingly showed childhood to be a time of ethical experimentation when children were shielded from many of the harsher consequences of their missteps. Emerging themes included humane treatment of animals and the most effective ways to aid less fortunate individuals, and children were encouraged to develop a sense of empathy. Later didactic writers viewed children as essentially good; bad behavior was attributed to misguided parents or educators, and all but the worst offenders were viewed as capable of reform. Increasingly, didactic literature offered models for shaping children into intelligent and empathetic adults rather than being content with offering illustrations of the outsize rewards and/or gruesome consequences awaiting extremely good or bad children.