

The Wish-granters in Children's Fiction: Comparison Between the Psammead and Doraemon

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Abstract

In this article, I shall compare two wish-granters in British and Japanese children's fiction, that is, the Psammead in *Five Children and It* (1902), which was written by Edith Nesbit (1858-1924), and Doraemon, which was created by the manga artist Fujiko F. Fujio (1933-96). In order to explore the similarities in the structure of their fictional worlds and the function of the wish-granters, in spite of the difference in cultural backgrounds, some aspects of both works such as plot, characterisation, and the relationships between the wish-granters and the child protagonists are analysed. As a consequence of the whole discussion, it will be clarified that they have a common function in each fiction, that is, encouraging the child protagonists' self-development.

子ども向けフィクションの中の「願いごとを叶えるもの」
—— サミアドとドラえものの比較 ——

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要旨

本稿では、イギリスと日本の2つの子ども向けフィクションの中の「願いごとを叶えるもの」、すなわち、Edith Nesbit (1858-1924) 作 *Five Children and It* (1902) に登場する the Psammead と漫画家藤子・F・不二雄 (1933-96) が生み出したドラえもんを比較する。異なる文化背景を持つにも関わらず、2つのフィクションには構造や「願いごとを叶えるもの」の機能に類似点が見られる。作品の筋、登場人物造型、「願いごとを叶えるもの」と子ども主人公との関係性の分析を通して、幼少の読者を対象とした2つのフィクションに描かれる「願いごとを叶えるもの」は、子ども主人公の成長を促す機能を果たしていることを明らかにしていく。

Introduction

This article aims to compare the two wish-granters in children's fiction: the Psammead and Doraemon. The Psammead is a sand-fairy, which appears in *Five Children and It* (1902) written by the British fantasist Edith Nesbit (1858-1924), and Doraemon is a creation of the Japanese manga artist Fujiko F. Fujio (born Hiroshi Fujimoto, 1933-96). Although they are from totally different cultures, these fictional characters show several similarities.

First, both of them are wish-granters who have the power to grant wishes for child protagonists. Second, the works in which they are described are assumed to be for child readers of around 10 years of age.¹ Third, both the Psammead and Doraemon similarly function in fiction for rather young readers.

In this article, the wish-granters are examined through the analysis of some aspects of both works² such as plot, characterisation, and the relationship between the wish-granters and child protagonists in order to explore the similarities between the two works in their narrative structure and the function of the wish-granters.

1. Similarity in Plot

In *Five Children and It*, the child protagonists happen to encounter a sand-fairy called the Psammead in a gravel pit near their summer home while they are spending their holiday in the countryside. Once the children realise that the Psammead is able to grant wishes, they become eager to ask this sand-fairy their wishes. Because they promised the elderly Psammead to request one wish a day, they visit the Psammead every day to wish for what must be the most profitable to themselves. Nevertheless, the wishes they are granted by the Psammead always lead them into trouble.

Doraemon comes from the future to the boy protagonist Nobita Nobi as a gift from his descendant. One day, Doraemon suddenly appears with Nobita's descendant Sewashi from the front drawer of Nobita's study-desk because, by accident, it is the entrance to the time machine, which is the beginning of the *Doraemon* series. Since he has come to help Nobita, Doraemon pulls out a gadget from his seemingly bottomless four-dimensional pocket whenever Nobita is in trouble. However, after it is proved to be so convenient, the gadgets inevitably cause some trouble because they are abused by Nobita or other children. Thus, the *Five Children and It* and the *Doraemon* series are obviously constructed on a similar plot.

In addition, the troubles caused by the wishes or the gadgets are resolved without exception after the children experience a slight thrill or excitement. Therefore, it is another similarity in both fictions that every episode ends happily and the child protagonists are kept safe.³

2. Characterisation of the Wish-granters

Subsequently, it seems necessary to compare characterisation in the two works. In

both *Five Children and It* and *Doraemon*, the central characters appear to be the Psammead and Doraemon rather than the human children who are concerned with those wish-granters.

Their appearances are totally different. The Psammead is a rather bizarre creature, which is described as follows:

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's.⁴

Because this sand-fairy is 'worth looking at,'⁵ children cannot help staring at it even if the Psammead becomes offended. (Figure 1) Unlike the Psammead, Doraemon, who has a round face and body, is non-threatening. (Figure 2) Moreover, Doraemon has an expressive face, which makes him more familiar and accessible for young children.⁶



Fig. 1. Edith Nesbit, *Five Children and It* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1993)



Fig. 2 Fujiko F. Fujio Museum, Kawasaki. Personal photograph by author. 11 Mar. 2015.

However, they also have a similar trait, that is, a similarity to toys. As Elmer Skenkel points out, the Psammead, who has eyes like telescopes and a furry body, is more like a toy than a fairy.⁷ Doraemon, who is known as a gadget cat, is not a living creature but a robot from the future. Doraemon was originally created both from a *dora-neko*, which means a stray cat in Japanese, and a *Polon-chan*, which is a common doll for babies. Fujiko obtained inspiration when he happened to kick his daughter's *Polon-chan* while he was

fussing around at home trying to think of ideas for his new manga.⁸ Thus, it seems to be natural that Doraemon is reminiscent of a toy. Such a trait common to both characters leads them to suggest an opportunity for a new sort of playing for the child protagonists.

Although both of these wish-granters seem to be superior to the child protagonists because of their power of wish-granting, their attitudes towards children are not the same. Whereas the Psammead is proud to be the last of his species,⁹ Doraemon is created as an equal to children. Fujiko didn't want to make Doraemon look down on children. Since the manga work *Doraemon* first appeared in a magazine for children aged nine to ten, Fujiko set Doraemon's height as the average for fourth year students at elementary school: 129.3 centimetres.¹⁰ Moreover, Doraemon, who is originally a nurse robot, is willing to take care of children and pulls out a gadget for Nobita when he's in trouble without any hesitation, while the Psammead always grants children's wishes reluctantly.

3. Characterisation of Child Protagonists

In addition to the wish-granters, it might be necessary to discuss the characterisation of the child protagonists, five children and Nobita, who also play important roles in both works. In fact, they are quite differently described.

The five child protagonists in *Five Children and It* are Cyril, Anthea, Robert, Jane, and Lamb (a baby). They are ordinary children from the middle classes. In those days there were usually several children in a family, and they used to play predominantly with their sisters and brothers. Since their parents were almost never around them, the elder children took care of their younger sisters and brothers. As a result of spending most of their time in a group, children easily learned how to cooperate with each other. That is why the child protagonists in *Five Children and It* show good teamwork whenever they need to solve the problems caused by their wishes. Apart from Anthea, who is characterised as being kinder and more considerate than others, these children lack character compared to the impressive Psammead.

Nobita in the *Doraemon* series is strongly characterised as a below-average child, that is, he is not good at anything. He is not athletic, and he always scores zero (equal to F) in his tests. Nevertheless, he does not make any effort to do better. His number one hobby is taking a nap. His parents are typical for the 1970s¹¹: a company employee and a full-time housewife. Although his mother eagerly preaches to Nobita to encourage him, she cannot always take care of him because she also has to do housekeeping. Therefore, Sewashi gifts Doraemon to Nobita to encourage him on behalf of Nobita's busy parents because his

ancestor's life, which is full of failure, affects Sewashi's own life in the future. Doraemon motivates Nobita to make efforts toward a better life in which he is to marry Shizuka Minamoto, the most popular girl in his elementary school.

Although Nobita is lazy and totally dependent on Doraemon, he has his own virtues, such as his generosity, kindness, courage, and mettle to be independent, even if he is a bit slower than others. Nobita is always willing to share what he obtains through Doraemon's gadgets with his friends around him, including Gian and Suneo. In addition, Nobita's good nature is explained by an adult character in this work. When Nobita and Doraemon go to the future to see Nobita's wedding, they happen to arrive there on the night just before his marriage. Because they want to see how Shizuka is, Nobita and Doraemon visit her house. Shizuka is talking with her father, and her father is encouraging her:

"I think your judgement in choosing Nobita is correct. He is the kind of person who wants others to be happy, and feels bad about others' unhappiness. That's the most important quality for a person to have."¹²

Shizuka's father seems to represent Nobita's virtues with the above words in this scene.

4. The Relationship between the Wish-granters and the Child Protagonists

Unlike Doraemon, whose visit to Nobita is planned, the encounter of the five children and the Psammead is sheer coincidence. Thus, the relationship between this wish-granter and the child protagonists is temporal. At first, the children are anxious about the Psammead, who suffers to swell itself up in order to grant their wishes, and they hope that the sand-fairy does not hurt itself or crack its skin.¹³ However, as they become eager to continue requesting effective wishes from the Psammead, the children totally forget the fact that this wish-granter is too old to keep granting the children's wishes. Only Anthea, who is kind by nature, is truly considerate of the Psammead. In the end, she releases the Psammead as her final wish.

Doraemon, who comes to Nobita with a certain purpose, is a good partner for Nobita to reach the goal of changing his future. When his mission is accomplished, Doraemon goes back to the future. Nevertheless, because of the effect of the single gadget he leaves for Nobita as his parting gift, Doraemon returns to Nobita. Doraemon's final gift is a liquid named 'Uso-800,' which means 'a pack of lies.' All the words spoken by anyone

who drinks this liquid are reversed. Nobita punishes Gian and Suneo for telling him a lie with this gadget, but his spirit is not refreshed. When he goes back home and his mother asks him if Doraemon has really come back again from the future, Nobita says, 'No, he hasn't. Doraemon will never come back. Not any more.' Because of the effects of *Uso-800*, Doraemon actually does come back to Nobita.¹⁴

Subsequently, Doraemon becomes Nobita's everlasting best friend. Therefore, the relationship between them is changed.¹⁵ Nobita suddenly changes when he needs to consider Doraemon. Before Doraemon returns to the future, he tries to provoke a one-on-one fight with Gian and finally beats him to make Doraemon relieved.¹⁶ Moreover, when he realises that Doraemon is exhausted, Nobita suggests he has a day off. Although Doraemon leaves Nobita a special bell, named 'Doraemon bell,' to call him back in case of emergency, Nobita tries not to use the bell and to get through by himself, even when he is bullied by Gian and Suneo or he suffers a perilous experience.¹⁷ These episodes denote how Doraemon is precious to Nobita. For Doraemon, Nobita is able to actualise his hidden virtues.

5. The Function of the Wish-granters

Although the relationship between the wish-granters and the child protagonists is different, both wish-granters function to encourage the self-development of children. The power of these wish-granters shows another similarity. Wishes granted by the Psammead are over at sunset. Such limited magic of the Psammead seems to save the children, even though they always get into trouble. The Psammead's wish-granting is similar to games with rules. Doraemon's gadgets also suggest fun and excitement to Nobita as well as other children. However, all the gadgets have no eternal power and there is always a way to cancel them out. Therefore, Nobita safely learns from his joy and failure caused by the gadgets.

Because the Psammead has existed since ancient times, it indicates to the children that people of long ago used to just wish for simple things such as food, but in vain. Although they repeatedly ask the Psammead to grant them extraordinary wishes, the children finally realise that what they need is food. For instance, when they wish to be as beautiful as the day, they are mistaken by their nurse Martha for strangers and locked out. As a result, they cannot eat anything until the magic spell expires at sunset. In another case, the children obtain wings to fly and have a lot of fun, but they soon feel famished and take some food and drink from the kitchen of a rectory. Although they try to pay with all the money they

have, their behaviour is tantamount to stealing because the money is not enough to pay for what they take.¹⁸ The Psammead, who mutters his old story, actually tries to tell the children what is really important.¹⁹

Furthermore, it can be argued that the children's wishes always cause trouble because the Psammead intentionally confuses what they wish²⁰, as if it is encouraging the children to realise what nonsense their wishes are. As they regularly and in vain wish one wish a day, the children gradually realise that there is something more important than their wishes. To some extent, the Psammead takes care of the children during the absence of their parents.²¹ Anthea's final wish to release the Psammead might represent the self-development of the child protagonists in *Five Children and It*.

Doraemon seems to pull out a useful gadget quite easily whenever Nobita entreats Doraemon for help. However, if Nobita refuses to return the gadget to Doraemon after the problem is resolved, he always warns Nobita, who is usually elated to fail in the end. Sometimes, Doraemon behaves maliciously. For example, he deliberately omits to tell Nobita what will happen in order to make him learn through concrete experience. Nevertheless, since he knows his role as a nurse, Doraemon always saves Nobita as soon as he realises that he was wrong.

In fact, Nobita shows a different quality in the longer versions of Doraemon from the one in the short manga included in the 45 volumes of the comic books. In the short versions, because of the length, one story is based on one gadget. The structure of all the short versions is almost the same. When Nobita is in trouble and he asks Doraemon for help, Doraemon pulls out a gadget for Nobita, a problem is caused by the gadget, and finally the problem is solved. Such a simple structure cannot help but emphasise Nobita's uselessness. Thus, in the short versions, Nobita seems to be totally dependent on Doraemon. However, in the longer versions, which are always titled 'Nobita and Something,' Nobita is given more opportunity to play an active part as a protagonist. For instance, Nobita is gifted at playing cat's cradle and at shooting things (with a toy gun). Neither is very useful in everyday life, but in the other world, he puts his talents to full use. Nobita is a fabulous gun-fighter on a planet somewhere in the universe.²²

In the longer versions, Doraemon's gadgets, or Doraemon himself, often become out of order, and Doraemon's four-dimensional pocket sometimes becomes useless. In such situations, it is Nobita who uses his wits and bravely leads others. Even Gian determines to follow Nobita, who is kind and sincere. Nobita, who is always helped by Doraemon in everyday life, saves people on another planet or a dinosaur in prehistoric times.²³

Similarly, it is pointed out that, in comparison to Nesbit's short magic stories, as well

as *Five Children and It* or *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, which consist of short episodes, the self-development of the children in *The Story of Amulet* is clearly described because this work is a full-length story.²⁴ Therefore, it can be argued that the narrative structure is affected by the length of the story in both fictions.

Conclusion

As a consequence of the whole discussion, the function of the two wish-granters in the fiction for rather young children is clarified. In both works, the child protagonists, whose wishes are granted, do not have to experience situations that are too serious and all problems are always resolved in the end. Confusion is suggested in order to just let them learn safely.²⁵ The similarity in the plots is derived from the authors' similar policy of placing a great emphasis on a sense of humour in children's fiction. Such a policy appears to affect the creation of the wish-granters.

Notes

- 1 According to *Do ra Carte: A Book for a Doraemon Authority* (1998), the first story of Doraemon appeared in the New Year issue of the magazine for fourth year students of elementary school in 1970. (2011 pp.22-25) Likewise, Nesbit's so-called Magic Trilogy opened with *Five Children and It*, and the stories are highly assessed as prominent works for children of 10-to-12 years. (Edward Eager 1958 p.349)
- 2 As for *Doraemon*, the manga series called 'Ladybird Comics' in 45 volumes, published by Shogakkan Publishers, Inc. (1974-1996), are used in the whole comparison with *Five Children and It* because all of these volumes were created during Fujiko's lifetime, unlike some of the other comic books and animated films about Doraemon.
- 3 Nesbit, who sometimes writes fearful creatures in her books for children, prefers not to expose her child protagonists to danger. Similarly, Fujiko places a great emphasis on lightness and a sense of humour in his manga works for children, as he remarks in an interview printed in the second volume of *F Life: Fujiko F. Fujio Official Magazine* (2014 p.92).
- 4 Edith Nesbit, *Five Children's and It*. 1993 p.25.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Regarding the Foreign Minister's selection of Doraemon as the first "anime ambassador" for Japan in 2008 and as a special ambassador for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, Amy Chavez points out in her article in *The Japan Times* issued on April 20 2013 that Doraemon trumped his powerful rival Kitty mainly because of Kitty's lack of smile.
- 7 Elmer Skenkel, "Domesticating the Supernatural: Magic in E. Nesbit's Children's Books" in *The Victorian Fantasists: Essays on Culture, Society, and Belief in the Mythopoeic Fiction of the Victorian Age*. 1991 p.212.
- 8 *Do ra Carte*. pp.26-7.
- 9 When it first meets children, the Psammead explains that the rest of his species became extinct long ago. (Nesbit, pp.28-9)
- 10 *Do ra Carte*. p.33.

- 11 Like other popular manga works, such as Machiko Hasegawa's *Sazae-san* and Momoko Sakura's *Chibi-Maruko-chan*, the characters do not get older and the situations continue to be based in the Showa era in *Doraemon*. Andrew Mueller points out that *Doraemon* is gradually becoming a nostalgic thing of the past, though he is a robot from the future. (*Monocle* 2015 p.46)
- 12 Fujiko F. Fujio, *Doraemon*. Shogakkan English Comic Vol. 8.
- 13 Nesbit, p.30.
- 14 Fujiko, *A New Version of Doraemon*. 2014 pp. 140-51.
- 15 The 3D-CG animated film titled *STAND BY ME Doraemon*, which was released in 2014, places an emphasis on the great friendship between Nobita and *Doraemon*.
- 16 Fujiko, *Doraemon* Vol.6.
- 17 Fujiko, *Doraemon*. Vol. 35.
- 18 Nesbit, p.107. In this scene, the inserted narration of the implied author, who always takes the child's side, makes an excuse for the child protagonists by emphasising that they are too young to realise the fact.
- 19 Margaret and Michael Rustins compare the Psammead to an elderly person who tends to mutter what he/she preaches.
- 20 Marcus Crouch, *The Nesbit Tradition*. 1972 p.112.
- 21 Sheila Egoff, *Worlds Within*. 1988
- 22 Fujiko, *Nobita and A History of the Development of the Universe*.
- 23 Fujiko, *Nobita and His Dinosaur*. Yasuyuki Yokoyama points out the difference between the short versions and the longer versions of *Doraemon* in his book, *A Study of Doraemon* (2009 pp.58-9).
- 24 Claudia Nelson, 'E. Nesbit'. pp.208-9.
- 25 In *The Child and the Book* (1991), Nicholas Tucker points out the following:

The topsy-turvy world of the Feast of Fools has always had an attraction for human beings of all ages, as long as everyone understands that order will be safely restored at the end of the day. (p.137)

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