“The Golden Age of Children’s Literature” refers to the last half of the nineteenth century, a period when the perception of children and childhood underwent a radical reconfiguration. The Augustan view, which focused on children who had to be instructed to grown-up social responsibility, gave way to the Romantic view—the remnants of which are still very much with us. The idea of childhood as a time of innocence, imagination, play, and pleasure was created in part by the Romantic poets, especially Wordsworth, who also associated children with the idea of an uncorrupted natural world.

**Part 1: Pictures of Innocence** [2 weeks]

In order to set the image of the Romantic innocent child, begin with Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” (1807), set in the context of pictures. Trace the descriptions of characteristics Wordsworth ascribes to the child in the visual depictions of children by Golden Age illustrations. Assign full texts (excerpts are available in NACL) from Kate Greenaway, Randolph Caldecott, and Walter Crane, possibly set against some eighteenth-century images of children (several appear throughout NACL).

**Texts in NACL**

Kate Greenaway, *A Apple Pie* (Alphabets) and *Under the Window* (Picture Books)

Walter Crane, *The Baby’s Own Aesop* (Animal Fables) Randolph Caldecott, *Sing a Song of Sixpence* and “Bye Baby Bunting” (Verse)
Suggested Further Reading


Part 2: Mothers and Daughters [3-4 weeks]

The emphasis here is on the mythologizing of the “angel in the house,” to use the phrase made famous in the 1885 poem of that name by Victorian poet Coventry Patmore. The first set of texts work together to introduce the Victorian concept of the “angel in the house,” in which the mother’s identity as a source of care, and order became vested with a transcendent power and served up as a role model for growing daughters. The paradigmatic example of such a mother is Marmee in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. *Little Women* was a hit from its first publication in 1868 and became a literary model for depicting idealized mother/daughter relationships, as well as for idealized versions of the “angel in the house” image of family life.

In actual practice, an “angel in the house” represents challenges for growing girls, and later representations of mother/daughter relationships are often characterized by tensions and anxieties that either assist or resist new understandings. In order to contextualize Golden Age depictions of mother/daughter relationships it might be useful to place them beside later more fully historicized texts.
Texts in NACL

Hesba Stretton, *Jessica’s First Prayer* (Religion)

Lucy Lane Clifford, *The New Mother* (Fantasy)

Selections from “Lullabies and baby songs” (Verse)

Christina Rossetti’s *Sing-Song* (Verse)

*Facts to Correct Fancies* (Life Writing)

Louisa May Alcott, “Pysche’s Art’ (Domestic Fiction)

Frances Hodgson Burnett, “Editha’s Burglar” (Domestic Fiction)

Lucy Maud Montgomery, “Each in his own Tongue,” (Domestic Fiction)

Core Text


Suggested Further Reading


Part 3: *Imagination and Fantasy* [4-5 weeks]
Lewis Carroll is at the imaginative center of the Golden Age of Children’s Literature, and his *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* is probably the central text of any children’s literature course. With *Alice* as its core, this section of the course can be approached in a number of ways, but three areas that take particular advantage of the NACL offerings are fantasy (including fantasy texts that appear in other genres, such as drama), nonsense, and illustration.

**Core text**


**Fantasies (including other genres)**

**Texts in NACL**

Sinclair, “Holiday House” (Fantasy)

E. Nesbit, *The Phoenix and the Carpet* (Fantasy)

J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* (Plays)

George MacDonald, “The Light Princess” (Fairy Tales)

Ted Hughes, “The Iron Giant” (Fairy Tales)

**Suggested Further Reading**

George MacDonald, *The Fantastic Imagination* (1893)


**Nonsense**
Texts in NACL

Edward Lear, “The Absolutely Abstemious Ass” (Alphabets), “The Owl and the Pussycat” (Verse), and “The Jumblies” (Verse)

Theodore Geisel, *Dr. Seuss’s ABC* (Alphabets)

Margaret Mahy, “17 Kings and 42 Elephants” (Verse)

Illustration

Texts in NACL

Beatric Potter from *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*

Blanche Fisher Wright from *The Real Mother Goose*

Suggested Further Reading:

Bring in as many versions of Alice illustrations as possible. Look at photographs Lewis Carroll took and compare with those of Julia Margaret Cameron.

Carol Mavor, *Pleasures Taken* (Duke University Press, 1997)

Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence*, chapter 6, “Through the Looking Glass”

Part 4: Nature (3-4 weeks)

The representations of nature in Golden Age literature, and literature influenced by the Romantic beliefs that engendered the Golden Age, assume several forms. Nature is seen as a place of the sublime, where revelation and self-knowledge become possible: nature is a projection of an ideal condition, a Garden of Eden, hence a reflection of the purity and grace of the Romantic child; nature is beautiful, hence an opportunity for pleasure and play; nature is a repository for the anthropomorphic expression of essential human characteristics.
This section of the course might examine nature’s rhetorical functions and symbolic uses, and relate them to the valorizations of the characteristics of the Romantic child, e.g. imagination, openness, intuition, etc.

Texts in NACL

Frank Stockton, “The Griffin and the Minor Canon” (Fairy Tales)
Nathanial Hawthorne, “The Minotaur”
Rudyard Kipling “How The Camel Got His Hump” (Animal Fables)
G. R.R. Martin: “The Last Super Bowl Game”

Animal Stories

Beatrix Potter, The Tale of Peter Rabbit (Picture Books)
Ernest Seton, “Raggylug” (Adventure)

Texts that precede the Golden Age but are good starting points:

Lullabies (Verse)

Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe (Adventure)
Howard Pyle, “The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood” (Legends)
Lancelyn Green, “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” (Legends)

Suggested Further Reading

Romanticism and Children’s Literature in Nineteenth Century England, ed. James Holt McGavran; see especially the sections on George MacDonald and William Wordsworth.