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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH



**A New Historicist Reading of Katherine  
Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977)**

A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of English in Partial Fulfilment of  
the Requirement for an M.A. Degree in English Literature and Civilization

**Submitted by**

- Chikhouné Naima Yasmine
- Ramdani Kenza

**Supervised by**

**Dr Ounissa CHIOUKH-AIT BENALI**

**Members of the Jury**

**Chair: Mrs Amina DAKHMOUCHE**

**Supervisor: Dr Ounissa CHIOUKH-AIT BENALI**

**Examiner: Dr Abida BENKHODJA**

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## **Dedication**

With all my heart, I'd like to offer a special dedication for all the ones who supported and helped me through my academic journey.

A special feeling of gratitude to my beloved parents, to my mother who have been my source of inspiration and endless love, the one and only woman on earth who truly deserves everything beautiful. Thank you for all your prayers and the comforting words that have accompanied me since I was a little girl and helped shape the person I am today.

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And finally, I dedicate this work to myself, for all the efforts and hard work I put in. I hope this accomplishment marks the beginning of a bright and successful life.

**Kenza.**

## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to my father, no longer here, but always present in my heart and in everything I do.

To Katia and Lydia, two dear friends who passed away. Lydia followed the same path and studied the same specialty. Her journey ended too soon, but her memory lives on in this achievement.

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## **Abstract**

This research paper, entitled *A New Historicist Reading of Katherine Paterson's Bridge to Terabithia (1977)*, offers a close reading of the novel through the lens of Stephen Greenblatt's theory of New Historicism. It explains how history, culture, and society of the 1970s influenced the way characters grow emotionally and build their identities. Through an examination of how these individuals respond to social pressures and are molded by outside forces, this study identifies the site of intersection between individual experience and cultural narratives. By employing Greenblatt's concepts of Self-fashioning and the Anecdote, the research illustrates how *Bridge to Terabithia* gives us a reflection of the emotional complexity of childhood in its socio-historical context. It further illustrates how children's literature can subtly shape the prevailing ideologies of its time. In conclusion, the research highlights the importance of New Historicist theory in revealing the depth of history of children's literature as well as its role in cultural awareness.

**Key words:** New Historicism, Self-fashioning, Anecdote, Children's literature.

## Table of content

<b>Dedication .....</b>	<b>I</b>
<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>IV</b>
<b>Table of Contents .....</b>	<b>V</b>
<b>General Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter one: Literary Background and Theoretical Framework of the Study.....</b>	<b>11</b>
Introduction.....	11
1. Brief Overview of Children’s Literature.....	12
1.1. Children’s Literature.....	14
1.2. American Children’s Literature.....	16
2. Katherine Paterson’s Biography.....	19
3. Literary Influence(s).....	20
4. <i>A Bridge to Terabithia</i> : Summary.....	22
5. The Socio-Historical Background of the Novel.....	23
6. Overview of New Historicism.....	26
6.1. New Historicism in Literature.....	28
6.2. Self-Fashioning.....	30
6.3. Anecdote.....	31
Conclusion.....	32
<b>Chapter II: Self-fashioning and Anecdotes in <i>Bridge to Terabithia</i>.....</b>	<b>33</b>
Introduction.....	33
1. Self-fashioning in the Novel.....	33
1.1. Jess Arons’ Journey of Self-fashioning.....	34
2. Anecdote and Identity Formation.....	45
Conclusion.....	55

<b>General conclusion.....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Work cited.....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Résume.....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>الملخص.....</b>	<b>68</b>

## **General Introduction**



## General Introduction

Literature is one of the most powerful kinds of art. Its main goal is to help people express themselves and to connect deeply with others regardless of time or culture. Thus, it gives us the ability to better understand human experience through texts and novels. Whereby, without the thoughts and feelings literature conveys, history would be just a list of events with no real meaning (Phelps 8). Literary works go beyond narrating imaginary stories; instead, it connects individual memories into broader cultural and historical contexts.

Children's literature, in particular, offers a powerful example of how literature reflects human experiences, cultural values, and emotional challenges. Thus, Katherine Paterson brings this experience into discussion in her novel *Bridge to Terabithia*. Our study seeks to demonstrate how children's literature can reflect the social and historical realities of its time. It aims to explore how cultural values, social norms, and historical events of 1970s America reflect themes like grief, imagination, and identity and even how they are represented. The objective of this research is to highlight how children's literature, more particularly Paterson's novel, offers insight into the emotional and cultural struggles experienced by young individuals within a specific historical context.

Children's literature is a genre that has evolved over the centuries to serve both pedagogical and sentimental purposes and demonstrate how stories reflect and transmit the values of a given society. As highlighted in *American Childhood*, by Anne Scott MacLeod; children's literature provides an insight into a culture without outlining its complete nature. When adults write for children, they bring their own experiences, beliefs about childhood and societal concerns into their writing. As a result, authors often practice self-censorship by telling children the truth, but rarely the whole truth, "children's books do not mirror the culture, but they do always, no matter how indirectly, convey some of its central truths" (vii).

Therefore, when analyzing children's literature, it's really important to give attention to what the books reveal about the society and time in which they were written, so that it can offer us a deep insight into the emotions and values of a culture, reflecting our core perspective towards ourselves, our society, and childhood itself (ix).

### **Problem of the Study**

While many scholars have studied it for its emotional themes and imaginative storytelling, *Bridge to Terabithia* has rarely been explored through the lens of its historical and cultural context. Published in the late 1970s, the novel reflects a period of social change in America that influenced children's everyday lives. Although many studies focus on its emotional impact or moral lessons, fewer have examined how these themes are shaped by the realities of the time. The main problem this research addresses is the limited scholarly attention given to the novel from a New Historicist perspective, especially in relation to how children's fiction can convey complex social and historical meanings.

### **Literature Review**

Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977) has attracted the attention of several scholars, who have analyzed it from various critical perspectives. One of the common concerns in those studies is the emotional and psychological development of characters, especially Jess Aarons, along with the symbolic and cultural meaning of the novel. Scholars have also examined how the novel portrays childhood grieving, identity, imagination, and relationships. Therefore, it is a rich text for psychological and thematic analysis. The novel has also been examined for its portrayal of gender roles, environmental concerns, and emotional growth in a specific social and historical context. Together, these works provide a good

foundation for further literary examination of the way in which the novel represents emotional change and personal development.

In the article, “The Meanings of the Broken Tree, River, and Bridge in Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*” (2013), Taufiqi G. Utomo examines how the novel's major symbols are rich in psychological and spiritual significance arguing that the imagery is more than literal and conveys deeper emotional truths. The author asserts that “a symbol gradually stands for something that stand for something else” (5), a view that aligns with the psychological processes of mourning and emotional growth, as manifested in the broken tree. The image symbolizes both Leslie's death and the emotional growth of the protagonist Jess. In addition, the river is symbolically a painful crossing point in Utomo's interpretation, a hurtful transition that will be undertaken by the boy following the experience of loss, while the bridge represents emotional continuity, spanning sorrow and the potential for healing. Collectively, these symbols deepen the novel's exploration of recovery and sorrow by inviting readers to challenge their own understanding of loss.

From an Ecofeminist perspective, Anandayu Suri Ardini's study entitled “Escaping to Nature: Ecofeminism in the Children's Book *Bridge to Terabithia*” (2023), discusses the symbolic association between nature and women in the book. According to Ardini, this pair shares a similar marginalized position in patriarchal society, and because of this parallel, the female character Leslie is empowered to overcome gender stereotypes by establishing an egalitarian relationship with nature. To support this, the author states that patriarchy has always held the view that women are “minor compared with men” and usually restricted to domestic affairs (2).

By building Terabithia, a fictional, magical forest kingdom, the characters can escape societal boundaries, particularly those related to class and gender. Consequently, Leslie's leadership and imaginative power transform nature into a space of liberation and identity formation, highlighting the potential of children's literature to delicately challenge dominant ideologies. Ultimately, Ardini's Ecofeminist reading of the novel opens a critical dialogue addressing how fantasy settings reflect the real world social struggles, illustrating how issues such as patriarchy, gender roles, and environmental degradation are deeply connected even when the literature is intended for young readers.

In addition to the Ecofeminist reading that presents Leslie as a strong and liberated figure through her connection to nature and her rejection of traditional gender roles, the article "One and One-Half Friends: A Laingian Approach to Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*" (2022), by S. Leigh Ann Cowan offers a psychological perspective grounded in Ronald David Laing's theory of ontological insecurity, a condition in which individuals lack a stable sense of self due to emotional neglect or disconnection. This approach suggests that Jess's emotional difficulties and identity struggles originate from a lack of affirmation and emotional support within his close relationships, particularly inside his family. Because of this, Jess has trouble building a clear and stable sense of who he is.

As Cowan writes, "An individual is a contingent being. No person develops into a mature, intelligent adult alone: it takes some relationship and interaction with others in order to develop a sense of identity" (57). While Ecofeminism portrays Leslie as a symbol of freedom through her bond with nature and defiance of gender norms, the Laingian perspective highlights her role in supporting Jess's emotional development. Her sudden death creates a painful rupture, but despite the shock, he is

left with the inner strength she helped cultivate, which gradually enables him to begin restoring his sense of self.

Another psychological contribution is found in Agus Mustajib's study "The Friendship Values Between the Main Characters as Reflected in Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*: A Psychological Study" (2020), builds on Cowan's analysis by further exploring the emotional bond between Jess and Leslie, which supports their personal growth. Mustajib emphasizes respect, care, and mutual support as the key elements of their friendship, stating that "friendship values can be given by taking care of each other, friendly, respectful, helpful, loyal, and wise" (212). This perspective highlights how Leslie's emotional support helps Jess cope with loss and continue his journey of self-discovery. Furthermore, Mustajib's examination of the core values within their friendship provides greater insight into how Leslie's presence and eventual absence influence Jess's emotional growth and development of his identity.

In a similar psychological vein, the research conducted by Lu'luin Nihaayah, Ianatul Khoiriyah, and Adam Anshori, "The Emotional Maturity of Jesse Aarons in *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson" (2018), examines Jess's emotional growth through the lens of emotional maturity. The authors apply Kevin Everett Fitz Maurice's theory, which identifies six stages of emotional development. They demonstrate how Jess progresses through these stages, from accepting his feelings to learning important life lessons (245).

This research complements Agus Mustajib's study, which focuses on the role of Leslie in supporting Jess's emotional growth through their friendship. While the latter emphasizes the mutual support in their relationship, Nihaayah, Khoiriyah, and

Anshori explore Jess's internal emotional journey more deeply, using a psychological framework to explain his transformation. They show how Jess, through overcoming isolation and grief, reaches emotional maturity, a process that highlights his ability to manage his loss, and develop a stronger personality. Together, these studies provide a fuller understanding of Jess's character development, both in terms of his personal emotions and his relationship with others.

Another research that can be applied to explain Jess Aarons's psychological development is Ika Wulaningsih's study titled "Depressive Position and Defense Mechanism of Jess Aarons in the Novel *Bridge to Terabithia*" (2017). She employs Melanie Klein's object relations theory, specifically the depressive position, to illustrate how Jess manages to deal with intense feelings like anxiety, guilt, and inferiority. The study explains that Jess enters the depressive position after Leslie's death, as he feels deeply guilty for not inviting her to go with him to Washington. Wulaningsih identifies both internal causes, such as loneliness and a lack of love from his parents, and external causes, such as bullying and the trauma of losing Leslie, as reasons for his emotional struggle. She also explains that Jess uses several defense mechanisms, including introjections, projection, and splitting, to handle his grief and find emotional balance.

As Wulaningsih notes, *Bridge to Terabithia* stands apart from other children's novels because it shows how a child's fantasy life meaningfully influences their psychological development and acts as a coping mechanism for dealing with painful emotions like fear, guilt, and inferiority (4). This study supports the idea that Jess's emotional journey is shaped by both his personal experiences and the larger family and social influences. Therefore, it reflects the New Historicist

approach by showing how individual psychology is affected by historical and cultural context.

These studies have explored the novel from various perspectives, but the historical context has been largely overlooked. Therefore, our contribution shifts to this aspect, using New Historicism to examine how the cultural and ideological currents of the 1970s shape the characters' experiences and the broader themes of the novel.

In the article, "An Introduction to New Historicism" (2021), Xiaotang Lyu states that New Historicism emerged by drawing on ideas from several poststructural theorists, including Althusser's theory of ideology, Foucault's notions of power and discourse, key ideas from deconstruction, and Geertz's anthropological approach (1075). This perspective challenges earlier ideas that treated literature as solely the product of individual genius or a simple reflection of a specific period. Instead, it views literature as both influenced by and actively shaping the cultural and ideological currents of its time.

The reviewed scholarship on *Bridge to Terabithia* is a valuable contribution toward the recognition of the novel's psychological depth, symbolic density, and social themes. Scholars have examined grief, emotional development, friendship, and gender through various critical theories such as psychoanalysis and Ecofeminism. These approaches, while offering great insight, do not account for the effects of historical and cultural contexts. This lack is a research necessity for a discussion of how the socio-political atmosphere of 1970s America shapes the lives and emotional journeys of the characters.

## **Significance of the Study**

Based on the preceding literature review, concerning Paterson's novel *Bridge to Terabithia*, we can observe that the novel has already been studied and analyzed by several scholars, especially in the fields of children's literature, imagination, and grief, often through a psychoanalytic interpretation. However, the previous studies did not examine the book from a New Historicist perspective. For this particular reason, we chose to approach it through a New Historicist lens by analyzing the novel's Socio-Historical background and focusing on the way it represents the cultural and social context of 1970s rural America.

There are several reasons that encouraged us to explore this novel through a New Historicist approach. Firstly, the protagonist Jess's personal growth and emotional transformation within a conservative and restrictive environment is one of the main reasons that motivated us, as it reflects the real struggles of American children during the 1970s. Secondly, the novel's treatment of themes such as gender roles, class differences, and grief inspired us, because these topics reflect broader cultural tensions in American society at that time. Finally, as students of literature interested in how fiction and history interact, we found *Bridge to Terabithia* a valuable work that opens the door to understand how children's literature can reveal the hidden historical and social truths of a specific era.

## **Theoretical and Methodological Framework**

We adopted in this study the theoretical approach of New Historicism introduced by Stephen Greenblatt, which emphasizes a close relationship between children's literature and its social, historical and cultural background. The New Historicist framework supports the idea that literature is not isolated but deeply connected to the era in which it is produced, revealing the hidden beliefs shown in the text.



The material of this study is Katherine Paterson's novel *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977), which will be examined through the lens of real life events and values from 1970s rural America. By doing so, the thesis seeks to show how the novel reflects the concerns and challenges of its time, especially in relation to childhood, loss, imagination, and social change.

## **Research Question**

This dissertation attempts to explore how *Bridge to Terabithia* reflects the socio-historical realities of 1970s America, with particular attention to aspects such as family structure, gender roles, and childhood experience. It also examines how the characters, especially Jess and Leslie, engage in acts of self-fashioning, revealing the cultural tensions and shifting identities of their time. Finally, the study considers how the novel employs anecdotal elements to communicate deeper emotional and historical truths, offering insight into the broader ideological context in which the story unfolds.

## **Structure of the Thesis**

Our research paper will be divided into two main chapters. In the first chapter introduces the historical and literary background of children's literature, with an emphasis on American children's fiction in the 1970. It also presents Katherine Paterson's biography, her literary works, and the historical events that influenced her writing. Then, we will offer a brief summary of her novel *Bridge to Terabithia* and explore the socio-historical background of 1970s America, emphasizing how it shaped the themes and characters of the book.

In the theoretical framework section, defines the New Historicist theory developed by Stephen Greenblatt, explaining its definition, origin, and key concepts, along with its relevance to literary analysis. We will focus in particular on the concepts of Self-Fashioning, which refers to how individuals shape their identity within social boundaries, and Anecdote

that highlights how small narrative details in the story reflect broader historical and ideological meanings. These concepts will serve as the foundation for our literary analysis.

The second chapter will focus on the New Historicist analysis of *Bridge to Terabithia*. First, we will examine how the characters, especially the protagonist Jess, Self-fashion identities within their social and cultural environment, examining how the characters' emotional and personal experiences reflect real historical events and social values of 1970s America by using the concept of anecdote and to highlight the connections between fiction and reality. Through this chapter, we aim to show how Paterson's novel effectively conveys cultural ideologies and social dynamics of its historical context.

# **Chapter one: Literary Background and Theoretical Framework of the Study**

## Chapter I: Theoretical Framework of *Bridge to Terabithia*

### Introduction

This chapter serves as a historical and theoretical background of children's literature, focusing specifically on the 1970s America due to its relevance to our theme and novel. Moreover, this chapter introduces Katherine Paterson as an American novelist by referring to her biography, and literary influences. Additionally, it introduces her novel *Bridge to Terabithia* by providing its summary and its socio historical background. Furthermore, the section briefly outlines the theory of New Historicism by Stephen Greenblatt as a literary analysis, emphasizing the concepts of Self-Fashioning and Anecdotal historicism which will be applied in the second chapter.

History and literature may seem two completely different aspects, and over time, scholars have given so many interpretations and definitions that it appeared as if they are separated, but in reality they are deeply connected. According to Valdosta State University in their article "What Is History?" (2025). History is the study of past events, societies and cultures that are represented through facts. Literature, in contrast, refers to written works that express human experiences, emotions and ideas, bringing all the past alive through stories and tales. Together, they help us to understand not only what happened in the past, but also how people lived and felt during different periods.

William Peterfield Trent in his article "The Relation of History and Literature" (1906), emphasizes the importance of these two disciplines by stating "let him [Historian] remember that if he divorces history from present life on the one hand and from literature on the other, he runs constant risk of committing blunders of every kind and degree" (465). Trent highlights that separating these fields can cause people to misunderstand or misinterpret facts,

which may lead to incorrect conclusions. After all, literature can offer a vivid picture of history.

## **1. A Brief Overview of Children's Literature**

Childhood is a time of wonder and vulnerability. For many children, the world can be too harsh, filled with challenges they may not fully understand or deal with. However, literature becomes more than just a form of entertainment by offering them a safe space that makes young readers to confront and deal with their difficult emotions and complex situations through storytelling. Peter Hunt in his book *Understanding Children's Literature* (1999), defines children's literature as a vast field of study that deeply connects with history, education, philosophy and psychology. Many authors nowadays have been influenced by it and recognize the importance of learning about these children's books, because through it we can gain insights into cultural norms, family structures, and historical perspectives, thus, enriching our understanding of literature as a whole (16).

When we talk about children's literature the first thing that comes to mind is fairytales, fantasy and probably nonsensical works written mainly for kids and that is not true, at least not in the way we conventionally assume. Hunt, in particular, discusses how the nature of children's literature is didactic and influential not only for children but also for adults; stating that:

Children's books have direct or indirect influence... socially, culturally, and historically. They are overtly important educationally and commercially with consequences across the culture, from language to politics: most adults, and almost certainly the vast majority in positions of power and influence, read children's books as children, and it is inconceivable that the ideologies permeating those books had no influence on their development (1).

We can understand from this quotation that the influence takes different forms. First, socially, these books help children distinguish between the right and facts and learn how to behave in many situations and how to interact with others by extracting morals and social rules which children can work with them throughout their life.

Children's literature culturally transmits the values, traditions, and beliefs of a given society. Showing the dominant ideologies of each time and how cultural identities were shaped through language, imagery, and themes. These books are an important way of communication to the young readers to transmit what culture considers acceptable and important, helping them to create the feeling of belonging, or in some cases, the opposite.

Children's books are influenced also historically by the political and social landscapes in which they are written. They often react to or reflect historical events, ideologies, and attitudes of their period. These texts not only document how people imagined, thought, and felt during a specific period of time, but also helped to form how future generations will interpret and understand history. Moreover, because many people encounter these ideas in childhood, they can leave permanent impressions that influence how they engage with society as adults.

Despite their ideological influence, Hunt also emphasizes the educational and commercial importance of children's books stating that "They are overtly important educationally and commercially..." (1), we can understand from this that education and commerce work together in shaping literary works. Hunt discusses the differences between the books people enjoy read privately and the ones they teach in schools. Books that are very popular and commercially successful may be seen as useless and are often left out of academic studies. However, classic books are often taught in school to transmit educational and cultural values. Here is the problem, if children are asked to read one type of book in

class but prefer something different at home, they may start to think that school books as boring or unimportant. As Hunt says, “if children read one kind of book in school, and another outside school, then certain books will be regarded as other” (3). Therefore, the link between education and commerce plays a strong role in what kinds of books are accepted and how children respond to reading.

As we mentioned previously, children’s literature is often seen as a tool for teaching and entertaining but still many fail to notice that this influences all characters and readers regardless of their gender. According to Hunt, children’s books are not just for fun or education, they serve many purposes: they can be “good for expanding the imagination,” “good for inculcating general (or specific) social attitudes,” or even “good for dealing with issues or coping with problems” (11). This shows the importance of this huge field that does more than narrate stories, it teaches values, and how to express emotions, and gives young readers the chance to explore their thoughts and identity in a safe and imaginative way.

### **1.1. Children’s Literature Development**

Throughout history, children’s books first appeared in the form of oral stories mainly through folktales and fairytales. These stories were not written down and were transmitted from generation to others carrying all the imagination, cultures and morals within children and even adults, as Jack Zipes states this point in his book *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (2006) “Fairy tales for children are universal, ageless, therapeutic, miraculous, and beautiful. This is the way they have come down to us in history, inscribed on our minds, as children and then later as adults” (1).

At first, these oral stories and songs were only meant for entertaining children as it seems to be, but instead they were used by adults to share religious, cultural and historical values. However, around the early 17th and 18th centuries with the revolution of the printing

press, books started to spread especially in schools, even though they were still mostly religious and educational, but they started to focus more on children's needs and even the idea of childhood itself began to change. John Rowe Townsend supports this historical shift in his book *Written for Children* (1996) by saying that "the prehistory of children's literature has two branches: the material that was intended to specially for children or young people but was not story and the material that was story but was not meant specially for children" (3).

Townsend in this statement asserts that before the emergence of children's literature as a distinct literary genre, there were two types of texts available, first to the young audiences which includes texts designed specifically for children, such as educational lessons, moral instruction books, and religious manuals, even though these texts were written for children but the beauty of the narrative and imaginative storytelling is missed. However, the second type of texts that was meant mainly for broad audiences refers to narrative materials such as myths, folk tales, and fairy tales, which did contain stories but were not originally written for children. This distinction shows how early children's reading material was either instructional without being imaginative, or imaginative without being age-specific.

It was by the nineteenth century that the concept of children's literature has clearly changed as a distinct category that started by giving importance to the imaginative storytelling meant especially for young readers. Peter Hunt viewed this period by explaining that children's books are part of the world culture, even though at the beginning of time the history of this literature was based on certain ideologies and beliefs that led to her obstruction, these obstacles were the male point of view that was taken very seriously and has the strongest influence over literature as a whole, because they controlled what should be written and published. However hunt also says that their dominance was far from stable. At the same time the other part of the ideology are the feminist voices that in contrary they were often not taken seriously and seen as childish. This means that early children's literature had different



perspectives and social groups. It focused mainly on the opinions of adult men and their dominance that effected children (5).

Only much later did children's literature begin to include more diverse voices and points of views, especially with the emergence of these British publishers Mary Cooper and John Newbery that often referred to as the father of children's literature. His publication of "A Little Pretty Pocket-Book" in 1744 marked a major turning point, as it combines entertainment with moral stories, showing that books could both educate and amuse children. Shifting to other parts in the world, for example in India, children's books began in Calcutta with the establishment of the School Book Society by missionaries in 1817. The influence of children's literature continued to grow over time. By 1988, half of the children's books published in France and over the world were translations from English (Hunt 5-6).

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, often described as the golden age of children's literature, this literary category had significantly developed. Peter Hunt marked this period as a turning point where literature has been described as prestigious due to the writers who started to enjoy and appreciate the process of creating literary works as never before, placing greater emphasis on emotions, imagination, and the inner world of the child, even stories became more adventurous, fantastical, and centered on child protagonists. Literature from this era also functioned as a "form of historiography revealing the spirit and mentality of a time and place with unrivaled precision and intimacy" (30). In other words, this period produced many of the classics of children's books still loved today which reflect the cultural, emotional, and historical contexts in which they were written.

## **1.2. American Children's Literature**

Children's literature development in America has it unique path, it begins according to Kathryn VanSpanckeren in her book *Outline of American Literature* (2007), "with the orally

transmitted myths, legends, tales, and lyrics of Indian cultures. There was no written literature among the more than 500 different Indian languages and tribal cultures that existed in North America before the first Europeans arrived” (3). Over time this oral tradition lead to the influence of storytelling in America including children’s literature in general.

With the emergence of the colonial period, Puritans were the first to transmit their religious beliefs, morals and education into the American literature as a means to interpret and fulfill God’s will. VanSpanckeren noted “Puritans wanted education to understand and execute God’s will as they established their colonies throughout New England” (5). Between 1630 and 1690 many universities were made particularly in the United States to educate and transmit their religious instruction and values, thus the early American children’s books began with religion instruction and would later expand to more diverse and imaginary themes.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the American literary theory began to move away from the dominance of the old traditional beliefs to introduce a new environment to the family life and human growth and even scholarship in which children’s suddenly found themselves changed by literature. During this period, children’s books started to become powerful literary works that deeply influence emotions and identity, besides it began to reflect the complexities of life such as social issues, race, war, poverty and psychological depth, reflecting the historical and social norms of each period. Children were the ones who benefited the most by learning how to express their feelings and confront challenges, thus understand the world around them.

Seth Lerer captures this transformation in his book *Children’s Literature: A Reader’s History, from Aesop to Harry Potter* (2008), where he says that “Some readers have found children’s literature to be a rack of hats: didactic, useful books that keep us warm or guard us against weather. I find children’s literature to be a world of snakes: seductive things that live in undergrowths and that may take us whole. Like the little prince...” (3). This metaphor

shows how children's literature in its revolution became more than educational tool, books started to show children's feelings, helping them think about their fears, dreams, and real life struggles. Stories were no longer only about right and wrong but they became a way for children to better understand individualism, adventure, and moral independence, reflecting broader changes in American society.

American authors played a key role in the development of literature specifically around the 1970s. They became more socially aware, reflecting the Civil Rights Movement, feminism, and other cultural shifts. Lerer notes that many children's literary works do more than what we expect, they guide young readers in understanding language, symbols, and narrative itself, through collections of moral stories like Aesop's Fables that "Writes a history of Western education, of family life, of languages, translation..." Or Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* that "illustrates the changing vision of adventure and imagination ..." (4), he also integrated the importance of reading in classrooms stating that "the schoolroom has remained the setting of children's literature from Greek and Roman antiquity to the present day" showing how the vision of adventures and learning itself change according to the setting (5).

Lerer also explores how scientific and scholarly developments have shaped the world of children's books. In the late 19th century, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution had a strong effect on how childhood was imagined. Authors began to question about the development of children and this led to stories full of transformation, strange creatures, and new worlds full of wonder, where children can explore both the world and themselves, like in modern books such as Series like J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* (1997–2007), which aimed to help children creating new feelings like empathy or power (5). These ideas help us understand our main novel *Bridge to Terabithia* in a deeper way. In the novel, school is not just a place for learning facts it is a space where the characters grow emotionally and face real life problems. Just like Lerer describes, the classroom in this story is part of the children's journey

to understand themselves and the world around them, which connects to the emotional and realistic style of 1970s children's literature.

## **2. Katherine Paterson's Biography**

Katherine Womeldorf Paterson, is one of the storytellers of children and young adult literature, born on October 31, 1932, in Qingjiang (now Huaian), Jiangsu, China. She was a daughter of George and Mary Womeldorf, American missionaries who moved to China before the First World War. While growing up, the family had to move approximately eighteen times to escape from the dangers of war, including the Japanese invasion in 1937. When they moved back to America, they lived in various towns like in North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia, before settling in Winchester, Virginia in 1940. This experience profoundly impacted her childhood, leaving her feeling like an outsider most of the time, which she later expressed in her writings.

At first, Paterson struggled with reading and writing in English since her first language was Chinese. Despite these obstacles, she eventually earned a Summa Cum laude English degree from King College in Bristol, Tennessee, in 1954. After graduating, she taught for a year at a rural elementary school in Virginia. She later went back to school to receive a master degree from the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia, where she studied the Bible and Christian education. Then from 1957 to 1961, she worked as a missionary in Japan where she studied both Japanese and Chinese culture, which influenced her writing later on.

Paterson was one of the most compassionate novelists of her time; she started writing after getting married in 1962 with Presbyterian minister named John Paterson. At the beginning she wrote materials to help children study religion. But then she turned to fiction. Her first novel *The Sign of the Chrysanthemum* was published in 1973, based on her

experience and studies in Japan. She wrote over thirty books that people named her the shining star of children's literature. She has received so many medals and awards, that she was classified in 2010 as the second US National Ambassador for Young People's Literature.

Paterson was one of four people in the world to win the two major international awards. According to Wikipedia, her most famous novels were *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977), and *Jacob Have I Loved* (1981), for which she won two Newbery Medals. She also won one of the highest literary awards in the United States, The National Book Award, for *The Great Gilly Hopkins* (1979) and for *The Master Puppeteer* (1977). In 1998 she won the biennial Hans Christian Anderson Award, which is called the Nobel Prize for children's literature, and for her career contribution to the children's and young adult literature in the broadest sense, she won the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award from the Swedish Arts Council in 2006. For her body of work, she was awarded the NSK Neustadt Prize for Children's Literature in 2007 and the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal from the American Library Association in 2013.

### **3. Literary Influence(s)**

Katherine Paterson's admiration for books started since the age of four. She was the middle child to five siblings known for her terrible temper but her mother's readings gave her hope and inspired her to change and cherish every second of it. Paterson loved to hear about the characters of her favorite books like those in A.A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* (1926), because of the resemblance of the character to her, she also admired reading at age of eight the book of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) she totally fell in love with the protagonist Mary Lennox, thus Paterson says in an interview "I fell in love with Mary Lennox... and because I loved her, I was able to learn to love myself a bit" (McGinty 9).

In addition to her love for reading, Paterson was deeply influenced by her father who participated as a volunteer in 1917 for the French army during the Battle of the Somme in the

First World War, which led him to become a missionary to China where she was born. Paterson admired everything about him and she describes him by being smart, hardworking and fearless with a strong desire to help others that reminded everyone of his good heart.

When Japan invaded China in 1937, the Paterson family was asked by the U.S. government to evacuate the country, and this was one of the most difficult moves for Katherine and her family. After they settled in Virginia, specifically in Richmond, Paterson felt like a foreigner, she was so quiet and shy that teachers didn't know that she could read and the fact that she was so smart; so for this particular reason, she was influenced and started to transmit all her struggles and thoughts in her writings, this shows later on how her books mirror her own life. Paterson even goes a step further by placing her characters into real life situations, as Paterson says in an interview "I get to write about real people who must confront the messy battles of the world as we know it" (McGinty 10).

One of the most successful novels of Katherine Paterson is the one we are examining in this research, entitled *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977). As mentioned before, Paterson's settings are based on the experiences she herself has faced, such as war or the death of a young friend. This novel in particular, was based on a true story that her son David faced when he was eight years old. At the time, David had trouble fitting in with other kids. While other children played, he often drew beautiful pictures that he called "stupid" (Bankston 11).

Paterson, who had experienced isolation herself as a middle child, understood the feelings of her son and worried about him. But one day in late autumn, a girl named Lisa Hill moved next to his house, and they became inseparable. She was a kind and imaginative girl who not only helped him with his homework but also shared his love for art, spending hours playing imaginative games in the woods behind her house and creating their magical world. Tragically, their friendship was cut short when Lisa was killed by a lightning on a summer

afternoon. This loss, along with Paterson's own battle with cancer that same year, was devastating for the family, especially for young David.

Out of this heartbreak, in 1970, Paterson started to write *Bridge to Terabithia* to help her son and others process grief and transfer the power of friendship and imagination. She said in an interview "The pain is too fresh for it to fall into rational paragraphs, but I want to try. For David, for Lisa's mother and for me." She also said "I wrote *Bridge to Terabithia* to try to understand for myself the tragedy of Lisa Hill's death, and, though I was not fully aware of it, to help me face my own death" (Paterson).

In the 1976, Paterson submitted *Bridge to Terabithia* to her publisher with low expectations. "I thought it was such a private book that my editor probably wouldn't want to publish it", she admitted in an interview in Christianity today. Despite her doubts, the book became a bestseller and was adapted into a film in 2007. Since then the book was profoundly connected with generations of readers, touched by its authentic depiction of grief and eternal hope.

#### **4. *Bridge to Terabithia*: Summary**

*Bridge to Terabithia* is a 1977 children's novel published by Thomas Y. Crowell Co. a book of thirteen chapters that narrates the stories of two children from different cultures. The story is set in rural Virginia around the 1970s in small village. It recounts a year in the life of a ten years old boy named Jess Aarons, who lives with his parents and his four sisters Ellie, Brenda, May Belle, and Joyce Ann. Mrs. and Mr. Aarons struggle financially and this impacted Jess's education and life. He is an artistic and sensitive child who wants to become the fastest runner out of all the boys at his school and to make his father proud. His life changed when a girl named Leslie Burke, came from Arlington, Virginia and moves to the old Purkins place near their house with her parents Judy and Bill Burkes. Leslie was one of the

bravest, kindest girls; her family lives a non materialistic lifestyle, and Leslie's intelligence and independence set her apart from the other children at school.

Despite their differences, Jess and Leslie developed the strongest friendship. Together, they create an imaginary kingdom in the woods, they call Terabithia, both ruling this place as monarchs in which they find comfort, courage, and support in one another in the most magical space where they can express themselves freely, thus facing their everyday burdens of school, bullies, and family. Besides, Terabithia becomes a place of refuge and adventures in which battle plans are developed to fight against the "giant" bully, Janice (Cowan 58).

The story takes a tragic turn when Leslie dies in an accident while trying to cross the creek to Terabithia alone. Jess, in the meantime was on a trip to Washington, D.C. arises, with his favorite music teacher Miss Edmunds, Jess goes, forgetting to tell Leslie to come with him. After hearing this tragic news he couldn't accept it and he experienced intense feelings of guilt, anger, and sadness. The loss of his closest friend was the most painful thing that happened to him. Jess finds a way of healing in the last chapter by building a bridge to Terabithia and brings his younger sister, May Belle, into the world he once shared with Leslie, and so she became the new queen of Terabithia. This final gesture was a way of honoring Leslie's memory and an expression of the love he still had for her, even after her death.

## **5. The Socio-Historical Background of the Novel**

*Bridge to Terabithia* (1977) is one of the first novels of Katherine Paterson, known by its reflection of the social and cultural changes of the 1970s. The novel is set in Virginia, America where it has marked by economic instability, declining religious influence in daily life, developing gender roles and new psychological understandings of childhood. Paterson explores all these elements throughout the story life of the two main families the Aarons and



the Burks, highlighting how these wider social changes shaped the characters' everyday experiences.

During this era, Kathryn VanSpanckeren in her book *Outline of American Literature* (2007), discusses how American literature reflected the nation's shifting values and concerns, especially in the United States where they had experienced significant economic and social transformations. After the Second World War, major events like the protest movements of the 1960s, the oil crises of the 1973 and the Vietnam conflict which left many of the Americans become unemployed with the feeling of betrayal for the government. At the same time, the emergence of cold War kept fighting for equal rights for people of all races, in addition of the rise of mass media that changed completely the American society from its roots. As a result, all these historical events and each act and moment in life started to be seen as unique (79).

Religion in America started to decline for the second time after the great depression where people suffered from poverty and unemployment, even though after the Second World War people started to regain their faith and feel thankful for peace and safety, but this situation did not last. Religion began to lose its influence again around the 1960s and 1970s, people started to question traditional beliefs, and fewer attended church. Even the media did not help religion to remain as strong as before, because all people started to place more trust in the government and science. However, religion did not vanish completely; instead, it became more involved in politics, particularly concerning issues like abortion and women's rights (Katz 1-3).

These changes in religion influenced Katherine Paterson and her writing. She was the daughter of Christian missionaries, so religion was an important part of her life like many others during this time, she even wrote stories that showed deep emotional struggles and

questions about faith. One example is *Bridge to Terabithia*, where she examines how children try to understand pain, friendship, and love. This honest and emotional style reflects the time she lived in when religion was changing, and people were looking for new ways to understand life and spirituality.

Another major point that marked America at that period and influenced Paterson in her writings was the rise of the second wave of feminism that inspired many women to waken up from their comfort zone and start fighting for their rights and dreams, this movement changed even the sector of education and the family life of the whole society. The feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s brought even changes on how politics and society were viewed in America. Feminism successfully challenged politics and the male dominance with the focus on gender problems, family life, women's rights to work and child care. However what really helped this movement to expand is television which became very popular and played a big role in spreading these new ideas and reaches a larger audience. Still, this movement also brought some challenges such as ignoring traditional values and focusing only on freedom. Thus, it impacted in a way the young generations like children (von Hodenberg 195).

According to Steven Mintz in his book *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (2004), after the Second World War the concept of childhood was not clearly recognized, children were often seen as young adults by doing hard work and confronting the terror of life. As Mintz explains "In puritans eyes, children were adults in training who needed to be prepared for salvation and inducted into the world of work as early as possible" (10). The development of children during this era was extremely challenging, and this way of thinking started to slowly disappear especially after the success of feminist movement, childhood began to be seen differently than before and was treated with care and protection. In the nineteenth century, American reformers focused on ending child labor, which was

considered harmful to children's health, education, and moral growth. As a result, children situation changed from being hard workers to hard learners.

This shift continued into the 1970s, when education started to develop by centering on children who were finally seen as individuals with emotional needs and personal rights. Experts started to accept that children should be allowed to express their feelings and be taught how to deal with difficult emotions. As a result, families and all educational centers began to move away from traditional discipline and opening more toward communication and psychological support. This change marked an important step toward a more civilized and successful society and helped creating a more modern, caring, and understanding view of childhood in American culture (Mintz 372).

## **6. Overview of New Historicism**

In our analysis, New Historicism stands as the central theoretical framework. This literary approach emerged and gained popularity in the United States in the 1980s as a reaction to the earlier methods such as Formalism and New Criticism which focused exclusively on the internal form and structure of literary works, often neglecting their cultural and historical contexts. In contrast, New Historicism suggests that a literary work cannot be fully understood without considering the context in which it was written. This theory was primarily developed by Stephen Greenblatt, whose influential book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980) is widely regarded as foundational to the field. In this work, Greenblatt demonstrates how in the sixteenth-century England, identity was shaped by powerful institutions such as the Church, the state, and the family, suggesting that individuals were largely formed by the cultural and social forces surrounding them (1).

This connection between literature and the broader social forces is further explored through the contributions of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, whose theories on power and knowledge have had a significant influence on New Historicist thought. Foucault challenges the traditional understanding of power as something that resides in centralized institutions, proposing instead that it operates throughout society, influencing people's behavior and beliefs. In his book *The History of Sexuality* (1978), he writes: "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault 93). Which suggests that power is not just about control and domination, but also the ways society shape people's thoughts and behaviors. Building on this, New Historicists use these ideas to analyze how literature portrays power relations, and how it reinforces or resists the dominant ideologies of their period.

From the broad concept of power to its connection with literature, one of the key principles of New Historicism is that literature is closely intertwined in history. A literary text is not created in isolation but is reflective of the political, social, and cultural conditions of the time. Greenblatt discusses this idea, arguing that "Self-fashioning acquires a new range of meaning: it describes the practice of parents, and teachers; it is linked to manners or demeanor, particularly that of the elite" (3). This suggests that literature is not just the product of the author's imagination, but also an expression of identity-formation processes within society. Another key principle of New Historicism is that a text meaning is not fixed, but can shift according to the time and context of reading. For this reason, New Historicists often analyze literary works side by side with non-literary ones, such as laws, speeches, or religious writings, so that they better understand how such works reflect or question the virtues of their time. This method also highlights that reader's understanding of a text depends on their personal experiences, and beliefs.

Therefore, the main goal of New Historicism is to understand how literature works within the broad scheme of historical and social framework. Rather than observing a given text in isolation, New Historicism views it as linked to the broad range of ideas, forms of power, and cultural practices which have shaped human actions. As Greenblatt describes, this vision reveals the “social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text” (5). This demonstrates that history and literature are not separate, but are components of an interconnected system that acts as one. In addition, New Historicists seek to demonstrate how literature actually interacts with the historical events, controversies, and values of the time, and how it mirrors, reacts to, or even affects the concerns of its era.

### **6.1. New Historicism in Literature**

New Historicism redefined the field of literary analysis by shifting the focus from the aesthetic form to the complex interaction between text and the social-historical forces that shape it. As Mukesh Williams explains, in his article “New Historicism and literary studies” (2011), this approach emerged from a broader “intellectual ferment in the American and European academia,” incorporating new methodologies from discourse theory, deconstruction, and cultural poetics to overcome the limitations of earlier schools of thought, such as New Criticism, which isolated texts from their socio-political contexts (115). Rather than treating literary works as autonomous artistic creations, New Historicism reveals how they are embedded within networks of power, ideology, and history. It shows the ways in which texts both reflect and challenge the dominant cultural values of their time by exposing the “hidden hegemonic discourses lying buried within” (115). In this light, literature is not just an aesthetic piece of art but a site of cultural tension, shaped by, and in turn shaping, the historical moment of its production.

In the decades following its emergence, New Historicism has continued to evolve through its absorption of diverse intellectual influences, including cultural materialism, feminism, Marxist revisionism, and cultural poetics. It is these interdisciplinary sources that enabled critics to reformulate English and American literary studies within the framework of broader historical and political imperatives (Williams 116). Literary analysis thus, began to challenge the hegemony of dominant critical traditions like New Criticism and historical positivism, revealing instead the deep involvement of literature in economic, political, and social formations. This shift did not only modernize the agenda of literary criticism within the Anglo-American world, but also had an impact globally, although at different rates in relation to the particular ideological conjuncture of each locale.

In the 1980s, New Historicism emerged alongside social and academic changes. Scholars from different backgrounds entered literary studies and began challenging the old ways of reading classic literature. These scholars brought their own unique views on class, culture, and ideology, which changed both how literature was studied and how it was taught (Williams 116). New Historicism sees literature as a product of many different influences, shaped by historical contexts, and not as something with fixed meanings. It uses Foucault's ideas about power, knowledge, and identity to show that knowledge is constructed, and literature should be read as part of larger social and political ideas.

Williams explains that New Historicism does not see history as a simple narrative story but as a collection of "glorious fragments" (117). This means that texts are shaped by unpredictable cultural shifts rather than following a fixed, chronological path. This way of thinking challenges the idea of a single, unchanging tradition, and instead promotes a model where unexpected events, new ideas, and voices from the margins are just as important as the dominant ones.

## 6.2. Self-fashioning

In understanding the interaction between literature and its historical and social context, it's significant to consider how individuals, particularly in history, actively constructed their identities as a response to these influences. One key concept in New Historicism that explores this dynamic is "Self-fashioning". This term, according to Stephen Greenblatt in his foundational book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980), refers to how individuals form and express their identities from the cultural, social, and historical forces that surround them. Identity, therefore, is not constructed in isolation but in relation to outside influences like power dynamics, social conventions, and cultural values. That is, people make themselves according to the world they live in and how others perceive them (50).

Greenblatt explains that, in sixteenth-century England, people began viewing identity not as something given or stable, but rather as something that could be created and shaped. He says, "My starting point is quite simply that in sixteenth-century England there were both selves and a sense that they could be fashioned" (1). This means that individuals were aware that they could present themselves in ways that would be pleasing to society. However, this shaping of the self was not a completely autonomous process. Institutions such as the family, the Church, and the state exerted significant power, regulating behavior, language, and appearance. Self-fashioning, therefore, was always involved in webs of power and control.

Furthermore, the idea of Self-fashioning is also closely related to the feminist theory, which discusses how gender notifies the construction of identity. Feminist theorists argue that women, in particular, are forced to take on roles as dictated by patriarchal ideology. Their behavior, speech, and bearing are likely to be determined by social expectations of how women should act in order to be accepted. Women, for instance, were meant to be quiet,

obedient, and modest in the Renaissance expectations which constrained their expression of themselves. Self-fashioning is therefore never a completely individual activity; it is shaped by social forces, and more especially those of gender.

### **6.3. Anecdote**

Another central concept of New Historicism is the use of anecdote as a literary technique of narration and interpretation. While it has traditionally been defined as a short, typically humorous account of a real event or individual, anecdote in New Historicist writing has a much more central function. It is a tool of connecting verifiable historical facts with personal, subjective narrative. According to Sonja Laden in her paper “Recuperating the archive: Anecdotal Evidence and Questions of 'Historical Realism'” (2004). New Historicist scholars prefer working with a wide range of archival texts such as memoirs, testimonial writings, theology texts, official texts, footnotes, and even images. Due to the wide range and scope of these materials, they employ anecdotes to organize them into significant and persuasive narratives (8).

Anecdotes in New Historicist scholarship are not rigid or constant; instead, they are highly flexible, open to different interpretations, and can reweave history in various ways. This demonstrates that history is not a fixed, objective record but a subjective, dynamic process shaped by context. As Laden observes, the anecdote resists definition, indicating the imagination and fluidity with which New Historicists approach the past (9).

Stephen Greenblatt, a co-founder of New Historicism, frequently starts his critical works with anecdotes. In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980), he argues that identities are fashioned in reaction to outside forces, usually seen as “alien” or threatening (9). In the same way, New Historicist anecdotes are not personal stories; they are well-embedded in broader historical and cultural contexts, and they illustrate how individuals



are built by the dominant norms, ideologies, and power structures of the time. Thus, anecdotes are not just techniques of narration. They are instruments of interrogation and imaginative reconstructions of the past. By combining personal experiences and interpretation of past events, New Historicism is able to fit in many voices and conflicting meanings, subverting hegemonic histories. As a result, the anecdote is used to reinitiate history as an open book and make it a living conversation, constantly changing with current agendas and ideologies.

## **Conclusion**

The next chapter is a detailed analysis of *Bridge to Terabithia* through Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism theory. It takes into account how the novel is framed by the social, cultural, and historical context of its production. Applying Greenblatt's theory and his two concepts of self-fashioning and anecdotes, the chapter examines how the characters accommodate themselves to society's norms and expectations, and how these forces are constructed to shape their identities. This approach offers the reader a clearer picture of how the novel engages with notions of emotional maturity, self and resilience, and shows how the lives of characters in the novel are shaped by the social and historical contexts of their existence.

**Chapter Two: Self-fashioning and Anecdotes in**  
*Bridge to Terabithia*

## **Chapter II: Greenblatt Concepts in *Bridge to Terabithia***

### **Introduction**

This second chapter is an analysis of the novel *Bridge to Terabithia* using the New Historicist theory introduced by Stephen Greenblatt, aiming to apply some of its concepts including Self-fashioning and Anecdotes. First we will analyze the Self-fashioning of the characters to understand the way their identity was shaped by the cultural and social expectations of the 1970s America. Then we will focus on the use of anecdote and see how specific stories can reflect larger historical and cultural truths.

### **1. Self-fashioning in the Novel**

Self-fashioning is a term introduced by Stephen Greenblatt in his introduction to *Renaissance Self Fashioning* (1980), which refers to how people shape their own identities based on the cultural and social norms of their time, in addition to how the individual comprises all the values and expectations supported by society (1).

Greenblatt describes Self-fashioning as an important process in the sixteenth century due to the social, religious and political structures which created a strong pressure on the individual personality. This process was not completely free as it was influenced by the power of the higher institutions such as the church and monarchy (1). Paterson in her novel presented Self-fashioning through the character of Jess Aarons, showing how his personality has been shaped over time despite all the struggles he faced due to the family expectations and the traditional roles assigned to boys in rural 1970s America. However, through his friendship with Leslie Burke that plays a guiding role in this process, Jess learns how to value creativity and emotions and helps him showing the best version of himself. In this way, the novel reflects how Self-fashioning can be influenced by both personal relationships and by the larger social context of the time.

### 1.1. Jess Aarons' Journey of Self-fashioning

In the first chapter of the novel, Paterson opens the story by introducing Jess Aaron's strong desire to be the fastest runner in his school. She describes him as a boy with big ambitions and dreams. Paterson narrating in the very first pages a short conversation between Jess and his younger sister May belle, she says;

Of course he [Jess] was going to run. He had gotten up early every day all summer to run. He figured if he worked at it - and Lord, had he worked-he could be the fastest runner in the fifth grade when school opened up. He had to be the fastest-not one of the fastest or next to the fastest, but the fastest. The very best (2).

In this passage Jess's Self-fashioning takes its first step toward development through his passion for running. He is someone who deeply seeks after recognition and approval especially that he lives in unsupportive and demanding environment in which success is often measured by physical strength and traditional gender roles. According to Greenblatt in his book *Renaissance Self Fashioning* (1980), individuals shape their identities based on cultural expectations and dominant social structures (3). In Jess's case, his ambition pushes him to work hard to reach the ideal image expected of boys, and to satisfy his father's expectations by winning a running competition at his school.

In rural 1970s America, men were often expected to be strong, competitive, and admired. Success was measured by how well they followed traditional male roles. Therefore, many activities, including sports were created to fulfill these expectations. For instance, the 1970s was known as "decade of the athlete" when athletics becomes an important part of American culture; since, they were considered as heroes and a source of aspiration mostly for the kids and teens (Muniowski). This illustrates how Jess wanted to prove himself through

running, which was one of the advantages of Self-fashioning, as it helps individuals like Jess to find their motivations and identity in their lives.

However, there is also a negative side of Self-fashioning that appears when the person depends too much on gaining approval from their surroundings and following social norms which can lead to hide important parts of a person's true self, like creativity and emotional sensitivity. This can be noted through Jess's hard work almost every day to help his parents. He is always the only one who takes on heavy responsibilities among his sisters like picking beans, milking the cow, and helping with house chores, showing how deeply he tries to meet the expectations placed on him. As Paterson narrates in the first chapter, Jess's mother says "All right, Jesse. Get your lazy self off that bench. Miss Bessie's [the cow] bag is probably dragging ground by now. And you still got beans to pick" (10). This reflects how Jess's rearing in a rural American society particularly within a working class family, impacted his way of thinking and his perspective on life.

Throughout history, a part of the American identity was shaped through hard-working and strong farmers and cowboys. These figures became symbols of traditional masculinity, like being tough, independent, and always ready to take on hard work. During the twentieth century, farmers were seen as the heart of the nation, respected for their labor, loyalty to family, and survival in harsh conditions. In contrast, a cowboy represents freedom and desire for adventure, and also violence when something stands in the way of what they want. The cowboys specifically, have gained an important and enduring place in America's popular culture through the films, books, and television. These ideals influenced deeply the American culture, especially in rural areas, like Virginia. Besides, this point was argued by Greenblatt saying that "the power to impose a shape upon oneself is an aspect of the more general power to control identity..." (1). Here he explains that the personality is not shaped according to individual desires but instead it is controlled by society and that exactly what we saw in Jess's

case, he was stuck in the traditional beliefs society made, which limits his personal growth and forces him to neglect his own dreams and creativity. Thus, he will end up as the person he never wanted to be.

During the 1970s, even though society was starting to develop and open up, many old beliefs remained loyal to its judgments and disrupt the proper development of the society, especially in children. Many people believed that men and women had different lives and responsibilities that should not blend. Thus, this way of thinking created a distance between men's duties and women in both social and emotional life. In the novel we see this clearly through Jess's passion for drawing, which was not something boys were expected to enjoy with or to be proud of at that time. Jess sadly did not get the support from his family and more particularly from his father. Paterson shows this tension in Chapter Two, in the following extract:

He would like to show his drawings to his dad, but he didn't dare. When he was in first grade, he had told his dad that he wanted to be an artist when he grew up. He'd thought his dad would be pleased. He wasn't. 'What are they teaching in that damn school?' he had asked. 'Bunch of old ladies turning my only son into some kind of a...' He had stopped on the word, but Jess had gotten the message. It was one you didn't forget, even after four years (15).

Jess's father's reaction made him hide his feelings and his love for art. He even started to pretend he liked other things, like football just to fit in. At school, when Mrs Myers asked to write about their favorite hobby, Jess lied and said it was football, even though he hated it, as Paterson explains, "He had enough brains to know that if he said drawing, everyone would laugh at him" (44). This shows how strong social expectations forced Jess to hide his true identity and pushed him to become someone he was not.

Another key element that played an essential role in Jess's journey of Self-fashioning is the arrival of Leslie Burke a confident girl with short hair and tacky clothes. She moves near Jess's house in the old Perkins place. Unlike all the other girls Jess had known, Leslie was unique, courageous, and intelligent she was even more athletic than many of the boys, including Jess, as Paterson states "Leslie continued to join the boys at recess, and every day she won" (39). Through the lens of Greenblatt's theory, we can see that Leslie is Self-fashioned from the beginning. She creates her own identity, while facing all the traditional gender norms, which really impacted Jess's personality throughout time.

Leslie's character can be also interpreted as an example of the uprising feminism during the 1970s, particularly the second wave of feminism; as highlighted in the article "Feminism: The Second Wave" (2020), by the National Women's History Museum. The 1970s marked the beginning of positive change for women, unlike the first wave the second was more focused on how they were treated in everyday life. The majority of women were challenging the old traditional beliefs, such as having limited choices in education and careers, while men had all the freedom and opportunities to choose their own path. This movement helped people start talking about gender roles and how they open new opportunities for both men and women.

One of the key figures who initiated this movement was Betty Friedan, with her influential book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), where she discussed all the difficulties American women had to face alone during the mid-twentieth century, particularly from the 1950s to the 1970s. Friedan herself was an example of a successful woman who fought for freedom and self-expression. She referred to this silent struggle as "the problem that has no name" (15), showing attention to the hidden emotional conflicts of women who were expected to feel satisfied only as wives and mothers. Her work played a major role in

inspiring and encouraging women to pursue their education, challenge traditional roles and believe that it's okay to be different and most important is to be independence.

Leslie's personality in the novel shows these feminist ideas. She does not dress or acts like other girls, and she enjoys sports and books, things that were often kept for boys. She is confident, brave, and smart, showing that girls can be just as strong as boys. Her way of thinking is different from what people in her rural town expect from a girl. Due to her unique character she inspired Jess to accept his own identity even if it goes against what others expect. But the most important thing she brought into Jess's life was the freedom to imagine and dream without fear of judgment. Leslie encouraged Jess to believe in his own creativity and helped him see the world in a different way. As Paterson states "Leslie was more than his friend. She was his other, more exciting self..." (62), this shows how Leslie was so important in Jess's personal growth.

Through his friendship with Leslie, Jess learns how to refresh his personality based on his true passions and feelings. He realizes that it is possible for him as a boy to dream and to be creative and strong at the same time, to enjoy doing one's favorite activities like running and drawing, he also for the first time started to feel confident and happy, especially around Leslie.

Jess's journey of Self-fashioning took another step when he and Leslie created a whole secret magical kingdom in the woods which they called Terabithia. Leslie captures this special moment when she says, "We need a place," she said, "just for us... it might be a whole secret country," she continued, "and you and I would be the rulers of it" (53). Jess was immediately fascinated by the idea of ruling a secret kingdom, even if it existed only in their imagination. But what truly attracted him was not the idea of power; it was Leslie's creativity and enthusiasm that he admired the most. At first Jess found it difficult to fully enter this new



world, his imagination was limited, and his personality was shaped by a strict environment that taught him to hide his feelings. As Paterson describes the moment Jess enters the wood, “Jess did not like dark places where it was almost like being under water, but he didn’t say so” (54). This moment shows how fear and not showing emotions, shaped by his community, made it hard for him to accept freedom and creativity at first.

However, over time Terabithia became a safe space where Jess started to slowly letting go his fears and had the courage to confront the new opportunities in his life. In this magical world there were no boundaries or rules that were expected by his society. In contrast, he could dream, imagine and express his feelings without fear of judgment. Leslie’s support and their adventures together helped Jess to reshape his identity in a free and authentic way; as Paterson narrates “For the first time in his life he got up every morning with something to look forward to” (62). In this way, Terabithia symbolizes not only escape but also transformation, showing how imagination can become a powerful tool for Self-fashioning beyond societal limits.

In the introduction to *Renaissance Self Fashioning* (1980), Greenblatt emphasis a good point to which we can understand the relation between history, society and individuals shaping identity; he says “If both the authority and the alien are located outside the self, they are at the same time experienced as inward necessities, so that both submission and destruction are always already internalized” (9), he means here that the authority (higher class or powerful people) and outsiders influence deeply and indirectly individual’s identity. This shows that even when the person does not follow what others want but he will always feel inside that he must be that way. Over time, these ideas become part of how a person thinks and behave. This can be seen in Jess’s daily life while the authority is represented by his parents, especially his father, who imposed traditional beliefs of masculinity and power since childhood.

Throughout the novel, as we already noticed Jess's family represents the dominant authority in his life, that reflect the early twentieth century values in rural America. His family with all the financial problems kept their perspective of life very strict and severe. As a result, they valued hard work and responsibility more than imagination or emotional expression. As the only boy in the family, Jess feels pressure to be strong and masculine, especially from his parents; Jess's mother says "Jesse Oliver! You leave that baby alone. whatcha mean lying there in the middle of the floor doing nothing anyway? Didn't I tell you I couldn't cook supper before you chopped wood for the stove?" (Paterson 91). Through this brief passage you can clearly see the pressure they put on their only son that demonstrates the harsh reality of traditional gender expectations in rural families, where boys were expected to carry adult responsibilities from a young age.

Besides all the physical pressure, Jess's parents also were having some concerns about their son's social life. Paterson shows this indirectly by writing: "his mother said that she was sure he was fretting that his only son did nothing but play with girls, and they both were worried about what would become of it" (62). This indicates how the Aarons follow strict social norms, they were worried just because their son is a friend with a girl, from this we can understand how limited and old fashioned their way of thinking is, but the most important thing is that "Jess didn't concern himself with what would 'become of it'. For the first time...." (62). Leslie's influence began to show in Jess's way of thinking as he became more open to think for himself and not let others define what was right or wrong.

Leslie's family, in contrast, can be seen as the alien, which is something that goes against the traditional family expectations. From a New Historicist perspective, as Greenblatt suggests, such examples show the cultural conflict between what is considered normal and what is different during a specific time in history. The Burks were very open minded, educated, and supportive. While most people in the city work as factory workers and farmers,

Leslie's parents work as writers. This profession encourages Leslie's parents to shape their family to be free and democratic so that their daughter grows up to be a brave and imaginative child. As Paterson narrates in the following passage:

Both of the Burkes were writers. Mrs. Burke wrote novels and, according to Leslie, was more famous than Mr. Burke, who wrote about politics. It was really something to see the shelf that had their books on it. Mrs. Burke was "Judith Hancock" on the cover, which threw you at first, but then if you looked on the back, there was her picture looking very young and serious. Mr. Burke was going back and forth, to Washington to finish a book he was working on with someone else (60-61).

During the 1970s, being a writer was extremely important, due to the cultural changes and how these careers were viewed, especially for women. The rise of second wave feminism as we mentioned before, encouraged for more equal opportunities in education and employment. Women started to have the ability to join various professional and political fields that had long been dominated by men, such as writing, journalism, and politics. Leslie's mother, Mrs. Burke was more famous than Mr. Burke, so this challenged all the traditional beliefs that the man should be the most successful in the family. Her use of a surname "Judith Hancock" and her serious author photo indicates that she takes her job seriously, which is something that was becoming more accepted and even admired at the time.

Likewise, Mr. Burks traveling to Washington as a political writer reflects how the politics takes a major part in the American life in the 1970s. Especially after events like Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movements which brought many changes to the country. Political writers play a significant role in helping regular people understand what was happening in the country through books, articles, and newspapers. So, through the novel Jess notices how Mr. Burks job was so beneficial for their country, which is very different from

Jess's working-class family, who are mostly concerned with hard work and holding on to traditional gender roles.

Another aspect that really impressed Jess during his time with Leslie was how her parents treated her more like a friend than a daughter. "Leslie was good at finding things for him [Leslie's father], and he liked her company as well. When she came home from school and on the weekends, he wanted her around. Leslie explained all this to Jess" (Paterson 90). This passage demonstrates the strong relationship between the Burks and how they feel connected and comfortable around each other, as if they were completing one another, which is completely different to Jess's situation.

In addition, Paterson narrates "There was no TV at the Burkes', but there were mountains of records and a stereo set that looked like something off *Star Trek*" (61). Their home, filled with books instead of a television, reflects their values and their mutual respect. Their appreciation for art and personal growth was more than all the material things. Their encouragement allows Leslie to explore her creativity freely and to grow without fear. This reveals a lot about American society at the time, especially considering that television had become a major part of family life. By the early 1970s, most families owned a TV, and it played a central role in daily routines.

However, the Burks choice of not having one, made them seem strange and different to others; Instead of following what everyone else was doing, they chose to be surrounded by books, music, and creative tools like the "stereo set that looked like something off *Star Trek*". These were a very popular science fiction show of the twentieth century that symbolizes the future and social change, which reflects the Burk's love of imagination and innovation. This entire situation deeply impacted Jess's Self-fashioning by exposing him to new ways of

thinking and opens a door to accept imagination and creativity, but the most important thing he learns is accepting to be different from others.

Jess notices that Leslie calls her parents with their first name “Leslie called them Judy and Bill, which bothered Jess more than he wanted it to. It was none of his business what Leslie called her parents. But he just couldn't get used to it” (Paterson 60). At first, Jess did not understand the reason nor the relationship she had with her parents; he was so uncomfortable being around them, as he thinks that calling your parents by their names is weird and disrespectful. However, that wasn't the only thing bothering him; he says “There was something weird about a grown man wanting to be friends with his own child. He ought to have friends his own age and let her have hers” (Paterson 92). The distance Jess had with his father made him think that the relationship between parents and children's must be defined by authority, not companionship; a belief that has been shaped on him due to his family's emotional detachment. His discomfort reveals how Self-fashioning is often limited by traditional beliefs, until we encounter new ways of living, like Leslie's family.

Jess's emotional development was completely evolved after the tragic death of his best friend Leslie, where a new version of him appeared, regardless of the pain and disbelief he was in. In the last chapter he took a decision to comfort May Belle by telling her, “Everybody gets scared sometimes, May Belle. You don't have to be ashamed” (Paterson 170), this moment shows how much he has matured emotionally. Earlier in the novel, Jess struggled to express his feelings or show weakness, especially as a boy raised in a traditional rural family where men were expected to be silent and strong. However, his relationship with Leslie changed his perspective of life and learns how to value his self by not hiding his emotions; and now jess became able to teach this lesson to his little sister.

As we already mentioned, Jess Self-fashioning before the arrival of Leslie was very low and weak, Jess confesses in the final pages of the novel,

He thought about it all day, how before Leslie came, he had been a nothing — a stupid, weird little kid who drew funny pictures and chased around a cow field trying to act big — trying to hide a whole mob of foolish little fears running riot inside his gut (Paterson 174).

Leslie's unique energy and creativity helped the transformation of Jess, especially when they created the new magical kingdom (Terabithia) where Jess can express himself freely out of all his family and community pressures. In Terabithia, he becomes a king, which made him someone with value, leadership, and imagination. His Self-fashioning journey began with Leslie's emotional support and continued even after her death.

By the end of the novel, Jess feels responsible to carry on Leslie's legacy. He realizes "he must go for both of them. It was up to him to pay back to the world in beauty and caring what Leslie had loaned him in vision and strength" (Paterson 175). This quotation beautifully captures the conclusion of Jess's transformation. He was no longer seeing himself as the fearful boy he once was. However now, he chooses to construct his new identity focusing on Leslie's lessons, for example: compassion, creativity, and courage. His Self-fashioning is not just a personal change, but it becomes an act of remembering Leslie and a way of transmitting her light to others, by fashioning them in his turn, starting by his sister May Belle. This shows how identity, especially in children's literature, is closely associated with relationships and with the dominant cultural beliefs, such as gender roles, emotional control, and the struggle to express oneself in working class families.

## 2. Anecdote and Identity Formation

As we already mentioned in the first chapter, Anecdote is a concept introduced by the historian Stephen Greenblatt, in his book entitled *Practicing New Historicism* (2000). Greenblatt asserts that the term Anecdote in literature represents stories or moments in life, which are inspired by historical events and reveal deep cultural norms. He believes that analyzing these events within a literary context may reveal how identity, authority, and resistance are formed in specific historical contexts (50).

In *Bridge to Terabithia*, Paterson provides some meaningful anecdotes that reflect the rural American culture, specifically during the 1970s. Paterson narrates the daily life of the protagonist Jess by illustrating how social expectations can affect the life of a young boy. Thus, these small and significant moments make the anecdotal elements in the story essential for understanding its historical and cultural depth.

Beginning with chapter eight where religion is explored in depth. According to Greenblatt, Anecdote helps to illustrate how systems of authority, like religion, shape the individual's daily life and reveal hidden cultural meanings. These little stories show how religious belief shapes societal norms and influences the way children perceive the world around them. This can be seen through May Belle's reaction to Leslie's honest curiosity about Christianity; during their short conversation about religion, Jess and his younger sister May Belle explain religious beliefs to Leslie, where she gently questions the story of Jesus, comparing it to other figures, she says "All those people wanting to kill him [Jesus] when he hadn't done anything to hurt them". She hesitated. "It's really kind of a beautiful story like Abraham Lincoln or Socrates -- or Aslan" (Paterson 117), and then, May belle responded with "It ain't beautiful, .... It's scary" (118).

This moment highlights two very different ways of seeing religion, first with Leslie who challenges all the traditional views of Christianity in Jess's community by her comparison of Jesus story to fictional characters of Narnia, a very famous series in the twentieth century, she linked the heroes like Lincoln who died for his role in preserving the Union and ending slavery, Socrates who was executed for challenging societal norms and encouraging independent thought, and Aslan, the lion, who sacrificed himself to save others, to Jesus who was killed for doing what was right. Leslie's outsider view of religion reflects how modern and educated families in the 1970s may have questioned or re imagined religion differently.

The Second perspective was about Jess and May Belle who interpret religion through fear. Paterson adds, "Cause if you don't believe the Bible - May Belle's eyes were huge – God'll damn you to hell when you die" (118). Through this clear passage we can tell that they were raised to accept religious belief as absolute truth, as they were terrified of the consequences of not believing which is eternal punishment. This shows how families in rural America views religion out of fear and judgment that even kids were not allowed questioning it or even not believing in it. While Leslie approaches religion with curiosity and logic, Jess has accepted the fact that his beliefs must be scary, showing how such ideas can control our perspective of life, sin, death, and even self-worth. This small conversation becomes a revealing picture of religious persecution and cultural pressure in rural America in the 1970s.

According to Joanne Beckman, in his article entitled "Religion in Post World War II America" (2000), in the 1960s and early 1970s, religion was still a very important part of American life. Even though new ideas and concerns appeared during this time, religion continues to play a strong role in many people's daily lives. This period also made American religious life more diverse than ever before. This is similar to Jess and Leslie's explanation of their different thoughts about religion. However, by the 1950s the church and religious



authorities like families started to take a new turn by focusing only on stability and respect, as Backman notes, “church and family [become] as the twin pillars of security and respectability” (No Page). This, through time it created a deep connection between belief and social image that went beyond expectation. For example, by the 1970s people started to see the church not only as place of faith, but also as a way to maintain a good reputation and avoid social judgment. Just like Jess’s mother who only cared about the church once a year, which is “Easter” as Paterson narrates in this passage;

Easter was the only time in the year that the Aarons went to church and it was a big deal. His mother always cried poor, but she put a lot of thought and as much money as she could scrape together into making sure she wouldn’t be embarrassed by how her family looked (110).

This anecdote reveals how religious life in rural 1970s America was tied to social reputation, especially for women like Mrs. Aarons who puts a lot of effort into making her family look good for Easter, even though they are poor. She still managed to spend what she could to make sure her family didn’t look embarrassing at the church. Her need to appear presentable, even while struggling financially, reflects the pressure women face to gain a respectable image. During that period of time especially in the countryside, a woman’s reputation was often related to how she looked and how her children behaved, and whether she followed expected traditions like going to church. Even if religion was not practiced throughout the year, but appearing in a good and presentable looking on Easter or other religious celebrations saves a family from gossip or shame.

The financial struggle of the Aarons was also portrayed in chapter seven, through the Christmas scene, where Paterson reflects the economic difficulties experienced by the working-class families in 1970s America. According to Dorothy Sue Cobble in her article “A

'Tiger by the Toenail': The 1970s Origins of the New Working-Class Majority" (2004), there was a huge change in employments during this period, which is from blue-collar traditional jobs such as, factory or construction work to pink-collar service positions like secretarial, waitresses, or retail work. These jobs, which were often dominated by women, received little recognition and were paid less than male dominated blue-collar jobs. But since the rise of the manufactory job opportunities in 1973, no one paid attention to the new working-class, which consisted of low paid service workers. Besides, this change made it increasingly difficult for families to survive due to stagnant wages and high living expenses (103-105). This is the case Aaron's family.

Paterson describes in a passage how Ellie and Brenda, Jess's older sisters, were fighting about what to give their boyfriends for Christmas, a conflict stopped by their mother's complaining that "there was hardly enough money to give the little girls something from Santa Claus, let alone a surplus to buy record albums or shirts for a pair of boys she'd never set eyes on" (Paterson 78). This reveals how it was difficult for them to afford the basic things especially in holiday traditions. Whereby, in 1970s rural America, many families faced financial problems, which made even a holiday like Christmas became a source of stress.

Another anecdote that shows the economic struggles was when Jess had received a present by his father in Christmas, "He had received a racing car set, which he tried to run to please his father. It wasn't one of those big sets that they advertised on TV, but it was electric, and he knew his dad had put more money into it than he should have" (Paterson 87). This passage highlights the family's and the period's economic limitations with the impact it had on their relationships. Jess's attempts to enjoy the gift and make his father proud failed due to his father's disappointment when "the silly cars kept falling off at the curves" At some point, the father mumbles "Cheap junk... Don't get nothing for your money these days" (Paterson 87). Mr. Aaron anger is not only about the toy but reflects the deeper frustration of not being

able to provide quality gifts. Moreover, it reveals the emotional stress that poverty imposes on working-class fathers in the 1970s America, especially during festival seasons like Christmas.

In addition to religion and economy, another Anecdote showed up to convey the reader how such small moments may open up to larger historical and ideological truths. The Anecdote was set in the school, a place that functions as another major source of authority in Jess's life, where traditional beliefs about gender roles, patriotism, and even fashion shaped students' mindset and behavior. This can be seen through this passage when Jess was lost in his thought, staring at his beautiful music teacher Miss Edmunds;

But Jess knew what fakes they were[ students]. Sniffing "hippie" and "peacenik" even though the Vietnam War was over and it was supposed to be OK again to like peace, the kids would make fun of Miss Edmunds' lack of lipstick or the cut of her jeans. She was, of course, the only female teacher anyone had ever seen in Lark Creek Elementary wearing pants. In Washington and its fancy suburbs, even in Millsburg, that was OK, but Lark Creek was the backwash of fashion. It took them a long time to accept there what everyone could see by their TV's was OK anywhere else (18).

Through this moment, Paterson introduces a deeper fact of how young people were educated in the countryside around the 1970s to follow social rules. And how anyone who acted or even dressed differently, like Miss Edmunds, was judged or treated like a stranger. Jess was in love with Miss Edmunds, she was his favorite teacher because she is the only person in the whole school who believed in his capacities and saw him as a talented person when he showed her one of his drawings, Paterson says "She [Ms Edmunds] said he was 'unusually talented', and she hoped he wouldn't let anything discourage him, but would keep it up" (16). Jess because of this started to believe that he was really good at something. However, not all the teachers shared the same opinion as Miss Edmunds, in fact, "when they

catch him [Jess] scribbling, they screech about wasted time, wasted paper, wasted ability” (Paterson 16). This difference shows how people in rural schools do not consider creativity and art as something impressive, especially for boys.

In the 1970s, countless schools in rural America suffered from a lack of funding, so they stayed focused on the traditional education. They often view artistic expression as a distraction from hard works or academic achievement. In contrast, Miss Edmunds reflects a more liberal, emerging wave of educators from the era who valued identity and inspired students to pursue their skills beyond restricted gender roles and expectations. Her support of Jess captures the tension of old and new ideologies battling within the American education system in the 1970s, particularly rural areas.

The students at Lark Creek Elementary often called Miss Edmunds, their teacher of music as a “hippie” and a “peacenik” (Paterson 18), both words that were often used in the 1960s and 1970s to describe people mostly teenagers, who created a cultural movement against the Vietnam War, and sought to accept peace, freedom, and equality. “The hippies”, developed their own distinctive lifestyle, whereby they constructed a sense of marginality” (Britannica). It means that they created their own way of living with a unique style of clothing and were often considered themselves as strangers. This indirectly affected many generations especially children who live in rural places like Lark Creek reflecting how deeply their environment shaped their thinking.

Jess does not ignore the fact that Ms Edmunds did really looked weird, because of her clothes, “her lack of lipstick or the cut of her jeans. She was, of course, the only female teacher anyone had ever seen in Lark Creek Elementary wearing pants” (Paterson 18). Even though at that time, women were free to choose what they want to wear, but it was still more common for women, to wear dresses or skirts in public, especially in professional jobs like

teaching. A woman wearing pants could be seen as rebellious or unfeminine. This explains why small towns are always culturally and socially behind the rest of the cities like Washington, who accept modernity and new trends. The emergence of media did help to expand contemporary culture, for example the television which allowed students to see what was happening elsewhere, but Lark Creek where the story was set, was stuck in the past, holding on its old values.

Ultimately, even though the students were pretending to dislike their teacher and her class of music, deep down they really enjoy it. Her singing seemed to be their only chance to feel free and express their emotions, which is something they couldn't do in their strict environment.

One other anecdote that reveals hidden cultural meaning was the scene of the bully girl Janice Avery when she was crying alone in the girls' bathroom, and Leslie took the courage and went in to comfort her. Leslie said in a conversation with Jess after class; "Did you know her father beats her?" Jess answered; "Lots of kids' fathers beat 'em." But Leslie continued; "No, I mean really beats her. The kind of beatings they take people to jail for in Arlington... You can't imagine..." (Paterson 104). The reference to Arlington is likely an allusion to the idea that the beatings she experiences would be considered criminal in a place where the law is enforced, such as Arlington, Virginia, a well-known location, possibly used to symbolize an area where such abuse would not be tolerated and would result in legal consequences, this scene is so important because it reveals a painful reality that many children in rural 1970s America experienced, which is violence.

According to the article "Police Uncovering 'Epidemic of Child Abuse' in 1970s and 80s", in the 1970s and 1980s, there was widespread of children's abuse sexually and physically and many victims have been traumatized, and some have killed themselves or been

left with severe mental health problems. At that time, physical punishment was really common especially by the parents and many people believed it was normal, particularly in poor or working-class families. Just like Jess's first reaction, showing that it was very normal to be beaten by your parents, this reaction reveals how common and normalized this was in his world. But Leslie, who came from a different background, saw the violence as something serious and wrong.

This anecdote also shows how family abuse was not talked about during that period. Children were expected to stay quiet and strong, even when they were suffering. As Paterson says "There was a rule at Lark Creek, more important than anything Mr. Turner made up and fussed about. That was the rule that you never mixed up troubles at home with life at school. When parents were poor or ignorant or mean,.... , it was up to their kids to protect them" (105). Janice after facing a difficult time in school, she without any attention revealed a secret and broke a rule she was forbidden to break. Through this scene, Paterson exposes the emotional pain that many children hide, and how society was expecting children to react to their rudeness and aggression.

In chapter 10 entitled "The Perfect Day", Paterson presented an important and powerful anecdote in the daily life of Jess. His little trip to the National Gallery of Art with Miss Edmunds, expose the social and cultural differences of the United States in the 1970s. Children in small towns like Lark Creek, had low chances to explore and travel beyond their environment. However, this visit gave Jess a unique and unforgettable chance to see the world with all its beauty, vivid creativity, and emotional freedom for the first time. When Jess enters the museum, Paterson writes, "Entering the gallery was like stepping inside the pine grove - the huge vaulted marble, the cool splash of the fountain, and the green growing all around" (138). This passage describes how this place feels magical for Jess and how art in rural America was something rare.

Paterson later adds, when Jess was in the museum “Two little children had pulled away from their mothers and were running about screaming to each other. It was all Jess could do not to grab them and tell them how to behave in so obviously a sacred place” (138). His reaction when he saw the two little kids playing around and yelling reveals how this moment impacted him and he did not want anyone ruin it for him. It also demonstrates how institutions such as museums are not only about art, but also about teaching values, respect and admiration for beauty, all of which Jess desired but rarely received in life. Through this significant anecdote, Paterson reveals how different cultures and class can affect the lives of American children living in the countryside and how glimpses of imagination and beauty could subtly provide a form of resistance to those obstacles.

As a final Anecdote, Paterson narrates a very sad ending right after the perfect day of Jess with Miss Edmunds, he comes home to their terrible news which was about the death of his best friend Leslie. At first, Jess refused to believe that she could be gone, which made him in a complete denial. This is clearly shown when his sister Ellie says: “Well, Momma, he's just sitting there eating pancakes like nothing happened. I'd be crying my eyes out. And Brenda adds, Boys ain't supposed to cry at times like this. Are they, Momma?” (Paterson 150–151). This personal moment becomes a window into larger cultural and historical values in rural 1970s America. Jess's struggle to express his emotions, especially his sadness revealed how the strict gender expectations placed on boys during that time, which affected their emotional control because boys even at a young age were seen as a sign of masculinity, and were often taught to hide their feelings and not to cry. In contrast to women who could be more open to express sadness or fear. In addition to the psychological awareness and mental health discussions that were not common in small towns, so children like Jess had very little emotional support.

As Jae L explains in her article “The Grim Emotional Legacy of 1970s Parenting” (2023), many adults today are dealing with unresolved childhood emotions. Even the children were not encouraged to talk about their feelings because it wasn’t a thing that people did at that time. As a person who was born in the 1970s she said “I don’t remember any adult ever asking me what I wanted. I don’t remember being asked how I felt about anything ever” ( No Page). This reveals that even girls were struggling with the same problem, and this was the consequence of the parents’ traditional beliefs and emotional habits they grew up with, especially after living through wars and hard times. This reflected the dark side of the American history, at that particular period. In the novel, Jess’s parents also did not know how to help Jess, Paterson writes “Your friend Leslie is dead, Jesse. You need to understand that” (152). This shows how Jess’s father awkwardly tries to comfort him by being direct as if he gave him an order to understand and to accept the truth. It shows the way adults had trouble expressing care in a kind way.

Still, Jess’s father tried to help him with physical gestures, the only way he knows, which is by holding him like a child, “His father pulled Jess over on his lap as though he were Joyce Ann. There. There, he said, patting his head. Shhh. Shhh” (Paterson 161). Through this gesture, Jess was finally able to release everything he had been holding inside. He cried like never before and for the first time, he felt safe and comforted by his father. This moment allowed him to release his fears and emotions, which helped him to heal. Another adult who struggled with grief is his teacher Mrs. Myers, She shared her own story with Jess about losing her husband and how difficult it was, saying “When my husband died .... People kept telling me not to cry, kept trying to make me forget. .... But I didn't want to forget” (Paterson 173). This strongly supports the idea that even adults were often told to hide their sadness and keep going with life. Grief was seen as a distraction, and people avoided talking about it.



Children, especially, were expected to simply “move on” quickly from loss without help or emotional support that is more common today.

Jess’s journey toward healing began to show signs of hope, he said “Because Mrs. Myers had helped him already by understanding that he would never forget Leslie” (Paterson 174). By highlighting this moment, Paterson shows that even a little support can make a big difference. Jess starts to feel stronger; not by forgetting Leslie, but by remembering her in a way that gives him peace. Jess for the first time he felt supported by those around him and even treated good, but unfortunately, this goodness was the consequence of the most tragically thing happened to him. In this way, as Greenblatt explains, the anecdote is not just a small story, but it reveals the emotional limits people had in that time and place (48). It shows how society often failed to teach children, especially boys, how to grieve and heal.

What makes this whole story even more powerful historically and culturally is the fact that *Bridge to Terabithia* is inspired by a real life event. As we already explained in the first chapter, Paterson wrote the story after her son’s best friend, Lisa Hill, died unexpectedly in a tragic accident. This connection between fiction and real life adds another layer of truth to Jess’s grief. It shows how literature can turn a personal tragedy into a shared emotional experience, giving readers a chance to explore grief, love, and healing through story.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, we emphasized how Stephen Greenblatt’s New Historicism especially the concepts of Self-fashioning and Anecdote helped us to understand better the novel *Bridge to Terabithia*. We have analyzed the characters and how they were influenced by the historical and cultural conditions of 1970s rural America, and we highlighted how religion, gender roles, poverty, and education shaped the daily lives of American families. By studying the concept of Self-Fashioning, we saw how Jess had reshaped and developed his

identity regarding all the traditional beliefs and pressures of his society, and how Leslie had helped and supported him throughout this process. Hence, with the focus on the Anecdote concept, we explored how such important moments in the novel reflect bigger historical and cultural truths all along the twentieth century.

Finally, Paterson's novel was not just a children's story about friendship and imagination, we extracted how valuable reflection of real historical experiences inspired by a real tragedy, shows how fiction can reflect reality and help readers better understand the personal impact of history.

## **General conclusion**

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In this research paper, we took a closer look at *Bridge to Terabithia*, an American children's novel written by Katherine Paterson and published in 1977. The story is set in rural America, just after the Vietnam War, and gives readers a glimpse into the emotional and social lives of young children growing up during that time. Through the use of Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicist approach, we explored how the characters in the novel are shaped by their historical moment. We also examined how cultural values, social expectations, and real-life events of the 1970s influenced their thoughts, feelings, and relationships.

To analyze this novel, we focused on two major concepts from New Historicism, which are self-fashioning and anecdote. These concepts helped us better understand how the characters formed their identities and how small, specific moments in the story reveal deeper truths about the society they live in. With the concept of self-fashioning, we studied how Jess Aarons, the main character, tries to build an identity that fits within the traditional masculine expectations of his time. In his community, being strong, silent, and hardworking was seen as the ideal image of a boy. Jess tries to become the fastest runner to earn recognition and value. However, when Leslie enters his life, she challenges these traditional ideas. She opens his mind to imagination, sensitivity, and emotional honesty. Their friendship allows Jess to express hidden parts of himself that he had been taught to ignore.

In contrast, Leslie herself is a character who does not follow the social rules of that time. She is brave, confident, and imaginative. She wears tacky clothes, beats the boys at sports, and talks about religion with curiosity instead of fear. Through her, we see a new way of thinking, one that questions old norms and allows for emotional freedom. Leslie represents a more open-minded and liberal part of American society, while Jess's family reflects the

conservative rural background. This contrast makes their relationship even more meaningful, as it shows how children can grow and change when they are exposed to different perspectives.

Through the concept of anecdote, we analyzed several key scenes in the novel that reveal deeper cultural and historical meanings. For example, the Easter church scene shows how religion was often tied to reputation and appearance, especially in rural families. Jess's mother cares more about how her family looks at church than about the religious service itself. This reflects the idea that religion was sometimes used more as a social tool than a spiritual one. Another anecdote takes place at school, where Miss Edmunds is judged for her appearance and lifestyle. She wears pants, doesn't wear makeup, and supports Jess's art, which is very different from how other teachers treat him. This scene shows the contrast between old and new values in education, and how creative expression was not always accepted in rural schools.

One of the most powerful anecdotes we analyzed is Jess's reaction to Leslie's death. His grief, confusion, and emotional breakdown reveal how children, especially boys, were not taught to express their feelings openly. In the 1970s, mental health was not a common topic, and emotional support for children was very limited. Jess's struggle with loss shows how deeply he cared for Leslie and how difficult it is to deal with grief in a society that expects boys to hide their emotions. His pain also reflects the real-life inspiration behind the novel, Katherine Paterson wrote the book after her son's best friend died in a tragic accident. This connection between fiction and real experience gives the novel even more emotional weight.

All of these examples show how *Bridge to Terabithia* is more than just a story for children. It is a rich, meaningful novel that speaks about important issues like identity, gender roles, social pressure, emotional expression, and grief. It offers a powerful message about how

children experience the world, and how they create their own safe spaces like Terabithia to deal with their struggles. The kingdom of Terabithia becomes a place of escape, imagination, and healing for Jess and Leslie. It represents the ability of young minds to resist social pressure and to find strength through creativity and friendship.

So, to sum up, our New Historicist analysis of the novel has shown how literature, even when it is written for young readers, can reflect important cultural and historical truths. The characters in *Bridge to Terabithia* are deeply shaped by their time and environment, but they also respond to these challenges in personal and powerful ways. Jess's transformation shows how identity is something we build in response to our world, and how friendship, love, and imagination can help us grow beyond what society expects of us.

This research also shows the value of using a New Historicist approach in analyzing children's literature. It proves that stories for young readers are not simple they are full of cultural meaning and historical background. When we read them closely, we can uncover important lessons about the world, the self and how the two are connected.

To conclude, further studies could explore *Bridge to Terabithia* using other literary theories such as psychoanalysis, to study the characters' emotional trauma and resilience; or feminist theory, to explore the gender roles that shape both Jess and Leslie. Another option would be to use trauma theory to better understand how children process sudden loss. Researchers could also compare this novel to other children's books that explore similar themes of grief, friendship, or social exclusion. Additionally, examining the novel's film adaptation, or how it was received in other cultures, could show how its messages have been interpreted and valued in different parts of the world. In the end, *Bridge to Terabithia* remains a timeless and deeply moving novel that invites readers, both young and old, to reflect on their lives, their struggles, and the power of imagination.

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## Résumé

Ce mémoire intitulé *Une Lecture Néo Historiciste De Bridge to Terabithia (1977) de Katherine Paterson*, explore le roman en s'appuyant sur les idées du Nouveau Historicisme proposées par Stephen Greenblatt. Il examine comment le contexte des années 1970 comme l'histoire, la culture ou la société a influencé les émotions des personnages et la façon dont ils se construisent. En observant leurs réactions face aux attentes et aux pressions de leur époque ce travail met en lumière le lien entre ce que vivent les personnages et les récits culturels qui les entourent. En utilisant des notions comme l'auto construction ou l'anecdote l'étude montre que *Bridge to Terabithia* évoque l'enfance avec beaucoup de finesse et de sensibilité tout en reflétant parfois les idées dominantes de son époque. En somme, cette recherche montre que la lecture néo historiciste permet de mieux comprendre la richesse des œuvres jeunesse et la façon dont elles participent à la construction d'une conscience culturelle.

**Mots-clés :** Nouveau Historicisme, Auto-construction, Anecdote, Littérature pour enfants.

## الملخص

يستكشف هذا البحث، بعنوان "قراءة تاريخية جديدة لرواية كاثرين باترسون جسر الى تيرابيثيا"، قراءة دقيقة للرواية من خلال نظرية ستيفن غرينبلات في التاريخية الجديدة. وتشرح كيف أثر التاريخ والثقافة والمجتمع في سبعينيات القرن العشرين على الطريقة التي تنمو بها الشخصيات عاطفياً وتبني هويّاتها. ومن خلال دراسة كيفية استجابة هؤلاء الأفراد للضغوط الاجتماعية وتشكّلهم بواسطة قوى خارجية، تحدد هذه الدراسة نقطة الالتقاء بين التجربة الفردية والسرديات الثقافية. وبالاعتماد على مفهومي غرينبلات "تشكيل الذات" و"الحكاية القصيرة"، توضح الدراسة كيف تعكس رواية العاطفي في فترة الطفولة ضمن سياقها الاجتماعي والتاريخي. كما تُظهر كيف يمكن لأدب الأطفال أن يُشكّل بشكل غير مباشر الإيديولوجيات السائدة في زمنه. وفي الختام، تبرز الدراسة أهمية نظرية التاريخية الجديدة في الكشف عن عمق التاريخ في أدب الأطفال ودوره في تعزيز الوعي الثقافي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التاريخية الجديدة، تشكيل الذات، الحكاية القصيرة، أدب الأطفال.