

# Where Children Encounter the Past

## Reading Time-Slip Fantasy as Literature of Place

Satomi Isobe

### Introduction

In the 1950s, two children's novels with a similar approach to time-slip were published in Britain: *The Children of Green Knowe* by Lucy Boston (1954), and *Tom's Midnight Garden* by Philippa Pearce (1958). These two books belong to a subgenre called "time-slip fantasy," in which a contemporary protagonist encounters people and places from much earlier times, often related to specific places, such as old houses or gardens. In both of these time-slipping stories, the central character is a child whose loneliness is alleviated by forming friendships with people from the past. Humphrey Carpenter suggests that a "very large number of good books for children were written in England between the 1950s and the 1970s" with a shared theme: "the discovery or rediscovery of the past" (217). As Carpenter points out, time-slip fantasy is one of the important genres of children's literature in the post-war period and cites *The Children of Green Knowe* and *Tom's Midnight Garden* as two of the best examples from this time,<sup>1</sup> which has been called the second Golden Age of children's literature<sup>2</sup> in Britain. While most academic research on time-slip fantasy has focused on time, this essay argues that an equally important area to investigate in this fiction is place. Often in time-slipping fiction, places where the protagonists spend time and encounter the past are deeply linked to places in the present of the story's setting. This essay will explore the significance of reading time-slip fantasy as literature of place by focusing on the locations in *The Children of Green Knowe* and *Tom's Midnight Garden*.

Though the genre of time-slip fantasy has not been defined conclusively so far, some studies have been conducted on these stories. Sheila Egoff carried out close investigations into genres and the history of British fantasy, categorizing this kind of fantasy, which includes magic atmosphere, as “enchanted realism.” Egoff claims that this category arose from effects of the post-war social circumstances on children’s writers. Moreover, according to Peter Hollindale, authors in this period sought “to maintain continuities which go beyond our personal histories and include the history of our families, our personal histories and include the history of our families, our birthplaces, our homelands, our cultures and our races” (Hollindale 67). Hollindale points out that the previous research on time-slip fantasy was inevitably focused on the connections between present and past people, as it is based on “novels which celebrate continuities linking old and young adults across several generations” (67). In addition, time-slip fantasy shares other recurring factors, such as the relationship between children and adults, isolated protagonists, and the change of landscape (Reynolds 21). British fantasy from the 1950s to the 1960s is preoccupied with change (Hunt 151), and Lynne Rosental explains Margaret Mead’s idea about this generation as follows: in the post-World War II era, children “have been most intensely aware of the discontinuity and potential chaos arising out of man’s increased capacity for self-annihilation” (53). Satoshi Andō also points out that this period is an age of “social crisis” due to the Second World War, economic instability, and the end of British empire (18). As these discussions suggest, time-slip novels written in the post-war period have been read as a reflection of historical and social crisis.

### **Literature of Place and Sense of Place**

The concept of place has been discussed and studied in multiple disciplines, such as sociology, geography, and literature. In this

research, the distinction between place and space proposed by the cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan is widely cited:

“Space” is more abstract than “place.” What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value. . . . The ideas “space” and “place” require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. (*Space and Place* 6)

As Tuan argues, space becomes place through our immediate experience, knowledge, and recognition of its characteristics. Similarly, Edward Relph argues that the importance of place depends on its relationship with human existence:

If places are indeed a fundamental aspect of man’s existence in the world, if they are sources of security and identity for individuals and for groups of people, then it is important that the means of experiencing, creating, and maintaining significant places are not lost. (6)

Both Tuan and Relph point out the deep connection between place and human existence in history. As Lawrence Buell suggests, “world history is a history of space becoming place” (63), and through the relationship with place, our memories for our own histories are accumulated.

Recent ecocritical approaches to the study of literature have been focused on place. Buell believes that the scale of place can be subjective and relative: “What counts as a place can be as small as a corner of your kitchen or as big as the planet” (62). According to Buell, recent ecological concern over place, including its scale, is changing

rapidly and flexibly. Ursula K. Heise discusses this variability of place:

The shifting scales at which the local is defined in different types of discourse already show that developing “sense of place” cannot mean return to the natural in and of itself, but at best an approach to the natural from within a different cultural framework. (45)

Heise insists on the importance of the various ecocritical approaches to “sense of place” to define various scales of place. To think about the concept of “sense of place,” let us look at Relph’s idea about sense of place. According to Relph, our sense of place shows the notion which explains the deep and close relationship between us and the place of our existence:

[O]f course such things as prairies or houses are not experienced in some isolated way—intentionality merely gives direction to experience and the actual experiences are composed of whole complexes of visual, auditory and olfactory sensations, present circumstances and purposes, past experiences and associations, the unfolding sequence of vistas and the various cultural and aesthetic criteria by which we judge buildings and landscapes. (17)

Relph’s thoughts about how places are experienced also chime with the work of Tuan; Relph suggests that we experience place by our sensibility or memories of the past and place can have a meaning by the relationship with human beings. In addition, Relph discusses an authenticity and unselfconscious sense of place and points out its significance as a source of identity:

An authentic sense of place is above all being inside and belonging to your place both as individual and as a member of a community and to know this without reflecting upon it. This might be so for home, for hometown or region, or for the nation. Such an authentic and unselfconscious sense of place is perhaps as important and necessary in contemporary societies as it was in any previous societies, for it provides an important source of identity for individuals, and through them for communities. (65-66)

According to Relph, a genuine and unconscious sense of place is significant for personal identification in society. From a similar point of view, Tuan explicates and emphasizes the importance of the physical senses in relation to place:

Sense of place is made up of experiences, mostly fleeting and undramatic. . . . It is a unique blend of sights, sounds, and smells, a unique harmony of natural and artificial rhythms such as times of sunrise and sunset, of work and play. The feel of a place is registered in one's muscles and bones. (183-84)

Our sense of place is, according to Tuan, what we perceive at one place, and our bodies memorize the feeling of it. Walter also implies the importance of physical sensations: "A place is seen, heard, smelled, imagined, loved, hated, feared revered" (142). Both Tuan and Walter suggest that how human beings experience place through the physical sense cannot be ignored when we consider relations between place and human beings. Mitchell Thomashow argues in a similar vein to Tuan:

People are best equipped to observe what happens around them—what they can see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. These

observations are poignant in their home places, where they are likely to spend lots of time, have many relationships, and be most in touch with the natural world. (5)

Therefore, it can be noted that the importance of the accumulation of daily perceptions in a place has been repeatedly claimed in the discussion of sense of place. Sense of place consists not only of the knowledge or thoughts about the place, but also of our active participation in the circumstances of the place, whether we are aware of it or not. As we get to know the characteristics of each place, we deepen and reinforce relationships with it through our immediate experience; sense of place is this process itself. Therefore, we find our identity by reinforcing sense of place at particular places in which we exist. In other words, sense of place is cultivated by deepening the meaning of human existence in the world in the context of the place, and it helps us discover our identity. The current research on sense of place in literary studies has been mostly limited to American literature, and little attention has been given to literature for children, especially fantasy literature. In the light of this fact, this essay attempts to read time-slip fantasy as a literature of place from an ecological viewpoint.

### **Place in Time-Slip Fantasy**

In the light of these concepts, the places described in time-slip fantasy are generally limited to small areas, such as old houses or cottage gardens. These small places, surrounded by walls or hedges, hold significance as safe, protected personal spaces, and this needs to be considered with reference to the historical aspects of the social crisis in the post-war period of the books discussed here. These protected places, in addition, play an important role as places which allow the writer's imagination its full play. Both Boston and Pearce describe fully the connection between place and their child protagonists, as well as the

relation between time and place in their stories. The setting of *The Children of Green Knowe*, Green Noah whose ancient name was Green Knowe, is based on the ancient manor in which Boston lived since 1937: The Manor at Hemingford Grey near Cambridge, which is the oldest continuously inhabited houses in Britain. The setting of *Tom's Midnight Garden* was inspired by the real-life King's Mill House and its garden, close to where Pearce spent her childhood in Great Shelford, Cambridge. The protagonists of each story communicate with people in the past from these locations: Tom in *Tom's Midnight Garden* goes into the Victorian garden when the grandfather clock strikes thirteen times and encounters a girl named Hatty; Tolly in *The Children of Green Knowe* meets three children—Toby, Alexander, Linnet—and a horse, Feste, who lived at his great-grandmother's house centuries ago.

The opening scenes of time-slip novels invariably describe the protagonist's move from their home to the new, important place. The opening scene of *The Children of Green Knowe* depicts the central character, Tolly, arriving at her great-grandmother's house. Victor Watson suggests that this is the key word for summing up the book's message:

The account of the arrival of the seven-year-old Tolly at his unknown great-grandmother's house . . . must be one of the best openings of a children's book ever to have been written. Arrival is the exact word, for this is more than an arrival by train at a railway station, or by boat at an old house entirely surrounded by water. It is—though the lonely, unhappy and rather bewildered little boy does not yet know it—an arrival at a deep and richly satisfying level, a restoration to family and home, the discovery that he has a place in a complex pattern of time and landscape. (135)

As this last line shows, Tolly's arrival at the house at Green Noah is his important moment which is described not only at a surface level but at "a deep and richly satisfying level" (135) because the house restores the history of his own family and himself. The implication of this is that Tolly moves to the place in which he truly should be. As Watson suggests, the place itself helps Tolly to discover his own identity.

Additionally, it is noteworthy that the authors use words related to place in their titles: "garden" is used in *Tom's Midnight Garden*, suggesting the importance of the setting; "Green Knowe" in *The Children of Green Knowe* is the ancient name of the place where the story takes place, and Tolly meets children who have been there when it was called "Green Knowe." The titles indicate that these fantasies are literature of place and reinforce the importance of the physical locations in the novels.

### **Children's Physical Sensations**

In these two time-slipping stories, deep relationships between places and children are described by their sense of place. Protagonists in time-slip stories move to places which are new for them, and the more they spend time there, the deeper experience they have. In time-slip fantasy, child protagonists encounter the past through their sense of place, which make themselves understand the history accompanying the place in each narrative. The place affects the protagonist's physical sense, and each of them deepens and develops sense of place there. Places are described through children's perspectives and sensations which are keen and sensitive; the characters perceive places through such diverse senses as smell, hearing, and touch.

Let us look closely sense of place in *The Children of Green Knowe*. In this story, Tolly's feeling at the old house is described through his sense impressions, especially of the sounds in the house. Old objects in the house play an important role in enabling Tolly to



contact children who had lived there centuries ago. Tolly, even with his eyes closed, feels the past through such items as the flute, the book, and the rocking horse:

In his dreams he was swimming toward the house in the dark when he heard the creak of oars coming to meet him. . . . The funny thing was, that lying there with his eyes closed he could still hear the creak-croak. No, it couldn't be oars, it must be the rocking horse. . . . [I]t seemed to him that the horse had just that minute stopped rocking. The only sound he could hear now was the slow tick-tock of the old clock. (18-19)

Tolly knows from Mrs. Oldknow's stories that children used to live in the house, and, as he discerns their existence, he finds that these children are still there. In this section, Tolly listens to the sounds carefully and tries to imagine what they are. After, though Tolly cannot see anything, he hears "a laugh so like a boy's" (22), "little bare feet running across the floor," and "laughter and whispering" (40). In the first half of the story, in fact, Tolly cannot see any children but feels their presence by his sense of hearing. However, Tolly gradually finds the children become more tangible. When Tolly finds the book of one child, Linnet, he recognizes her existence by his sense of touch:

He bent down to have a closer look, but as he did so two hands were pressed over his eyes from behind and he could feel breathing beside his ear. He put his hands up and felt two very little ones and some curls, soft little cobwebs.

"Linnet!" he said at once, trying to catch hold of the fingers, but they melted away and there was nobody. (84-85)

At the Manor house, Tolly gradually accumulates the sense of place

and it allows and even urges him, spontaneously, to see the children in Green Knowe.

In *Space and Place*, Tuan refers to the importance of the sense of smell in our sensations. “The senses of smell and touch,” Tuan notes, “can be improved with practice so as to discern significant worlds” (10). Tuan continues, “Odors lend character to objects and places, making them distinctive, easier to identify and remember. Odors are important to human beings” (10). As Tuan suggests, the sense of smell which is necessary for us to recognize the world helps us identify and memorize places.

In *Tom’s Midnight Garden*, Tom’s acute sense of smell is frequently described. In the scene where Tom enters the garden after talking with Aunt Gwen, the garden is described carefully and beautifully: “the scene tempted him even now: it lay so inviting and clear before him—clear-cut from the stubby leaf-pins of the nearer yew-trees to the curled-back petals of the hyacinths in the crescent-shaped corner beds” (20). Then, in the next morning, he remembers the beautiful garden:

That [The garden] was real. Tomorrow he [Tom] would go into it: he almost had the feel of tree-trunks between his hands as he climbed; he could almost smell the heavy blooming of the hyacinths in the corner beds. He remembered that smell from home: indoors, from his mother’s bulb pots, at Christmas and the New Year; outside, in their flower-bed, in the late spring. He fell asleep thinking of home. (24)

The repeated descriptions of the smell of hyacinths shows that Tom’s vivid memory helps form his feelings towards the location and his sense of place. From that memory, Tom determines that the garden was “real.” Additionally, Tom’s sense of place connects to the smell from

his own home, which is the most comforting and familiar place for humans, especially for lonely children. Tom's sense of place from the scents in the garden is the only evidence for its existence, as this scene shows: "as he ran down the stairs to the hall, Tom was remembering the hyacinths: he had seen the curling back of the petals; he had smelt them. They had been real last night; they were real now" (29).

Furthermore, the scene that Tom finds behind the door to the backyard at daytime is opposite to the nighttime one. Tom finds that the beautiful garden at midnight has been changed to "a narrow, paved space enclosed by a wooden fence" (30), and he notes that "the place smelt of sun on stone and metal and the creosote of the fencing" (30). The smell of hyacinths in the garden is replaced by the smell of creosote, a chemical substance used as a wood preservative. The other materials in the daytime space, such as dustbins, newspapers, and cars, symbolize the contemporary consumer society and shows the contrast with the natural beauty of the midnight garden. Therefore, the value of each place is represented as Tom's sense of place even as he first enters. The paved space in the present has entirely lost its aesthetic and emotional significance, even though it was the beautiful garden in the past. The contrast between Tom's sense of place in each version of the outdoor space provides him with an even deeper connection to the midnight garden.

The scene in which Tom can no longer enter the garden also represents the sense of place in the present, and this description emphasizes the tragic aspect of this impressive scene: "He could see nothing. He stood on the doorstep and sniffed the air. There was no frost in it, and yet there was no lingering summer perfume from shut flowers and from grass and leaves. The air seemed empty of smell, except for a faint tang that he could not quite place" (211). Tom, by sniffing the air, tries to smell the place itself and confirm its existence. Although Tom can see nothing in the darkness, he can feel the place.

To be more precisely, the darkness makes Tom's other senses keener. Through their acute senses, child protagonists in time-slip fantasy can perceive more than the surface appearance of a place, and they can get to know some of its particular features. As they deepen their sense of place, they understand that there are other times still lingering in the same places.

### **Place, Time, and Continuity**

In *Tom's Midnight Garden* and *The Children of Green Knowe*, each place is significant for children to recognize the existence of the past. Why and how can these places connect children to the past in time-slip fantasy? To consider this question, let us focus on continuity of place in these novels. Relph explains the importance of the continuity of place for people's feelings in the context of place and time:

The changing character of places through time is of course related to modifications of buildings and landscapes as well as to changes in our attitudes. . . . On the other hand, the persistence of the character of places is apparently related to a continuity both in our experience of change and in the very nature of change that serves to reinforce a sense of association and attachment to those places. (31)

Relph suggests that people's attachment to some places<sup>3</sup> is cultivated by time. As time changes places, we feel continuity of places; in such cases, we feel comfort, stableness, or security in places as well. As Relph explains that "the result of such a growing attachment, imbued as it is with a sense of continuity, is the feeling that this place has endured and will persist as a distinctive entity even though the world around may change" (31); our attachment to places makes us feel a sense of relief and trust in the place with a sense of continuity.

As Rosental suggests, “No writer for children has been more deeply concerned with their responses to the uncertainties of the postwar era than Lucy Boston” (53). There is no doubt that Boston was strongly concerned with “discontinuity” after World War II. The house in Green Knowe is represented as an “archive” (Long 89), and young readers feel “the essential continuity of human experience” through reading this novel (Butler and O’Donovan 2). Through the sense of continuity, we acknowledge the duration of a place from the past to the present. Old places contain many memories, and the continuity of place along with children’s imagination is seen in *The Children of Green Knowe*. In one scene, Tolly imagines that there is still a horse in the old stables:

He [Tolly] crouched there trying to imagine that the stall was occupied by the warm silky body of a horse, feet stamping in straw, hindquarters fidgeting, tail swishing, and a great rolling black eye that could see backward and forward at the same time, half covered by mane and forelock. He tried so passionately to imagine it, to see, hear and smell it, that the wonder is that no horse was there. (32-33)

Here, Tolly expands his imagination about the past of the house so vividly he can “almost smell” it, like Tom in *Tom’s Midnight Garden*. Through a tale about the old Manor house by Mrs. Oldknow, Tolly gradually develops his imagination about the past from his passion to feel the past by his sense of hearing, smell, and touch. The old Manor house represents the past and shows him the continuity of time, until finally Tolly sees and interacts with children of the past. Because his ancestor lived in the house for such a long time, Tolly naturally connects the root of his family with the house. In *The Children of Green Knowe*, the unabating existence of the place emphasizes the

accumulation of time through centuries in the story. Tolly's sneezing "in the dust of centuries" (175) symbolizes that Tolly is physically involved with the history around him. That is, in *The Children of Green Knowe*, the house is described as a family tree that represents "the persistence of the character of places"; the family history is, as it were, accumulated in one place.

A big difference between *Tom's Midnight Garden* and *The Children of Green Knowe* is that the garden in the former has been so radically altered in the present that Tom understands a clear difference between the time periods. The beautiful Victorian garden, which Tom has played in and loved, completely disappears in the present time. However, when Tom meets Mrs Bartholomew, she recollects the moment Tom left the garden: "you reached the porch, and I suppose you went indoors, for that was the last I saw you." Mrs Bartholomew says to herself, "He's gone; but the garden is here. The garden will always be here. It will never change" (222). Mrs Bartholomew's memory is a relief here. It cures her own loneliness as she recognizes that the garden is stable in her memory and it allows her to remember her friend, Tom. This stability of the garden emphasized by Mrs Bartholomew's sense of place indicates the stability of memory. Mrs Bartholomew continues, "I knew, Tom, that the garden was changing all the time, because nothing stands still, except in our memory" (222-23). This shows the clear contrast between changeability of the garden as an actual place and the stability of memory. Mrs Bartholomew understands the stability of the garden when she sees Tom leave the garden for the final time. This suggests that even though the garden may change completely, it will never disappear from memory. A sense of place can keep living in a person's memory as long as they live, and can be handed down among people, even when the place itself is entirely changed. In an interview with a magazine of children's literature, Pearce explains why she wrote this novel:

My father had to retire and they sold the Mill House. Suddenly my childhood was chopped off from me. As they were in the process of selling it I began thinking of writing stories based on the house and the garden and this feeling of things slipping away. It's a terrible feeling. (Pearce, *Books for Keeps* 14)

This suggests that Pearce attempted to keep the garden and the house from her childhood in her memory, as well as creating new memories for her readers. In light of Pearce's own experience, *Tom's Midnight Garden* can be read as a story filled with Pearce's sense of place at an actual place. That is, from her fear of a tragic loss of the garden, she wrote the story of a boy who loses the garden.

In *Tom's Midnight Garden*, the garden still changes in line with natural cycles. When Tom enters the Victorian garden, the seasons differ, sometimes there is snow, and Tom also sees lightning in the garden from autumnal storms. However, the garden itself is always stable:

Tom thought of Time: how he had been sure of mastering it, and exchanging his own Time for an Eternity of Hatty's and so of living pleasurably in the garden for ever. The garden was still there, but meanwhile Hatty's Time had stolen a march on him, and had turned Hatty herself from his playmate into a grown-up woman. (204-05)

From time-slips in the garden, Tom understands the fact that time changes his playmate into a grown-up woman. Tom gradually understands the function of time: "Tom had seen Hatty's Time—the garden's Time—covering what must be about ten years" (172) when he enters the garden. Tom continues as follows: "different people have

different times, although of course, they're really all bits of the same big Time" (172). This suggests that a person's memory, including sense of place, can remain in a place where they spent time. As "Hatty's Time" exists in the garden, memories of events and individual time are accumulated in the garden. Through the time-slip, Tom understands the history of people at the garden and knows the different aspect of the time in the same place.

*Tom's Midnight Garden* can be read as a story about the acceptance of change in places. The scene which describes Tom's loss of the garden is tragic: Tom cries Hatty's name aloud in the present backyard, but cannot find her. Later, when he realizes that Hatty is now Mrs Bartholomew, he repeats her name and confirms her existence: "You were Hatty—you are Hatty! You're really Hatty!" (219). Tom realizes that in Mrs Bartholomew, the young girl, Hatty, who he played with in the garden, is still living. Tom understands that even though he has lost the garden, life at the place itself continues. One of the functions of the Victorian garden for Tom is a place where change and loss can be experienced and endured. This learning process results in Tom being forced to leave the protective garden behind.

Watson points out that "the sense of belonging" and "the naming" is important in *The Children of Green Knowe* (137-38). According to Watson, "Only his mother, and now his great-grandmother, understand that naming is recognition, and recognition has to do with belonging to a place" (137). This suggests that Tolly's family has been rooted in Green Knowe. Tolly, who could not belong to any place before he comes to Green Noah, feels that he belongs to this house. As "[Tolly] felt with all his heart that he was at home" (Boston, *The Children of Green Knowe* 18), he finds his true "home." Watson points out that the "sense of belonging is repeatedly reinforced by the birds who fly into his bedroom, the time-travelling children who play with him, the magical flute-playing" (138). Through his life with children and Mrs.



Oldknow at Green Noah, Tolly gradually gets the feeling that he is at home. In the story, Tolly sometimes feels “as if he had lived here always instead of just one day” (35), and “could hardly believe he was the same boy who had spent miserable holidays alone in an empty school” (154). Life in Green Noah makes Tolly feel his sense of belonging to his true home and he comes to feel like he is one of the members of the family-tree there, like Toby, Alexander, Linnet, and Mrs. Oldknow. That is, as in the other five books of Boston’s “Green Knowe” series, the house is symbolically a shelter which protects him from social change outside.

## Conclusion

This essay explored by focusing on the representations of place, how the protagonists encounter the past in *Tom’s Midnight Garden* and *The Children of Green Knowe*. In time-slipping stories, the child protagonists reinforce their sense of place by physical sensations as they spend time there, and their immediate experience allow them to encounter the past at the place. The continuity of place is recognized by changeability and stability of place and it also allows children to communicate with people who used to live there in the past. In the light of historical background of British time-slip fantasy in the 1950s, it can be said that the sense of social, political, and economic discontinuity encouraged writers to look before their own time period to connect with a personal place. In other words, time-slip fantasy was the way to go beyond the cleft of the discontinuity between the pre-war period and the post-war period through the same place. Continuity of place allows us to hear the voice of people who lived hundreds of years ago. Time-slip fantasy makes readers realize that place and life can continue, and we all share the same place as time—as Tom says, “they’re really all bits of the same big Time.”

## Notes

1. *Tom's Midnight Garden* and *The Children of Green Knowe* are also rated highly for the elaborateness of their framework. For example, John Rowe Townsend recognizes the value of *Tom's Midnight Garden*: "If I were asked to name a single master piece of English children's literature since the last war—and one masterpiece in thirty years is a fair ration—it would be this outstandingly beautiful and absorbing book" (*Written for Children*, 247).
2. For a discussion of this term, see Virginia Haviland, "A Second Golden Age? In a Time Flood?"
3. Tuan explores this concept through the term "topophilia," in *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (1974).

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