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English Literature for Children and Young Adults

Subject of project: text sample and tasks that could be included in a children's supplementary reading volume

Target age-group: 13-14 (7th-8th grade)

Focus: writing

E. Nesbit,
Five Children and It

This text is taken from *Five Children and It*, a book by E. Nesbit. It tells the story of five children, Cyril (the eldest), Anthea, Robert, Jane and Lamb (the youngest). They go to the countryside and, one day, while playing in a *gravel pit*¹, they find a sand-fairy, a very strange creature that makes all their wishes come true. Still, there is a problem: everything the children wish for (for example, to be very beautiful or to have lots of money) turns out badly. In the end, the children always get back home safe after every adventure. The fragment below presents the episode when the children discover IT.

"'Let me alone,' it said. And now everyone heard the voice and looked at the others to see if they had too.

'But we want to see you,' said Robert *bravely*².

'I wish you'd come out,' said Anthea, also taking courage.

'Oh, well-if that's your wish,' the voice said, and the sand *stirred and spun and scattered*³, and something brown and furry and fat came rolling out into the hole and the sand fell off it, and it sat there *yawning*⁴ and *rubbing*⁵ the ends of its eyes with its hands.

'I believe I must have dropped asleep,' it said, stretching itself.

The children stood round the hole in a ring, looking at the creature they had found. Its eyes were on long *horns*⁶ like a *snail*⁷'s eyes, and it could move them in and out like telescopes; it had ears like a bat's ears, and its *tubby*⁸ body was shaped like a spider's and *covered*⁹ with thick soft fur; its legs and arms were furry too, and it had hands and feet like a monkey's.

'What on earth is it?' Jane said. 'Shall we take it home?' The thing turned its long eyes to look at her, and said: 'Does she always talk *nonsense*¹⁰, or is it only the *rubbish*¹¹ on her head that makes her silly?' It looked *scornfully*¹² at Jane's hat as it spoke.

'She doesn't mean to be silly,' Anthea said gently; we none of us do, whatever you may think! Don't be frightened; we don't want to hurt you, you know.' 'Hurt ME!' it said. 'ME frightened? All its fur stood out like a cat's when it is going to fight.

'Who are you? And don't get angry! Because really we don't know.' 'You don't know?' it said. 'Well, I knew the world had changed— but— well, really— do you mean to tell me seriously you don't know a Psammead when you see one?' 'A Sammyadd? That's Greek to me.' 'So it is to everyone,' said the creature sharply. 'Well, in plain English, then, a *sand-fairy*. Don't you know a Sand-fairy when you see one?'

'Do talk some more,' Robert cried. 'I didn't know you were a Sand-fairy, but I knew directly I saw you that you were much the wonderfulest thing I'd ever seen.' The Sand-fairy seemed *a shade less disagreeable*¹³ after this.

'It isn't talking I mind,' it said, 'as long as you're reasonably *civil*¹⁴. But I'm not going to make polite conversation for you. If you talk nicely to me, *perhaps*¹⁵ I'll answer you, and perhaps I won't. Now say something.' Of course no one could think of anything to say, but at last Robert thought of 'How long have you lived here?' and he said it at once.

'Oh, ages — several thousand years,' replied the Psammead.

'Tell us all about it. Do.' 'It's all in books.' 'You aren't!' Jane said. 'Oh, tell us everything you can about yourself! We don't know anything about you, and you are so nice.' The Sand-fairy *smoothed his long rat-like whiskers*¹⁶ and smiled between them.

'Do please tell!' said the children all together.

It is wonderful how quickly you get used to things, even the most *astonishing*¹⁷. Five minutes before, the children had had no more idea than you that there was such a thing as a sand-fairy in the world, and now they were talking to it as though they had known it all their lives. It drew its eyes in and said..."

(E. Nesbit, *Five Children and It*, pp. 9-11)

¹ *grael pit*= carieră de nisip

² *bravely*= curajos

³ *stirred and spun and scattered*= (despre nisip) s-a mișcat și s-a răsucit și s-a-prăștiat

⁴ *yawning*= căscând

⁵ *rubbing*= frecând

⁶ *horn*= corn

⁷ *snail*= melc

⁸ *tubby*= bondoc

⁹ *covered*= acoperit

¹⁰ *nonsense*= nimicuri, prostii

¹¹ *rubbish*= (aici) vechitură, prostie

¹² *scornfully*= cu dispreț

¹³ *a shade less disagreeable*= mai puțin dezagreabil

¹⁴ *civil*= bine-crescut, politicos

¹⁵ *perhaps*= poate

¹⁶ *smoothed his long rat-like whiskers*= și-a netezit mustățile lungi ca de șobolan

¹⁷ *astonishing*= uimitor

Exercises

- I. Read the text. Then, draw and colour the portrait of the sand-fairy.
- II. What do you think the sand-fairy will tell the children about the place where it used to live?
- III. How do you think this episode will end?
- IV. Imagine you meet a fairy. What would it look like? What kind of fairy would it be (sand-fairy, forest-fairy, tooth-fairy etc)? Draw its portrait. Describe your fairy and the world it comes from.

Teacher's guide

Five Children and It is a fantasy novel for children written by E(dith) Nesbit (1858-1924), an English writer who became famous for her children's literature. She was a political activist and co-founder of the Fabian Society (an intellectual movement, the predecessor of the modern Labour Party). Her narratives sprout from slices of life which are extremely probable in the real world. The story in *Five Children and It* is built on a completely realistic setting in which the children find a portal, a special passageway that will take them to the fantastic world. This is, therefore, a sample of intrusive fantasy, as the characters are plunged into the fantastic, but they always return home, to the realistic world in the end. Moreover, it is also a text that develops the main ideas of the domestic novel and of the adventure story for children. The narrative voice is playful and witty and it seems to be talking to the children over the adults' heads (not the other way around, as one might stereotypically expect things to be in books for children). The adventures the children undergo teaches them valuable lessons; it is not all fun and games, they, too, even if only children, have certain responsibilities. They learn to look after one another, to think before acting, to take responsibility for their deeds, and, most important, to be careful what they wish for because it might just come true!