

# The Fragile Beacon: Representations Of Hope In The Child Characters Of Susan Hill's Fiction

Tokhirova dilrabo muzaffar qizi

Doctoral student, Uzbekistan state world languages university, Uzbekistan

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**Abstract:** This article investigates the role of hope as a formative psychological and existential force in the child characters of Susan Hill's prose, focusing on the novel *I'm the King of the Castle* and a selection of short stories. Employing hermeneutic analysis alongside developmental psychology theory and literary theory, the study seeks to interpret how Hill constructs children's inner lives and reveals the ways hope is a survival strategy and also a precarious condition readily disrupted by trauma, abuse, and social violence. Kingshaw, Edmund, James, Mick, Elizabeth, Lizzie, Clara, and Rima are some of the characters that embody the tension between vulnerability and resilience. Their desires—for friendship, parental respect, fairness, and personal agency—demonstrate the interplay of internal psychology and external coercion. Situating Hill's fiction within the wider critical scholarship on childhood in literature (cf. Nikolajeva, 1996; Eriksson, 2014; Deeb, 2019), the article argues that hope is discerned not only as a thematic nodal point of Hill's fiction but also as a marker of children's psychological development and existential struggle. The findings contribute to ongoing debates on the literary figuration of childhood, offering an insight into how fiction negotiates the risky dynamics of resilience, vulnerability, and the search for meaning.

**Keywords:** Susan Hill; child characters; hope; literary psychology; resilience; trauma; *I'm the King of the Castle*.

**Introduction:** Hope has long been regarded as a vital psychological resource, particularly in literature that depicts childhood as a site of vulnerability and growth. As Ernst Bloch reminds us, hope functions as an anticipatory consciousness, orienting the subject towards a possible future (Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 1986). In children's literature and its extensions, hope often emerges as both a protective mechanism and a fragile aspiration, frequently thwarted by social and familial constraints. Maria Nikolajeva, in her seminal *Children's Literature Comes of Age* (1996), stresses that children in modern literature are rarely idealized; instead, they are shown struggling with loss, alienation, and the painful negotiations of identity. Susan Hill's works, especially *I'm the King of the Castle* (1970), dramatize this dynamic with haunting precision. Her child characters are neither romantic innocents nor moral exemplars but psychologically complex individuals whose hopes reveal their longing for connection, recognition, and meaning. This article investigates the manifold expressions of hope in Hill's fiction, arguing that her portrayal of children aligns with

broader literary-psychological debates about trauma, resilience, and existential choice (see Eriksson, 2014; Deeb, 2019).

## METHODS

The study employed close reading, thematic coding, comparative cross-textual analysis, and integration of psychological and narratological frameworks as its main methods.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

Hope, in Susan Hill's works, is not only a source of comfort for child characters but also a vital force that helps them find their way in life, endure hardship, and grow both personally and emotionally. Kingshaw, for instance, finds himself trapped in the hostile world dominated by Edmund Hooper. Yet what allows him to survive in such an environment is hope itself. In every difficult situation, Kingshaw clings to a new form of hope, and this becomes the driving force that pushes him to carry on. At first, he hopes to befriend Hooper: "Kingshaw wondered whether there might now be some sort of truce between them, whether he might

somehow have won his right to stay here. He had prepared to get on with Hooper, as he got on with most people, because it was safer to do so... he was too vulnerable to let himself indulge in making of enemies". Although this hope is childishly simple, it compels Kingshaw to search for meaning in life. During the terrifying incident in the forest, when Kingshaw comes to Hooper's aid, a new sense of hope awakens in him—the belief that goodness can still triumph over evil in the world: "Kingshaw began to wonder what would happen afterwards, and whether Hooper would be ashamed. He thought, now he won't be able to frighten me, he won't be leader". This hope gives Kingshaw strength. He believes that his care and kindness might bring about a change in Hooper as well. Despite the risks, he forgets himself and worries for Hooper like an older brother would. Yet this hope is shattered the very same day they return safely from the forest: Edmund not only blames Kingshaw for having gone there, but also accuses him of the near-tragedy when he almost struck his head on a rock and drowned: "It was Kingshaw, he pushed me in the water". Na janob Huper, na Kingsho xonim Charlzga ishondi: "He saw that they did not really know him, not any of them, they had been completely unaware of everything he thought and felt, quite ready to believe Hooper's lies and complaints. To Kingshaw, the lies were crazy, so blatantly, he thought anybody must see through them". This state of hopelessness leaves a deep mark on Kingshaw, yet he still continues to search for new hopes in order to survive. As a small boy, his worldview is too limited to fully grasp why adults can be so unjust. When his hope of improving relations with Hooper is crushed, he begins to look forward to September, believing that once school starts they might return to their former home. But this hope too is soon destroyed when Mr. Hooper proposes marriage to Helena Kingshaw. The prospect means that Kingshaw and Hooper would attend the same school, and even the thought of such a future fills Kingshaw with dread: "Even though he would not beat up Kingshaw himself, he had friends, didn't he, other boys at the school. Hooper would only have to speak a word". At Leydell Castle, Hooper envies Kingshaw, climbs the wall, and falls, breaking his leg, which sends him to the hospital. During this time, Kingshaw meets a boy named Anthony Fielding in a chapel, and they quickly become friends. To Kingshaw, Fielding appears confident, innocent, and carefree. He spends long hours with him—watching calves being born, observing squirrels, and visiting the Fielding home, where he is warmly welcomed and engaged in heartfelt conversations with the family. This friendship gives Kingshaw new strength and awakens in him a fresh hope for the future. Yet when Hooper returns from the hospital, Helena invites

Fielding to Warings. Once Hooper learns of Kingshaw's friendship with Fielding, he becomes determined to take him away from Kingshaw—and eventually succeeds in doing so: "Hooper went, he could move much faster, now, on the plastered leg, but Fielding waited for him all the same. Kingshaw stood just outside the door, moving his toes about in the loose gravel, listening to the soft, rough sound it made. He wasn't going to the farm...Hooper could go. He didn't care about Fielding, none of it belonged to him anymore".

In reality, Fielding had intended to wait for Kingshaw, but under Edmund's pressure he left with the belief that Charles would follow them later. Kingshaw, however, fails to grasp this genuine intention, for he is still a child whose ability to judge situations clearly is not yet fully developed. Believing that even this last hope has been taken from him, he feels utterly alone. These moments become decisive. Having lost his mother's support, the treasured models he had built with his own hands, and the friendship of Fielding, Kingshaw slips out early one morning while everyone is asleep. He heads toward the pond he had discovered at Hangwood—and there, he takes his own life: "He felt suddenly excited. This was his place, it was where he wanted to be. It was all right. He said to himself, again and again, this is all right. He began to push his way slowly through the damp undergrowth". This tragic ending reveals the most dangerous consequence of hopelessness. Unable to find his place in life, Kingshaw chooses death as his final decision. His character vividly illustrates the essential role that hope plays in human existence. It must be recognized that when hope disappears—especially for children—life itself loses its meaning. On the other hand, Edmund, too, carries his own form of hope. His hope is simple: he longs for his father's affection and attention. This yearning becomes most evident in his thoughts about home: "It is my house, he thought, it is private, I got here first. Nobody should come here". He simply wants to protect his father, his home, and his place from outsiders—those he sees as "intruders"—or, in a childlike way, he is jealous of sharing them. Edmund hopes that all of his father's attention will be directed solely toward him. This becomes clear in the boastful words he shares with Kingshaw: "My father's going to give me a new one for this Christmas, he is going to give me a gold watch... It will cost a lot of money, about 50 pounds". Through this boast, he seeks to prove how much his father loves him. Most importantly, he clings to the words his father has spoken to him: "Hooper's father had said, you are the most important thing in my whole life, to Hooper". This affirmation and recognition from his father can be seen as Edmund's highest hope. To ensure that neither his

place nor his father's affection would be shared, he constantly mistreats Kingshaw—fabricating lies about him to his father and to Helena, writing threatening letters, locking him in the dark stable and in the Red Room filled with his grandfather's dead birds and insects, and even pursuing him through the forest when Kingshaw attempts to run away from Warings. Edmund's cruelty, however, is rooted less in strength than in fear: beneath his aggressive schemes lies the anxiety and vulnerability of a child terrified of losing his father's love.

The relationship between James and the beekeeper, Mart May, is a moving expression of humanity and hope. These two characters—one a shy, quiet, thin, blond boy, the other an illiterate, ordinary man living in isolation in the countryside—find each other in unlikely circumstances. Their bond grows out of James's childlike, deeply human longing for true friendship. When James first arrives at his aunt's house in the village, he tries to appear proud and self-assured. Yet behind this façade, Mart immediately senses the loneliness, fragility, and fear within him. What begins as a halting and fragmented conversation gradually develops into one filled with genuine meaning: "Pity you don't have a pal to play with. 'Bit lonely, here with the old people.' 'I haven't got a pal.' 'Must have.' 'No.' 'You'd better get looking' 'I am going to a new school' 'You'll get pals there then' 'Will I?'. Even he himself didn't believe he could make a friend, so when he asked, 'Really?', it was the spark of hope in his heart. The situation begins to change: James finds out that Mart cannot read: "The sea-green eyes widened. 'Mart May?' there was a strange awe in the boy's voice. 'can't you spell?' This unexpected "terrible" discovery opens a new door for James—now he is not only trying to teach, but also to connect, to be useful. By teaching Mart to read, he wants to help him, and at the same time, he hopes to find a true friend for himself. "A week passed. Every day, the boy waited, carrying two books and two pencils, and every day Mart May was busy". This description shows James's loyalty and determination. He acts, he waits, he doesn't turn away from his goal. James's persistence is nourished by his feeling of friendship for Mart. When they begin to learn writing together, the process becomes not only a lesson, but also a symbol of healing and connection for them. "First we find the letters of your name. M. the boy pointed. Mart May stared as the marks swerved, leaned, straightened themselves again". To Mart, the letters that looked crooked and uneven were like the still-unformed, slowly taking shape relationship between him and James. Though James was young, he had already become a deeply devoted "teacher.": "After the boy made him write the letters he had read.

His small pale face was intent, his body willing Mart May on". Throughout the summer, trainings took the form of habit: "Relentlessly each morning and afternoon, the boy slid up beside him. M-A-R-T M-A-Y". But this journey would not always follow a smooth path. One day, Mart fell ill: "His head was stabbed with black spikes", Days turned into weeks, and he missed the little boy terribly: "missing the quite, pale figure at the elbow". This painful sense of longing shows that their bond had, in fact, grown into a deep emotional friendship. A year later, James returns. This time, Mart sees him happily playing with a child his own age. James smiles and says: "You were right, Mart May." "What about?" "you will be bringing your pals here, plaguing. And now I have". This dialogue reflects hope coming to fruition. James is no longer alone; like any other ordinary child, he now has a friend. Through patience, determination, and mental effort, he found friendship, and this bond transformed his life. By teaching Mart to read, he brought color into his life and found his own place in the world.

Mick's inner world is revealed through a difficult struggle between hope and despair. His hopes are shaped, reshaped, and tested by the unfolding events. At first, he pins his hope on his brother Charlie's recovery; later, he hopes to enforce justice through acts of vandalism. Yet both hopes are ultimately dashed by the end of the story. As a result of these trials, Mick struggles to find his own path in life. He sincerely prays to God, placing his heartfelt hope in his brother's ability to stand on his own feet: "Make him not die". This plea is a silent cry meant to prevent being lost in the depths of despair. But Charlie dies. For the first time, Mick feels as if prayer is of no use: "The bad thing was he couldn't say any prayers about it, so there was no help from anywhere. After Charlie he knew that prayers might not work". This episode marks the point where Mick's hope is utterly shattered. It represents, in fact, the breaking of childlike trust and the onset of a psychological crisis. A void emerges in his inner world, and it is precisely this emptiness that drives him to seek justice. Mick is tormented by the cold-heartedness of Mr. O'Connell, among those responsible for Charlie's death. For this reason, he devises a plan with his friends to vandalize the cross. This act of vandalism is not merely anger or resentment—it is an expression of hope that justice might be restored. "They were only here for him, they were all trying to think of what to do for him, and because of Charlie". In this sentence, we can see the attention Mick receives from his friends and how they act as his support. The choice of which destructive act to carry out, and when to begin it, is left entirely to Mick. Yet this choice is not guided by inner confidence, but is made under the influence of pressure and

despair: "Mick knew when to give in... he had given permission. They would do it. He would". These sentences reflect Mick's surrender, the fading of his inner will, and actions shaped under peer pressure. He hopes to create change by releasing the pent-up anger within him, yet this proves to be a feeble attempt. Here, vandalism becomes a manifestation of inner despair. The characters within the group are noteworthy for embodying different personalities and fates: Deano—the bully—hesitates at nothing; Norry—given to smoking; and Sluggy—despite outward flaws, a perceptive boy: "It was Sluggy who said the obvious. He scarcely spoke, because of the hole in the roof of his mouth that made him sound like an idiot, which he definitely was not". Each of them reflects different layers of society. After the act of vandalism, Mick's expectation—that justice would be served—was not fulfilled; on that day, everything remained as it was: "The great brass cross was upright and shining as it caught the sun, the splayed figure unharmed". Here, the cross remaining unharmed signifies that Mick's actions were in vain, and he was unable to change anything: "Father O'Connell put out his hand, greeting them at the porch, and Mick had to take the yellow fingers but the look on the face was no different and nothing happened, nothing was said". They had knocked the cross down, yet the father said nothing—he silently reached out his hand. This silence was not punishment, but something even heavier than punishment. Behind this gesture, however, Mick's inner void comes into focus, clashing with his father's coldness and lack of affection. Mick's story shows the role of hope in personal development, and how its fading can lead to a sense of meaninglessness and depression in life. At first, he seeks salvation from God, and later tries to make change with his own hands—but neither works. Hope is the inner beacon that illuminates the path toward a goal. When it fades, a person loses their way. Mick experienced this many times as he grew, learning the weight of his mistakes.

Lizzi and Clara simply hoped for warmth from their mother, and for her to allow them to go for a walk on the beach. Every day, they waited to see if their mother would let them go: "They would not go to the beach. Then after all, they might. Might not... their hopes swung violently about... they had never built up any defences against such disappointments". Their mother even forbids them from saying the word sand: "They were not allowed to call 'The sands'". Finding an excuse was never difficult for their mother: "Too hot, too cold, too windy... or too crowded or too bleak". Yet despite all this, the little girls do not let the tiny lamp of hope inside them go out; they continue to long eagerly for a walk on the beach: "Only continued to hope and have

their hopes extinguished... clamoured to go".

When, at last, one day they are granted permission, they witness an unusual sight: their mother showing kindness to a child she does not know: "She began to probe at the blown sand... as if the handkerchief had worked a miracle". This image of a kind mother left such a strong impression on the girls' hearts that they began to imagine their own mother treating them with the same warmth: "Each tried to imagine some unimaginable change in their mother". But this hope proves fleeting. Their mother remains strict and emotionally distant. "She had turned her head. 'What are you doing there?' They had fled". Even as they grow up, these painful memories and the many shattered hopes continue to live with them. Even at their mother's funeral, they are still not free from the fears and prohibitions of the past, hesitating to express their feelings openly.

In Elizabeth's story, the protagonist does not pin her hopes on grand dreams or radical changes, but rather on stability, the unchanging nature of her familiar surroundings, calm, and safety. Yet her mother wanted Elizabeth to see the world, to travel, to step beyond the narrow confines of the restricted life she had imposed—almost as if she hoped to realize through her daughter the changes she herself had never achieved: "You should travel to other countries, in your years to come. There's a world beyond yourself you must break through to. Never forget it... It would be a disappointment to me, Elizabeth, were you not to, and a sad waste". This admonition creates an inner conflict within Elizabeth. In contrast to this advice, she feels herself as a dreamer, yet a girl who longs for stability: "She could not imagine her own future in this place called 'the world'; she only ever went down inside herself – her whole life looked inwards". For Elizabeth, it was not change but remaining in her familiar surroundings that mattered. The phrase "Her whole life looked inwards" reflects that she draws her strength not from the outside world, but from inner calm. She even hesitates to speak of new, adventurous opportunities: "She did not want to talk about it... 'It might not happen. There might not be the money. She prays, hopeful that her mother will recover and that the four of them can live together as a family once again: "She crouched back in her bunk against the wall, and prayed to God". Before her death, her mother spoke words that were crucial in helping Elizabeth redefine her path in life. The sea voyage, which hastened her mother's own death, ultimately became a gift for Elizabeth: "But it was for you to have this time. A week by the sea. That was all". Elizabeth, waking at dawn, comes to realize the following truth: "Now, she knew at once, in this cold dawn, that she must set herself aside,

as her mother had done". This is the discovery that became the foundation of Elizabeth's own life philosophy: her mother, throughout her life, suppressed her feelings, set aside her own desires, and lived putting others above herself. Yet this selflessness did not bring her happiness; it led instead to loneliness in quiet, and ultimately to an early death on a deserted beach. Elizabeth feared that such a life might be her inheritance as well, and for the first time, the girl who had never opposed her father quietly rebelled against her mother: "Go in, Elizabeth. The stove's not lit. you'll have to get the sticks' but still, for a long time, she didn't move, only sat, not able to let her grief out, and the truth in. not wanting the future to begin with this one, simple act, of obeying him". At first hoping for stability, Elizabeth now resolves to find her inner strength and to chart her own path in life. Rima's hope, meanwhile, initially takes shape through the way those around her treat her. She is growing up under her mother's excessive protection and control: "Dolly is over-protective". Although this protection hinders the girl from finding her own path, she primarily lives according to her mother's wishes, striving to please her. Her hope, too, is tied to not upsetting her mother and keeping her satisfied. A visit to her aunt's and uncle's household brought about significant emotional changes. She found it difficult to conceal her uncle's blindness, and at times was astonished by his unawareness of others' reactions: "The eyes never focused on her... She didn't understand how people were said not to know about the blindness". The philosophical conversations with her uncle further accelerated this process: "The voice in her head asked, What is life? Is it a waste of effort that birds migrate? What are light and darkness? When I am dead, will I know it?" This passage shows that Rima is guided not by the approval or praise of her mother, uncle, or aunt, but by reflection on life itself and an effort to understand its complex truths. On one of these days, her uncle gives her the opportunity to make her own choice: "She was to choose a present for herself... she was completely free to choose." This freedom forms the foundation of her new hope: the right to make her own decisions. Yet at the same time, she still wished for her choices to be approved by her mother: "Why were they here, to give her a present? How should she choose? How much is the cost? And what her mother would say bubbled inside her head." This episode shows that Rima's hope of 'pleasing my mother' has not yet faded: "Dolly has always been proud, Elsa once said. She understood what it meant now". During the process of choosing a gift, she comes to an entirely different realization: people actually know about her uncle's blindness: "So it was not true that people did not know. The blindness was obvious, she saw that

now". This discovery brings new insights and changes her approach to life. She now senses that she has grown up: "The next time she came here she would be older. She was already older. That was why he had bought her the brooch". Now she is recognized by her mother as independent, a slightly older girl. Yet this hope is short-lived: "And when she showed the brooch on the lapel of her brown coat, her mother's face pursed up in disapproval. The dog was not diamonds and the collar and eyes were not rubies. It was diamante only, and unsuitable to give to a child". Once her hope for her mother's approval is fulfilled, her potential for personal growth increases, as she gains experience in making decisions based on her own values and desires.

## DISCUSSION

Hill's fiction places children in hostile environments where hope becomes both a survival tool and a site of profound fragility. Kingshaw in *I'm the King of the Castle* embodies the desperate search for respite within a world governed by Edmund Hooper's cruelty. As Phelan (2005) notes in his narrative theory, focalization through child characters intensifies the affective stakes of hope and despair. Kingshaw's repeated attempts to forge peace—first with Hooper, later with Fielding—illustrate how children's hopes for friendship function as existential lifelines. Yet his ultimate suicide underlines what happens when these fragile hopes are consistently betrayed: the collapse of meaning itself.

Edmund Hooper, by contrast, exhibits a distorted hope centered on exclusive paternal attention. His aggression towards Kingshaw is not only cruelty but also the manifestation of an insecure child clinging to the hope of recognition, echoing psychoanalytic perspectives on rivalry and displacement (cf. Winnicott, *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World*, 1964).

In Hill's short stories, hope manifests in varied registers. James's devotion to teaching Mart May to read in *The Boy Who Taught the Beekeeper to Read* dramatizes what Viktor Frankl (1963) called "the will to meaning": the act of instilling hope in others as a means of constructing one's own purpose. Mick's shattered hopes in *Punishment* reveal the destructive trajectory of despair, where failed prayer and futile rebellion illustrate how hopelessness can culminate in moral disorientation. Elizabeth's inward-looking hopes for stability, contrasted with her mother's expansive aspirations, echo what developmental psychologists describe as the tension between dependency and individuation (cf. Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, 1980). Similarly, Lizzie and Clara's fragile hopes for maternal warmth, and Rima's shifting hopes for recognition and

autonomy, underscore how Hill employs hope as both narrative drive and psychological theme.

By situating these portraits within broader literary traditions—where, as Zipes (2002) argues, stories of childhood often mediate social anxieties—Hill's work emerges as a profound commentary on the precariousness of children's inner worlds. Hope is not simply optimism; it is the fragile beacon that sustains the possibility of becoming, even when circumstances conspire to extinguish it.

## **CONCLUSION**

Susan Hill's depictions of child characters illuminate the paradox of hope: it sustains life and identity yet, when betrayed, deepens despair and precipitates collapse. Kingshaw's tragic trajectory, Edmund's possessive longings, James's persistent devotion, Mick's shattered prayers, Elizabeth's inward turn, and the tentative yearnings of Lizzie, Clara, and Rima collectively illustrate the fragile, multifaceted role of hope in shaping childhood experience. As literary psychology reminds us, hope functions both as an inner resource and a relational construct, bound to recognition, trust, and care. Hill's fiction reveals that when hope is nurtured, it fosters resilience and growth; when crushed, it becomes the most devastating absence in a child's life.

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