Literary Worlds of Childhood

In memoriam
Professor Andrzej Zgorzelski

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Introduction

Literary Worlds of Childhood analyses texts written in English for children from the beginning of the eighteenth century to the twenty first. The book mostly focuses on British fiction though poetry is also glimpsed at and American books are occasionally considered. The aim is to capture generic and semantic dominants of the considered texts in order to delineate the understanding of the child and childhood inscribed in them. The project spans the boundaries of cultural and literary studies, which I do not treat as exclusive here. However, the literary aspect has definite priority in my study while the sphere of culture serves as a crucial background that impacts literary texts and is in turn modified by them. The metaphorical **worlds** in the title refer to the thematic areas I choose to explore as significant for the construction of the child and childhood. The book is divided into seven thematic chapters which examine the fictional child in the contexts of religion, education, nature, play, the supernatural, the past, and politics – though admittedly, I do not study the full extent of these thematic areas but select narrower aspects as ways of accessing each theme. Thus, for example, the chapter on religion focuses on Christianity, the spatial motif of the garden serves as a gateway to the discussion of nature, while the supernatural is approached through the figure of a ghost. I consider the selected thematic fields as important semiotic areas within culture that provide vital contexts for conceptualisations of the child and childhood. My choice of these particular themes reflects my own interests and preferences, and I am quite aware that it is possible to choose other thematic fields. The same remark may be made about the authors: though in many cases they represent the children's "classics" (present or past), they are rooted in my own reading fascinations – sometimes acquired already in my childhood (like E. Nesbit's books) and sometimes discovered only in adulthood (like *Harry Potter*).

Within the chapters as well as in their sequence in the book I proceed roughly chronologically (though in a rather meandering way), which allows to shed light on the changes that the understanding of the child and childhood has undergone in the span of over two centuries. The earliest of the analysed texts is a 1715 collection of religious hymns for children, Isaac Watts's *Divine and Moral Songs*, and the latest is Suzanne Collins's dystopian *Hunger Games*. In between I examine some writers from the eighteenth century, such as Anna Barbauld, Thomas Day, Sarah Fielding, and Mary Wollstonecraft, as well as nineteenth-century ones, beginning with Maria Edgeworth who published at the turn of the two centuries, and proceeding to Cecil Frances Alexander, Charles Dickens, Juliana Ewing, Lewis Carroll, Katherine Sinclair, Eleanor Sleath, and then to the Edwardian writers, like Frances Hodgson Burnett, Rudyard Kipling, E. Nesbit and A.A. Milne (somewhat beyond the proper dates of the period). The later twentieth century is mostly represented by David Almond, Lucy Boston, Nina Bawden, George Mackay Brown, Richard Carpenter, Suzanne Collins, Susan Cooper, Neil Gaiman, Penelope Lively, Lois Lowry, Mary Norton, Philippa Pearce, Kit Pearson, Terry Pratchett, J.K. Rowling, and Alison Uttley. Also, I occasionally venture beyond texts written especially for children and briefly consider Wordsworth's poems, Dickens's fiction, or nineteenth-century ghost stories. Admittedly, not all the authors listed here are treated with equal attention. Moreover, some texts are discussed in several chapters from various thematic and generic perspectives.

I begin with the early eighteenth century since it is seen by many scholars as the time of crucial changes in the attitudes to children and the understanding of childhood:

> […] the eighteenth century was certainly a transformative period in the history of childhood in the West. […] John Locke at one end of the century, William Wordsworth at the other, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau between them, all clearly deserve their prominent places in the standard histories of childhood. This is partly because their writing changed their contemporaries' understanding of the child, but perhaps more because they reflected changes which were already underway. Locke was the most influential writer to put on paper that the moral and intellectual development of children should be carefully nurtured, that children were not inherently sinful but were reasonable beings who needed to be understood on their own terms, and that children of different ages required different treatment. Rousseau's idea of the inherent innocence of children and their subsequent corruption within society was an even more important epistemological shift. Then the Romantic insistence that children had as much to teach adults as to learn from them was more radical still – even if it probably had much less effect on how children were actually treated (Grenby 2006: 313).

In addition to the other crucial cultural changes, the eighteenth century is also the time when what we now call children's literature is introduced. While obviously the children who happened to be literate read various texts throughout the earlier centuries, it was only in the eighteenth century that the concurrence of many cultural, social and economic changes resulted in the writing and publishing of books designed especially for children, who were recognised as an audience separate from the adults.[1] This association of literature for children with the eighteenth century is challenged by the scholars who assert that children always read for both instruction and amusement and present examples of the child's interactions with books from medieval and early modern times.[2] While studying texts read by children or adapted for them is certainly a legitimate position in relation to children's literature studies, my own choice is to follow numerous scholars in defining my area of interest as focused on texts purposefully written and published for children considered as a separate audience by both authors and publishers.

In her *Engines of Instruction, Mischief and Magic* Mary V. Jackson convincingly presents the Puritan roots of children's stories and poems and the conditions which enabled the Puritan impulse to continue in the eighteenth century. As I show in Chapter I, I entirely agree with tracing the beginnings of children's literature in the Puritan (or dissenting) views and writings with their heavy stress on religious and moral instruction. Even if didactic purposes were especially insistently articulated in early writings for children, they seem to be a constant feature of texts addressed to the young audiences – however differently they may be expressed in different periods. Didacticism points to utilitarian purposes of children's texts and introduces a question when – or even whether – children's books can be treated as belonging to the sphere of literature understood as literary art. While this is not a question admitting of an easy answer, I opt for a broad definition of literature as one of the semiotic systems of culture,[3] which includes a historically changing, wide variety of texts. The semiosphere of literature would have more or less rigorous procedures and institutions for determining inclusion or exclusion, and hierarchical positions of various texts – while all the rules, institutions and the very understanding of literature would be historically contingent and dependent on other semiotic

[1] Compare Margaret Kinnell's "Publications for Children (1700–1780)" for an informed account of the developments in children's publishing connected, as she claims, to the eighteenth-century population boom eventually culminating in the 1820s (1995: 29).

[2] Compare, for instance, Nicholas Orme's *Medieval Children* (2001) or Margaret Reeves's "Children's Literary Cultures in Early Modern England (1500–1740)" (2019: 219–240).

[3] My understanding of semiotics is rooted in the ideas of Yuri Lotman; compare, especially, his *Universe of the Mind. A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (1990).

systems in a given culture.[4] Moreover, literature is usually defined in reference to the "artistic value" (for instance, in *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, 1995: 830), which may be understood as an aesthetic quality – defined in my book as an additional organisation unique to a given text, superimposed on the natural language and called the "secondary modelling system" by Yuri Lotman or the "supercode" by Andrzej Zgorzelski.[5] While texts are also organised by generic rules and various other literary and cultural conventions (for example, stylistic rules or class and gender assumptions), it is the secondary modelling systems or supercodes that subsume linguistic, generic and cultural rules and are responsible for creating entirely novel equivalences of literary signs (words as well as motifs, characters, locations or events) and consequently for the creation of new meanings. It is my belief that artistic qualities may indeed be found in texts written for children – and thus one may look for unique patterns and new meanings in them. In my analyses I attempt to reconcile the focus on individual meanings of the analysed texts with disentangling cultural premises and implications of the constructions of the child and childhood in each text. I always give priority to literary analysis treated here as an indispensable first step for considering social conventions and cultural assumptions.

One important consequence emerging from my adoption of the supercode or the secondary modelling system as decisive for the semantics of a given text, concerns the fact that I treat the story worlds as models of invented worlds and not direct descriptions of the phenomenal world of the author and the reader. Every textual story world is unique but they can be considered from the broader perspective of more general categories. I will rely on the classification of literary world models proposed by Andrzej Zgorzelski and refer to, especially, mimetic, antimimetic, fantastic and exomimetic types of story worlds.[6] The mimetic category applies to texts where "the individual literary supercode is imposed […] upon the ethnical language unobtrusively" so that "this type of literature pretends that the fictional universe is a copy of the phenomenal one" (2004: 32). Antimimetic world models endow story worlds with additional magical or metaphysical dimensions

[4] My position here is similar to the one defined in Zohar Shavit's *Poetics of Children's Literature*: "[…] children's literature is part of the literary polysystem, […] it is a member of a stratified system in which the position of each member is determined by socioliterary constraints. Thus, it is an integral part of society's cultural life, and only as such, should it be analyzed" (1986: x).

[5] Compare Lotman's "The Place of Art Among Other Modelling Systems" (2011: 249–270) originally published in 1967, and Zgorzelski (1992: 10).

[6] Zgorzelski speaks of "supragenological types of fiction" (2004: 32) in the sense of certain categories of fiction above the level of genres. These categories are defined in terms of world models and embrace several genres.

and present them as "a true vision of the universe" (2004: 32). Fantastic models confront the mimetic order with one or more different models, in order to stress their strangeness, while exomimetic worlds speculate about possible models – by introducing the motif of dream, extrapolation or analogy – without confronting such models with the mimetic one within the text (2004: 32).

In my approaches to particular texts and to cultural systems they are rooted in, I employ narratological and semiotic tools as well as notions deriving from genological and reception studies. The analyses of particular texts not only refer to the elements of story worlds, such as the categories of character, space, and plot, but embrace the level of discourse with its various types of narrators, as well as strategies and techniques of narration. Moreover, I recognise the complexity of reception problems in relation to children's literature, which is written by adults more often than not, and usually provides a reception role not only for the child as an inexperienced reader but also for a more mature and competent reader. While these two reception stances may be conveniently labelled the addressee (of the narration) and the implied reader (or authorial audience), I recognise the fluid and gradable nature of reception where many intermediate levels of understanding are possible. When I refer to the reader, I usually mean the authorial audience unless I specify otherwise. Whenever the need arises, I define additional terms as they appear in the discussion of particular texts.

Another term essential to my analyses is genre. Since I give a more comprehensive account of my understanding of the term elsewhere (Węgrodzka 2018: 12–13), here I only want to emphasise that I treat genres as one of the flexible and changeable semiotic systems in the larger semiospheres of culture and literature. Though all genres presuppose the employment of conventional elements and rules, these may be more or less strict and binding. Moreover, as my analyses repeatedly indicate, texts are never generically pure but always involve underlying features of earlier genres and admixtures of elements of contemporary genres. Obviously, texts also contain non-systemic elements, which, however, may join or even change genre structures if they are taken up by other writers. An important aspect of genre in my employment of the term is that I do not use it for the sake of classification. I follow the scholars who believe that genres guide or even determine literary communication (e.g. Fowler 1982: 20; Malcolm 2000: 89) and thus direct the reader's understanding of a given text. However, in the case of children's literature, it needs to be remembered that authors often use additional communicative strategies to make up for the child-reader's limited literary and cultural competence, including knowledge of genres.

The semiotic and narratological tools in analysing children's texts indicate my choice of treating children's literature as a legitimate part of the semiosphere of

literature. I am aware of certain special features of this area of study (connected with the target audience or rather audiences), but it seems obvious to me that such qualities as several levels of narrative address or the target readers' limited cultural and literary competence characterise many texts beyond the realm of books for children (for instance, autodiegetic ironic narratives or popular fiction). I am also aware of children's texts performing didactic and socialising functions, but again, I do not perceive these as unique to children's literature: all texts (not only literary) are always underpinned by cultural presuppositions, and all authors have some more or less obvious agendas. So, I see the presence of didacticism as a matter of degree rather than an exclusive feature of children's literature. My understanding of culture as a semiosphere comprising vast numbers of other semiospheres in various configurations (Lotman 2005: 213–225) and expressive of diverse beliefs and attitudes, predisposes me against viewing children's literature as especially manipulative or even abusive of its helpless audience.[7] Clearly, however, in the case of children's texts, just as in any others, it is interesting to know what the underlying presuppositions may actually be. And this is exactly the gist of my project here. Aware of the culturally contingent nature of the understanding of the child,[8] I examine a number of children's texts from various periods and genres in order to reveal the conceptualisations of the child and childhood that underlie them. However, I have to add that I do not intend to display all the cultural presuppositions in the analysed texts: I do not, for example, deal with gender, class, or race and ethnicity presuppositions – not because I see them as uninteresting or irrelevant, but simply because one has to draw boundaries in one's research interests.

There are many books that link textual analyses and cultural contexts in attempting to elucidate various cultural notions, including the understanding of the child, as, for instance, Gillian Avery's *Nineteenth-century Children* (1965) or Grzegorz Leszczyński's *Kulturowy obraz dziecka i dzieciństwa w literaturze drugiej połowy XIX i XX w.* (2006), which discusses Polish literature. Deborah C. Thacker's and Jean Webb's *Introducing Children's Literature* (2002) links selected analyses of children's texts with particular cultural periods from Romanticism to Postmodernism. Much useful information can be garnered from histories of childhood, for example, by Philippe Aries's famous

[7] Compare Marah Gubar illuminating article "Revising the Seduction Paradigm: The Case of Ewing's *The Brownies*" (2002: 42–66). Moreover, as I contend in connection with Nesbit's fiction, children are capable of creative uses of texts, completely unexpected by their authors (Węgrodzka 2007: 25–58).

[8] The claim that childhood is a cultural construct was first – and very forcefully – made by Philippe Aries in his *Centuries of Childhood* (the French original was published in 1960). Compare also Alan Prout and Allison James, who claim: "The immaturity of children is a biological fact of life but the ways in which this immaturity is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture" (2014: 7).

(or notorious?) *Centuries of Childhood* (1979) or by such scholars as Colin Heywood or James Marten. There are also many illuminating edited volumes, for instance, *The History of Childhood* (1976, edited by Lloyd deMause) or *The Routledge History of Childhood in the Western World* (2013, edited by Paula S. Fass). Yet I do not attempt to reconstruct historical and social conditions. My project is predominantly literary, and I think it differs from similar ventures by being more closely linked to particular genres with their characteristic thematic and spatiotemporal contexts, plots and character roles, as well as narrative strategies. I perceive the authors' generic choices as important for the understanding of the child and childhood inscribed in a given text. That is why apart from a thematic focus, particular chapters also have their generic dominants. The first chapter, for instance, focuses on the genre of hymn, the second on early school stories, the third and fourth predominantly concern moral tales and domestic novels, the fifth chapter looks at the ghost story in its various guises, the sixth traces developments within the fantastic historical novel, and the last chapter considers utopias and dystopias for children and young adults. The generic dominants of the thematic chapters hopefully enhance the book's coherence, but I am painfully aware that they also limit the discussion and exclude many interesting texts from being considered (for instance, since I restrict the examination of the thematic area of religion to the poetic genre of hymn in the first chapter, I can give religious prose fiction only a very brief mention). In spite of limitations of the approach adopted here, it is to be hoped that the linking of the thematic and generic concerns together with a roughly chronological approach to literary and cultural developments allows to present a broad and varied – though certainly far from complete – picture of children's literature and its underlying concepts of the child and childhood in their historical alterations.

Some parts of this book are based on my previously published articles, which have been revised and considerably extended for the present purposes. All such earlier versions are carefully acknowledged in the footnotes accompanying relevant chapters or their parts and listed in the Bibliography.