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Agents of Reform?: Children's Literature and Philosophy

Karen L. McGavock

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Abstract Children's literature was first published in the eighteenth century at a time when the philosophical ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on education and childhood were being discussed. Ironically, however, the first generation of children's literature (by Maria Edgeworth *et al*) was incongruous with Rousseau's ideas since the works were didactic, constraining and demanded passive acceptance from their readers. This instigated a deficit or reductionist model to represent childhood and children's literature as simple and uncomplicated and led to children's literature being overlooked and its contribution to philosophical discussions being undermined. Although Rousseau advocates freeing the child to develop, he does not feel that reading fiction promotes child development, which is a weakness in an otherwise strong argument for educational reform. Yet, rather ironically, the second generation of children's writers, from Lewis Carroll onwards, more truly embraced Rousseau's broader philosophical ideas on education and childhood than their predecessors, encouraging and freeing readers to imagine, reflect and actively engage in ontological enquiry. The emphasis had changed with the child being embraced in education and society as active participant rather than passive or disengaged recipient. Works deemed to be seminal to the canon of children's literature such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* challenge readers to work through conflicts many of which can be identified retrospectively as exhibiting postmodern characteristics. By exploring moral and spiritual dilemmas in their writing, Carroll, Barrie and Lewis's works can be regarded as contributing to discussions on theodical postmodernism. The successes of *The Lord of the Rings* and Narnia films suggest that there is an interest in exploring moral dilemmas, fulfilling a need (perhaps for tolerance and understanding) in society at large. Children's literature has an almost divine power to restore, to repair and to heal, all characteristics of theodical postmodernism but differing from the more widely held conception of postmodernism which pulls apart, exacerbates and exposes. Children's literature therefore offers a healthy and constructive approach to working through moral dilemmas. In their deconstruction of childhood, these authors have brought children's literature closer to aspects of enquiry traditionally found in the domain of adult mainstream literature. As the boundaries between childhood and adulthood become more fluid, less

K. L. McGavock (✉)
School of Education, University of Dundee, Gardyne Road, Dundee DD5 1NY, UK
e-mail: k.l.mcgavock@dundee.ac.uk

certain, debate is centring around whether the canon of children's literature itself has become redundant or meaningless since there are no longer any restrictions on which subjects can be treated in children's literature. Despite the fact that children's literature clearly engages with difficult issues, it continues to be left out of the critical equation, not given serious attention, disregarded as simplistic and ignored in contemporary philosophical discussions concerning morality, postmodernism and the future of childhood. With children's literature coming closer to mainstream literature, and exhibiting prominent features of postmodernism, however, it is only a matter of time before philosophical discussions actively engage with children's literature and recognise its contribution to the resolution and reconciliation of ontological dilemmas. When this occurs, philosophy and children's literature will re-engage, enriching contemporary investigations of existence, ethics and knowledge and fruitfully developing thought in these areas. This paper aims to contribute to this process.

Keywords Children's literature · Childhood · Narnia · C.S. Lewis · J.M. Barrie · Peter Pan · J.K. Rowling · Harry Potter · Rousseau · Theodical · Postmodernism · Development

Children's literature was first published in the eighteenth century at a time when the philosophical ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on education and childhood were being discussed. In a departure from the earlier construction of childhood and its associations with original sin and constraint, Rousseau radically reconstructed childhood to assert the innate goodness of the child and his associations with freedom. At the same time, however, he constructed innocence and childhood synonymously. The notion of innocence is problematic because of the connotations this has with simplicity. Ironically, though philosophical debate instigated this change in the construction of childhood, because of the correlation between childhood, innocence and simplicity, children's literature came to be regarded as a simple medium far removed from philosophy dilemmas, ontological concerns and complexities. Tensions remained, however, within and between the old and new constructions of childhood to the extent that the modern conception of childhood began to deconstruct almost as soon as it was constructed. I argue that far from consolidating the modern construction of childhood, children's fiction actively deconstructs childhood and maps this process. Rousseau constructed contradictories in his depiction of the freedom of childhood but also the simplification of it. Yet I believe that children's fiction has a role to play in negotiating contradictions, in exploring the labyrinthine constructions of childhood and in contributing to discussions on the human condition. It is important to acknowledge difficulties and contradictions in relation to childhood and to consider the ways in which the image of the child has been manipulated.

The first generation of children's literature comprised of works such as *Moral Tales for Young People* by Edgeworth (1798) and *The Fairchild Family* by Sherwood (1818). These works were didactic moral primers, intended to prime the child reader, purge him or her of original sin and foster passive obedience. Kingsley (1862) followed this tradition in his publication of *The Water-Babies*, as did MacDonald (1872) in *The Princess and the Goblin*. Didactic writers adhered to the old construction of childhood, regarding children as empty vessels to be filled. This instigated a deficit or reductionist model representing childhood and children's literature as simple and uncomplicated and leading to children's literature being overlooked and its contribution to philosophical discussions undermined.

These writers ascribed a low status to childhood, regarding it as a means to the end of adulthood rather than as an end in itself. From its separation from adulthood in the eighteenth century consumer society, childhood became extrinsically valuable as a

commodity worth exploiting in the market place. A double image of the child was presented at this time, however, signifying the existence of double standards. The same society that was exploiting child chimney sweeps was also seeking to protect them. Children were industrialised by the very society that sought to protect them from "the excesses of Industrial societies" (Jenks 1996, p100). The child was regarded as a raw material. In *The Child in Time*, Ian McEwan satirises this in the form of a fictional *Authorised Childcare Handbook*, which states "more than coal, more even than nuclear power, children are our greatest resource" (McEwan 1987, p205). As a raw material, the child is malleable, benefiting from being knocked or moulded into shape, often physically, by adults. Childhood is defined and refined in them by this process. Children are *informed*, *reformed* and sometimes *deformed* through the construction of childhood that represents them. In reaction to the mechanisation of the new industrial society in the nineteenth-century, there was a concern that, "youth seems in danger of becoming a machine" (Sinclair quoted in Dusinberre 1999, p74). Instead of appreciating the intrinsic worth of childhood as advocated by Rousseau, regarding the child as an instrument for adult gain implies that childhood has an extrinsic purpose, a utility. This is far removed from the intrinsic worth of children evoked in the Romantic idealisation of the child as essence. At the same time, however, the Romantic child became important in the later eighteenth-century in the Factory Acts instigated by pioneers such as Robert Owen at New Lanark.

In 1908 The Children's Act was passed with the intention of protecting vulnerable children against the excesses of industrial societies, marking the end of a long process of progressive legislation. The Romantic construction of childhood as an ideal state represented the child as a civil saviour, symbolising redemption for society. Children came to be defined in terms of assets for the nation's future and childhood was transformed into human capital. Regarding children's fiction as a mechanism for social change seems to be a logical extension of this construction of the child as utility.

Indoctrinatory texts, such as those by Edgeworth and Sherwood, were incongruous with Rousseau's philosophy. They repressed rather than freed children to think beyond the parameters of convention, to occupy narrative spaces to imagine and reflect. Lewis Carroll is truer to the spirit of educational reformers such as Rousseau, than Sherwood, Edgeworth, and others who sought to repress children through their works. *Alice*, therefore, provides a refreshing alternative to didactic texts. Through subject and object reversals, Carroll parodies the way in which the Victorian industrial society constructed childhood as utility, as instrumental to the process of change and as an instrument through which social change can be brought about. Far from consolidating this conception of childhood as innocent and simple, the second generation of children's literature (from Lewis Carroll onwards) deconstructed this.[1] The radical approach of having his central child character, Alice, challenge adult authority at a time when children were generally seen and not heard perhaps explains why adults didn't enthusiastically receive *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* when it was first published. "In a survey of children's reading habits conducted in 1888, *Alice* does not feature at all in the popular polls. Nor did adults take to it at once" (Carpenter 1985, p68). Works such as Alice, more truly embraced Rousseau's ideas, encouraging and freeing readers to imagine, reflect and actively engage in ontological enquiry.

In his writing, Carroll began to reunite children's literature with its philosophical roots. The expert logician provided opportunities for children to explore philosophical dilemmas through the medium of children's fiction.

[1] These authors "have been almost the only important adults to recognise that many children are naturally intrigued by philosophical questions" (Matthews 1980, p56).

The majority of Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books are concerned with philosophical dilemmas. One of the most enduring contributions Carroll made in the books was to discussions on development; particularly in the way that he challenged the grounds on which development is necessarily linear. He even daringly suggests that moving forward may be regressive. It is worth considering whether the Alice that we first meet, when she falls asleep, is the same Alice as the one at the end of the book who wakes up. In other words, does Alice remain unchanged by her experiences in Wonderland, or does she actually change, and in which ways? My view is that not one, but several Alices are depicted in Wonderland, exposed as snapshots of her development over time, in much the same way that in photography, his alter-ego Dodgson used a delayed timing device to step into moments. This method can be described effectively through reference to the popular Victorian toy, the zoetrope, which allows an image to be spun very fast, so that continuity through time is perceived.

It is also exemplified to good effect in the Hatter's tea party (Carroll 1865, p64), in the Caucus Race (Carroll 1865, p26) and in the Red Queen's explanation to Alice that "*here* [...] it takes all the running *you* can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!" (Carroll 1872, p145). In each case, characters symbolise process, creating conditions of motion which are conducive to development. They are conduits – change occurs within and through them – and they are agents in reform. By representing child characters in this way, Carroll along with other second generation writers activate the child from centuries of dormancy.

The big difference between first and second-generation writers of children's literature is that second-generation writers do not sentimentalise childhood. Instead of consolidating childhood writers of classic children's fiction such as Carroll, J.M. Barrie and C.S. Lewis did not experience idyllic childhoods themselves since each of them lost close relatives at an early age. In his critical essay, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," Lewis (1952) responded morally to the challenge that children should not be exposed to nasty, violent or disturbing elements. He claims that he:

> suffered too much from night-fears himself in childhood to undervalue this objection. I would not wish to heat the fires of that private hell for any child. On the other hand, none of my fears came from children's books. (Lewis 1952 in Egoff et al. 1969, p215)

He draws our attention to the dangers of instilling pathological fears into the child's imagination, the phobias which cause unnecessary and untold emotional harm to the child, and explains that in presenting them with this kind of distasteful fantasy, one is making their outlook, "not brighter but darker" (Lewis 1952 in Egoff et al. 1969, p216). He also cogently asserts that:

> nothing will persuade me that children's books causes an ordinary child any kind or degree of fear beyond what it wants, and needs, to feel. For, of course, it wants to be a little frightened. (Lewis 1952 in Egoff et al. 1969, p216)

Lewis exposes the sentimental image of childhood as unrepresentative. He explicitly remarks that

> we must write for children out of those elements in our own imagination which we share with children. [...] The child as reader is neither to be patronised or idolized: we talk to him as man to man. (Lewis 1952 in Egoff et al. 1969, p219)

This led him to enquire, "why some writers talk as if care and worry were the special characteristics of adult life? It appears to me that there is more *atra cura* in an average schoolboy's week than in a grown man's average year" (Lewis 1955, p69).

It was this impulse that motivated him to create characters who confronted difficulties throughout various interior and exterior journeys.

Lewis also expressed concern about the uses of fiction and the confusion between storytelling and telling lies. He explained:

> I'm beginning to think that some people [...] just don't understand what fiction is. When you say what is natural with the intention of making people believe it, that's lying. (C. S. Lewis in Lewis 1966, p261).[2]

It seems that Jean-Jacques Rousseau misunderstood what fiction is. He was concerned that fiction would fill young people's heads with falsehoods and lies. Rousseau even described reading as the scourge of childhood since he felt it resulted in children talking about things of which they knew nothing.[3] Yet this is the one area in which I feel Rousseau contradicts himself. His failure to recognise the role that children's fiction plays in children's emotional, imaginative and intellectual development is surprising because it goes against Rousseau's philosophy of freeing the child to explore, albeit within carefully controlled parameters.[4] I feel that this view directly opposes the radical "progressive" pedagogy advocating freedom offered by Rousseau, which is far removed from the "repressive" pedagogy of constraint. Learning through exploration is best achieved through revealing rather than withholding information about the world and engagement with fiction can facilitate this. Rousseau's theories are still very influential today, continuing to underpin child-centred education, which is embedded in contemporary schooling.

Rousseau's (1762) work, *Emile or On Education* is essentially a work that details his philosophy of education. *Emile* is unique, written as part-novel, part-philosophical treatise. The book is written in the first person, with the narrator as the tutor, and describes his education of a pupil, Emile, from birth to adulthood. Having clearly outlined his reservations about the role of fiction in the development of young people, the only book he endorses is Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* because of the virtue of self-sufficiency it instils in the reader. Rousseau explains:

> I hate books. They only teach one to talk about what one does not know.[...] Since we absolutely must have books, there exists one which, to my taste, provides the most felicitous treatise on natural education. This book will be the first that my Emile will read. For a long time it will alone compose his whole library, and it will always hold a

[2] "Letter to a Lady," dated 2 February 1955.

[3] There is a danger, here, of homogenising children by constructing childhood in a sentimental way. The period of childhood spans a number of years. As Baggett points out, certain "books may not be suitable for 6-year-olds, but that doesn't mean they're not suitable for 9-year-olds (not to mention most adults of all ages)" (Baggett 2004 in Baggett and Klein, p171).

[4] Rousseau's notion of natural goodness is mediated by the inevitability of change towards 'civic society' and by the ambiguity of the very notion of nature. Bernadette Baker identifies that the concept of nature has at least six multiple-meanings:

> [. . .] as an original state [. . .], as untamed animal appetites without religious or moral reasoning [. . .], as matter and force [. . .], as uniform laws of motion [. . .], as that which is not made by humans [. . .], and as those potentials and dispositions that are revealed a posteriori by institutions Man founds. (Baker 2001, p233)

Rousseau strongly regards Nature as positive and the original state of the child to be good. He does, however, believe that society potentially corrupts individuals. Human Nature can, he argues, be reconstructed through education which substitutes and supplements original nature to nurture virtues such as compassion and extrapolate these latent tendencies from within. By making strange, we can see afresh and with this new vision, Rousseau argues, goodness in society can be realised and the goodness in our natures revealed.

> distinguished place there. [...] What, then, is this marvellous book? Is it Aristotle? Is it Pliny? [...] No. It is Robinson Crusoe. Robinson Crusoe on his island, alone, deprived of the assistance of his kind and the instruments of all the arts, providing nevertheless for his subsistence, for his preservation, and even procuring for himself a kind of well-being – this is an object interesting for every age. (Rousseau 1762, p184)

Interestingly Rousseau and Robert Owen both had reservations about 'artificial' book learning over 'natural' or experiential learning which is strange at a time when there was a significant rise in print culture and consumerism. Rousseau felt there should be no mediation between the child and experience. His view was that books mediated experience, dealing in abstractions. He regards book learning as 'false' learning. Only when a child is master of the natural world at around 11 years of age did Rousseau think he would be ready to read books when his ideas will not be complicated by those of others and he is less likely to be deceived. The ultimate goal of education, for Rousseau, was compassion with moral self-sufficiency. What Rousseau proposed was a combination of social education and cultural reform. He placed emphasis on the child being embraced in education and society as an active *participant* rather than passive or disengaged *recipient*. This culminated in the child being represented as an agent of reform, with change occurring within and through central characters. In this role, they were active catalysts rather than passive conduits.

In his creation of Alice, Lewis Carroll represents this change. Falling down the rabbit-hole results in Alice being in flux and in her suspended development. While she is down the rabbit hole, time stands still and when she is in motion, or is spinning, time is similarly static. Indeed we find the Sheep in *Through the Looking Glass* enquiring whether Alice is a child or a "teetotum" (Carroll 1872, p179) (a spinning top), since she is always in motion. Alice is a symptom of uncertain times; she is a symbol of process, development and motion. In this way, Carroll differs from his predecessors who ascribed the function of social regulator to the child. In her activity, she presages features of her representation that reflect the same concerns as postmodernism. Hope is therefore offered in her capacity to work through conflicts and so to develop.

Works deemed to be seminal to the canon of children's literature such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* challenge readers to work through conflicts many of which can be identified retrospectively as exhibiting postmodern characteristics such as genre eclecticism, the disintegration of traditional narrative structures, polyphony, intersubjectivity and metafiction.

By exploring moral and spiritual dilemmas in their writing, Carroll, Barrie and Lewis's works can be regarded as contributing to discussions on theodical postmodernism. My definition of "theodical postmodernism" that underpins the discussion is based on Jasper's (1992) as outlined in *The Study of Literature and Religion: An Introduction*. In his definition of the term "theodical," Jasper explains that

> what have these works, more or less contemporary, in common [is] unstable referentiality; of *Angst* and the individuation of death; above all, perhaps, texts acutely conscious of the brittle fabric of their textuality which is strained, linguistically and musically stretched to breaking, liminal. (Jasper 1992, pxv)

It seems to me that Jasper's term can be applied well to modern works of children's fiction in their exploration of conflicts such as existential dilemmas, the fear of time, death and absence of meaning and in their negotiation of the space between childhood and adulthood. Theodical postmodernism is a logical continuation of religious terminology applied to works that are "seminal" to and "canonised" as works for children.

Barrie's Peter Pan evokes further ontological concerns. His fear of death is connected to his resistance to fixing the text in print. The text is vertiginous; it is a doubling redoubled (like many of the characters in the play), which moves forward by doubling back in a non-linear way. It would appear that *Peter Pan* is characteristically postmodern. *Peter Pan* is the unstable text *par excellence*. The form of the text, the characters and the language of *Peter Pan* are unstable. This instability results in difficulties categorising Peter Pan. At one point in the text Captain Hook enquires, "Vegetable? Mineral? Animal? Boy?" (Barrie 1928, p122) in his pursuit to identify Peter Pan by type. Despite resisting categorisation, "when new lost children arrive at his underground home Peter finds new trees for them to go up and down by, and instead of fitting the tree to them he makes them fit the tree" (Barrie 1928, p119). In his desire to avoid categorization it seems Barrie rather hypocritically categorizes others. Form and reform are inextricably linked in postmodernism contributing to a new appreciation of childhood and prompting the role of children in society to be re-evaluated.

C.S. Lewis also provides readers with opportunities to work through conflicts which are often emotionally complex.[5] Through the process of writing, difficulties or conflicts can be revisited and worked through. Wholeness can be achieved through revisiting incomplete moments which have disrupted development. In a letter to his friend, Arthur Greeves, Lewis wrote, "ink is the great cure for all human ills, as I have found out long ago" (Lewis quoted in Gormley 1998, p44). It has an almost divine power to restore, to repair and to heal, characteristics of David Jasper's definition of theodical postmodernism but differing from the more widely held conception of postmodernism which pulls apart, exacerbates and exposes. By allowing Caspian, Eustace and Jill, at the end of *The Silver Chair*, to return to face the school bullies who had tormented them (Lewis 1953, p190) Lewis demonstrates ways in which re-entering moments in fiction can instigate positive change.

Lewis claims that the most enriching experiences are generated from a tension, from a diverse and incongruous amalgam of sensations and emotions that he refers to as, "a conflict of sensations without name" (Lewis 1955, p57) and resulted when he was "living [...] in a whirl of contradictions" (Lewis 1955, p89). In his writing, therefore, he offers scope for development through reconciling conflicts, harnessing the energy of the contrast by piecing together fragments of a previously shattered moment. Where an experience is incomplete and where there is not enough stability in which to develop, or from which to move on, a tension forms, and there are sufficient gaps in which to re-enter in an attempt to complete or to resolve the situation.

It is significant that when an interviewer from *The Christian Century* posed the question, "what books did most to shape your vocational attitude and your philosophy of life?", Lewis included *The Prelude* by William Wordsworth (Walmsley 1999, p62), since Wordsworth recollected childhood experiences in this poem in an attempt to re-experience and reappraise his formative years. Another of Wordsworth's (1815) epiphanic sonnets, "Surprised by Joy," was important in shaping his vocational attitude. It is no coincidence that Lewis chose "Surprised by Joy" as the title for his autobiography. Wordsworth communicates a negative epiphany in the poem, which is about the death of his daughter, Catharine. Transcendence is coupled with loss when the poet turns to his daughter to share his joy only to remember that she is dead, thus reawakening the painful sense of loss that had lain dormant for the duration of the verse. The pain of utterance is communicated in staccato exclamations and caesurae. This surge of emotion, which overwhelmed

[5]Gareth Matthews refers, in this regard, to the ways in which "children facing death find *Charlotte's Web* comforting. In this story, fears are expressed but we are reassured" (Matthews 1980, p95).

Wordsworth in his experience of a spiritual moment of great intensity, induced in him a higher level of understanding. For Lewis, reflection was essential to development.[6]

In *Surprised By Joy*, Lewis remarks, "it is not settled happiness but momentary joy that glorifies the past" (Lewis 1955, p5). This epiphany caused him to appreciate a, "certain vividness of the imagination and the affections" (Lewis 1955, p46). He refers to this awakening as an "administered shock" (Lewis 1955, p11), which he glimpsed not only in his life, but also in mediated form through fiction as a child. These flashes remained in his memory, and with every flash, his old worldview gave way to reveal a new worldview, the light of illumination breaking through the clouded confusion of the event. The first of these momentous occasions to shatter Lewis's security was an event which dealt the first stab: the death of his mother when he was only 10 years old.[7] His mother's death disrupted the "settled happiness" of his childhood (Lewis 1955, p15). His old worldview had been shattered so that only "stabs of Joy" (Lewis 1955, p15) were subsequently felt, the experiences thereafter were antithetical; joy was tinged by the constant reminder of pain and shattered fragments of the old Joy cut deeply as well as reminded.[8] Lewis repeats the phrase in *Prince Caspian* where "a tired-looking girl [...] looked out of the window and saw the divine revellers [...] and a stab of joy went through her heart" (Lewis 1951, p172). This seems an unusual way in which to describe the emotion of Joy. On each occasion, Joy was tinged with pain, harbouring the ever-present threat of withdrawal or injury.

There is sadness in Lewis's conviction that "Joy [...] must have the stab, the pang, the inconsolable longing" (Lewis 1955, p55). Its transience makes Joy "never a possession, always a desire for something longer ago or further away or still 'about to be'" (Lewis 1955, p59) rendering it elusive and, ironically, unrealisable. Here, Lewis is caught in a Lack Paradox where, "to have is to want and to want is to have" (Lewis 1955, p129). The imminent threat of withdrawal is deeply felt, penetrating Lewis's texts. The paradoxical relationship of joy and pain are fused, in this way, to harness the tension.

J.K. Rowling follows in this tradition of confronting and exploring difficulties in her *Harry Potter* novels (1997–). Characters' responses to irreversible situations, particularly concerning birth and death, ultimately strengthen them. Harry witnesses the death of his peer, Cedric Diggory, who he cannot save despite his best efforts and interventions and is again confronted with irreversibility when his godfather, Sirius Black dies. The irreversibility of death is similarly exposed in Harry's response to the "The Mirror of Erised" (Rowling 1997, p153). The Mirror of Erised, as Dumbledore explains, "shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts" (Rowling 1997, p157). Harry's heart-felt desire was to be united with his parents who were killed by Voldemort when he was a baby. Unlike other characters in the novels whose fears are represented in external physical terms, "when it comes to Harry, fear and all associated

[6]It was virtually inevitable that that philosophical themes would find expression in C. S. Lewis's novels when one discovers that not only did Lewis study and teach Philosophy but that he "believed he got the job at Magdalen because he was the only candidate who could teach both Philosophy and English, the combination the college wanted for the position" (Walls 2005 in Bassham & Walls, pxv).

[7]Lewis re-experiences and works through the loss of his mother in *The Magician's Nephew*. It is represented in the difficult choice Digory has to make between "obedience to Aslan's command and an action that may save the life of his dying mother" (Meilaender 1998, p7). He is tested and is ultimately rewarded for his obedience.

[8]In her commentary on Wordsworth's poem, "Surprised by Joy," Chapman writes, "the 'return' of the memory of loss produces a 'pang' second only to the experience of loss itself, an abject moment" (Chapman in Tigges (ed.), 1999, p122) which corresponds to Lewis's "stabs of Joy" (Lewis 1955, p15).

emotions are described powerfully from the inside" (Morris 2004 in Baggett and Klein (eds.), p11). Rowling poignantly evokes the moment Harry stood in front of the mirror:

> The Potters smiled and waved at Harry and he stared hungrily back at them, his hands pressed flat against the glass as though he was hoping to fall right through it and reach them. He had a powerful kind of ache inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness. (Rowling 1997, p143)

Harry wrestles with facticity. He cannot change the circumstances of his birth and it seems that he cannot change his destiny. He did not choose to be famous but is punished by the Dursleys for something he cannot change. Indeed, he has no option but to live with them in an environment where he is resented. Voldemort also punishes Harry for a power which is innate and which, as a baby, he could not control.

Each response by a character to an irreversible situation adjusts them better for adult life where unpleasant aspects cannot be removed by waving a magic wand or reversing time. As Tom Morris indicates, in the *Harry Potter* novels:

> [...] problems are rarely solved merely by the use of magic, but rather by intelligence, planning, courage, determination, persistence, resourcefulness, fidelity, friendliness, and many other qualities traditionally known by the great philosophers as virtues.[9] (Morris 2004 in Baggett and Klein (eds.), p10)

It is of course possible to contest Dumbledore's assertion that "it is our choices [...] that show what we truly are" (Rowling 1998, p245); instead in relation to adults, it is how we respond to irreversible events and situations that are fixed, which make us who we are. In this respect, adults develop through responding to situations that cannot always be controlled. This situation strongly occurs when Harry is bound by magical contract to compete in the Triwizard Cup even though he did not opt into the competition. This uneasy tension between what he is bound to and yet resists enriches the character as he strives to address both inner and outer conflicts.

In her novels, Rowling is not afraid to explore issues such as depression which her mother suffered from. She represents depression in the form of the Dementors who she describes as:

> among the foulest creatures that walk this earth. They infest the darkest, filthiest places, they glory in decay and despair, they drain peace, hope, and happiness out of the air around them. Even Muggles feel their presence, though they can't see them. Get too near a dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you. If it can, the dementor will feed on you long enough to reduce you to something like itself [...] soul-less and evil. You will be left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life. (Rowling 1999, p140)

When the dementors get near Harry, he can hear Voldemort murdering his mother. Through confronting difficult issues such as these, Rowling demonstrates the rich ways in which fiction can enhance the understanding and support the development of readers.

[9] Indeed, the Hogwarts School Houses are founded on virtuous principles: Gryffindor for bravery, Ravenclaw for cleverness, Hufflepuff for the diligent and Slytherin for the ambitious (Rowling 2000, p17). Hermione behaves virtuously by championing a moral cause in her creation of the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare (Rowling 2000) designed to defend the marginalised and to confront prejudice. In this way, Rowling's characters are not too far removed from the writer's own life working, at one stage, for Amnesty International.

Bettelheim (1976), writing in *The Uses of Enchantment*, believes that fairy tales offer narrative structures which facilitate the resolution of conflicts. He makes a distinction between modern children's fiction and fairy tales, believing that the former works do not allow resolution of conflicts to occur while the latter offer scope for archetypes to be separated in order for clear resolution to occur. Holding a specific perspective as a psychologist rather than a literary critic, Bettelheim condemns modern children's fiction. According to his hypothesis, modern children's stories avoid existential problems (Bettelheim 1976, p8) instead of confronting dilemmas or dealing with difficulties. Bettelheim argues that modern children's fiction "cheats the child of what he ought to gain from the experience of literature: access to deeper meaning, which is meaningful to him at his stage of development" (Bettelheim 1976, p4), characteristics which he firmly believed were present in fairy tales. There is a fundamental flaw in his argument, however, since many works of modern children's fiction have a basis in fairy tales.

Bettelheim believes that modern children's stories confuse the child reader's conception of what is real and what is not (concerns shared by Rousseau), since many of the boundaries are blurred. He particularly criticises modern children's stories because they end negatively and do not resolve problems positively, remaining fragmented and incomplete. It seems that Bettelheim constructs childhood as sentimental and believes that positive development can only occur when dilemmas have been happily resolved at the conclusion. Indeed, this leads Gareth Matthews to ask, very cogently, if "Bettelheim [...] recognised the role that stories can play in stimulating philosophical thinking in young children? The answer is 'No' – a resounding 'No.'" (Matthews 1980, p67). I share Matthews' concern that such a view encourages the condescension of children.[10] It is false to construct society in these terms, since children are implicated in a society in which problems are not always happily resolved, so contriving a happy ending is likely to appear less convincing and satisfying to the reader who is aware of this. In addition, I argue that even those fairy tales that Bettelheim believes have happy endings do not happily end in resolution. This is exemplified in *The Three Little Pigs*. Surely the third and only surviving little pig could not live happily ever after knowing his other two friends had perished! This is to contrive an artificial or false resolution. Children's writers such as Terry Pratchett, acknowledge the empowerment of children through granting child readers the power to alter the destiny of characters. Very often, the character and plot can be shaped through exchanges with children over the Internet. Narrative and existential tensions do not need to be resolved to forge a happy ending, rather the tensions can be harnessed and channelled. A positive result can be obtained through interaction with the reader, helping him/her to reconcile difficulties and live with situations that cannot so easily be resolved (offering scope for lifelong development).[11] This is the mark of a society that has grown up.

[10]The same charge can be levelled at Jean Piaget in his construction of cognitive theories of development regarding children. Just because children may not conceive of or structure the world as we adults do, does not mean that they are pre-moral beings incapable of working through ontological dilemmas common to humanity as a whole.

[11]Naturally inquisitive children have potentially a lot to gain from philosophical engagement and critical skills of enquiry. Recently, the BBC reported that 4 year olds are being taught philosophy in Clackmannanshire nurseries. Research by the University of Dundee suggests that exploring philosophical concepts through structured inter-active classroom classes "raises children's IQ by up to 6.5 points and improves their emotional intelligence," self-esteem and confidence. Furthermore, it is believed that "starting the subject early in life had a profound effect on young people's behaviour," enabling them "to move to a level where informed choice can be made" (BBC 2007).

Bettelheim claims that modern children's fiction generates only momentary pleasure, yet these fleeting glimpses are symptomatic of the postmodern society characterised as ever-changing, temporary, instamatic, transient and transitory. His argument is that modern children's stories merely allow readers to escape their difficult situations for a short time, by indulging their hopeless fantasies and providing a retreat from actual life, which halts rather than promotes positive development. Such a stance communicates an instructional and moral tone, which is condescending to readers of all ages. Bettelheim looks to J.R.R. Tolkien for reinforcement, listing four elements, which he believes are incremental to development through fiction and can be regarded as precursors to contemporary "bibliotherapy." They are: (1) fantasy, (2) recovery (from deep despair), (3) escape (from great danger) and (4) consolation (which he believes to be the most important of the four criteria) (Tolkien 1964 in Egoff et al. 1969).

Bettelheim is contemptuous of authors of modern children's stories such as Lewis Carroll who, he claims, evade moral responsibility. Contrary to Bettelheim, I believe that Carroll, Barrie, Lewis and Rowling approach their work from a moral standpoint, but realise that by disappearing in their text, they appear to evade responsibility. The disappearing author may even occupy an omniscient role within a theodical text.

Interestingly, Bettelheim's hypotheses have never been put to empirical test. Because of the proliferation of fiction for young people in all media, I believe it is worth revisiting Bettelheim and considering his theories in the light of these changes thirty years on.

Northrop Frye began his 1963 Massey lectures entitled *The Educated Imagination* by asking, "What good is the study of literature? Does it help us to think more clearly, or feel more sensitively, or live a better life?" The same questions might be asked of children's literature – What is the value and role of children's literature? Does it point to a solution? Does it rally for a cause? Does it provide a moral lesson? Does it prove a theory? Though it may by chance do any of these, it should not be bent to these purposes. For its most radical purpose is to remind us of ourselves (Susan Griffin). Children's literature has a tremendous cultural contribution to make in terms of helping society to make sense of itself. It helps all who engage with it to explore contradictions and complexities in rich and very fruitful ways. Should children's literature educate *and* entertain? I concur with Oscar Wilde in his remark that "The good we get from art is not what we learn from it; it is what we become through it' ('English Renaissance of Art,' 25)" (Pease 2004 in Roden (Ed), Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies, 2004, p111). Each second-generation writer of children's literature regarded fiction as a means of communicating complex ideas, often deep philosophical dilemmas, in a simple way. While the "stories are not themselves works of philosophy. What they do is raise, sometimes in gripping and unforgettable ways, intriguing questions" (Anacker 2005 in Bassham and Walls (eds.), p131) about existence and experience. These texts act as catalysts, engaging our moral imaginations, enabling us to "consider our decisions, our values, and our lives from fresh and different moral perspectives" (Anacker 2005 in Bassham and Walls (eds.), p130). The impetus to educate as well as to entertain informs the work of second-generation writers, setting them apart from their didactic predecessors. If children's literature is to have an educational function, is it to protect or prepare children to cope with life's difficulties? Surely it is better for children to be prepared rather than protected from the vagaries of life through sensitive explanation, through revealing truths in a reassuring way. Instead of encouraging readers to dwell on difficulties and to revisit them in a negative way, children's literature therefore offers a healthy and constructive approach to working through moral dilemmas.

As I bring this paper to a conclusion, I would like to put forward a few questions which might help to structure discussion. What is in the best interests of the child now or his or

her future adulthood? If we try to keep children innocent are we simply perpetuating the fantasy that adults have created thus deluding ourselves, and undermining the importance and complexities of childhood? Is children's literature or has it ever been written solely for children? Is it healthy for an aging society, where the majority of its members are over the age of 30, to be obsessed with youth culture and to perceive the best years of their lives to be firmly behind them? There has been a demographic reversal in British society since the nineteenth century. The population of England and Wales doubled between the 1801 and 1851 censuses and by 1861 nearly one third of the population was under the age of 15. These changes in the composition of society inevitably impact on the constructions of childhood and adulthood during this period. Children's literature reveals a lot about childhood, so it must also compositely reveal a lot about adulthood since the two categories were constructed in opposition to each other, forced apart to create a marketing niche in consumerist eighteenth century society. As a result, children's literature offers an interesting vantage point in which to survey the evolving relationship between childhood and adulthood. One way of mapping the changing role of adults from controllers to facilitators is through the role he or she assumes as narrator. This calls into question the reliability of the narrator, the moral framework in which he or she is writing and the presence or absence of a moral authority in their work.

It is hard for children's literature to shake off its moral inheritance. Because of the way in which children's literature and childhood are inextricably linked, an implicit moral dimension is evident. To a certain extent, children continue to be regarded as social regulators and children's literature continues to fulfil a moral and or spiritual function.

The successes of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Narnia* films suggest that there is an interest in exploring moral dilemmas through fiction, fulfilling a need perhaps for tolerance and understanding in society at large. Indeed over the past 20 years, there has been a tremendous surge of interest by literary scholars in Britain concerning the ethical import of writing, with some claiming this has culminated in a "crisis of ethics." Gayne Anacker indicates that:

> The moral vacuum created by the successive failure of these ethical theories has created the space in which moral relativism, moral scepticism, and other intellectual diseases have flourished. (Anacker 2005 in Bassham and Walls (eds.), p140)

This, she claims, has led:

> Many philosophers [...] to return to the moral approach of the ancient and medieval eras, when it was assumed that ethics is centrally concerned with character and virtue, not specific actions or duties. This approach to morality is known as virtue ethics, and one of the most remarkable developments in recent philosophy is the resurgence of this classic approach to morality. (Anacker 2005 in Bassham and Walls (eds.), p140)

Works of good quality children's literature do not "present us with a neatly packaged puzzle", often leading readers into areas of moral complexity, but instead they "give us the materials for raising a number of fascinating and important questions" (Matthews 2004 in Baggett and Klein (eds.), p182). These works do not promote moral relativism – good and virtuous characters within them do occasionally make mistakes but these mistakes do not define them since ultimately, as Aristotle reminds us, it is what they consistently do for the good that is important in moral terms (Baggett 2004 in Baggett and Klein (eds.), p164).

At the same time, critics have identified troubling connections between the legacy of modernist humanism, the movement of moralising liberalism and ethics for example the entanglement of the roots of literary criticism with the civilising mission carried out in

England's colonies through the supposedly moral influence of "good" English Literature. Similar questions may be asked regarding the civilising mission of the Canon of Children's Literature and the role of children's literature as a moralising agent. Andrew Motion, the Poet Laureate, along with other writers, was recently asked by the Royal Society of Literature to nominate his top 10 books for schoolchildren. Anthony Gardner of the RSL sought the recommendations after a discussion between the society and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority on the teaching of English in schools. The lists aimed to put together "a children's canon on which people might like to draw. [He explained that] By and large these are books that are classics and have stood the test of time." Interestingly this Canon comprised not only of those traditionally regarded as children's books such as Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* but also of those usually regarded as exclusively for adults such as James Joyce's *Ulysees*. My feeling, however, is that any kind of prescription of this kind is extremely problematic.

Over the centuries, from Plato in *The Republic* to Martha Nussbaum and Alasdair MacIntyre in more recent times, philosophers have recognised important connections between literature and morality, not least in the way that "stories can powerfully contribute to moral development" (Anacker 2005 in Bassham and Walls (eds.), p131) in children. Yet many have failed to extend this to also consider the significant contribution which children's literature makes to the moral development of adults. For far too long children's literature has remained on the periphery despite being central to our understanding of ourselves. Indeed I agree with the novelist Philip Pullman who believes that "children's literature bears the burden of dealing with big existential questions and complex moral dilemmas" (Pullman 2002 in Blake (ed.), p83). Children's literature therefore fills a need to explore these ontological dilemmas since many works of adult fiction do not provide the scope to do this. This goes some way towards explaining their popularity with adults.

Despite the fact that children's literature clearly engages with difficult issues, it continues to be left out of the critical equation, not given serious attention, disregarded as simplistic and ignored in contemporary philosophical discussions concerning morality, postmodernism and the future of childhood. It is unfortunate that children's literature does not feature in contemporary debates surrounding postmodernism since fluidity, flux and non-linearity penetrate and permeate children's fiction and could contribute to and enrich discussions in these areas. Recent studies of postmodern areas such as Neil Postman's *Death of Childhood* (Krips 1997, p45) and Burke's (1992) *Death and the Return of the Author* fail to attend to children's literature, even though childhood and the author share a conceptual connection since notions of childhood and notions of the author have arisen at the same time. Through their analyses, both critics inform and structure discussions surrounding these conflicts and really ought to refer to children's literature in their discussions leaving one important part of the dialogue or discussion muted. I do not propose that philosophers "try to turn these charming children's stories into something ponderous and pretentious" (Walls 2005 in Bassham and Walls (eds.), pxv). Instead, I encourage them to recognise the rich philosophical themes which run through these books and to give them serious attention so that they inform critical works exploring these ontological areas. In this way, I concur with Gareth Matthews in his "hope to help secure a place in the philosophy curriculum of the future for the philosophy of childhood as a genuine area of academic research, writing, and teaching" (Matthews 1980, p9).

From the moment that childhood was constructed in the eighteenth-century a gap formed between childhood and adulthood to the extent that, in her 1992 work, *The Case of Peter Pan: or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, Jacqueline Rose suggested that this gap was unbridgeable. Now, however, I believe that childhood and adulthood have gravitated so

close together that the gap between childhood and adulthood no longer exists and so no bridge is required. Childhood and adulthood are now so close together that the categories have, in fact, crossed-over and become almost indistinguishable. Culturally, we have now reached the critical point, described by Lewis Carroll as the place 'where the stream and river meet'" (Mavor 1996, p133, endnote 50) – that is where childhood and adulthood converge.

In their deconstruction of childhood, second-generation children's authors have brought children's literature closer to aspects of enquiry traditionally found in the domain of adult mainstream literature. As the boundaries between childhood and adulthood become more fluid, less certain, debate is centring around whether the canon of children's literature itself has become redundant or meaningless since there are no longer any restrictions on which subjects can be treated in children's literature.

With children's literature coming closer to mainstream literature, and exhibiting prominent features of postmodernism, it is only a matter of time before philosophical discussions actively engage with works of children's literature and recognise its contribution to the resolution and reconciliation of ontological dilemmas as agents of reform, instigating change. When this occurs, philosophy and children's literature will re-engage, enriching contemporary investigations of existence, ethics and knowledge and fruitfully developing thought in these areas. Through reflecting, connecting and projecting, this paper aims to have contributed to this process.

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