Hooded Fang and Jabberwock: The Richler-Carroll Connection

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Résumé: *Gary H. Paterson s'intéresse à l'inscription des codes sociaux dans les genres littéraires et, plus particulièrement, dans les contes de Mordecai Richler. Il montre comment cet auteur, dans* Jacob Two-Two et The Hooded Fang, *a parodié et renversé les stéréotypes du "méchant garçon" et de la "petite fille sage" tout en remettant en question les codes complexes, hérités du XIXe siècle, qui régissent le passage de l'enfance à l'âge adulte.*

When Mordecai Richler's *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang* appeared in 1975, critics voiced some strong and rather mixed reactions. Margaret Laurence praised it unstintingly as a "swift paced, zany, hilarious, serious, strange and moving book" (37) and noted that a key quality in this and other Richler writing was tenderness. Angela Huth, writing in *Spectator*, commented on the "Alice-like dreamy confusion" (774) of the events, while the *TLS* reviewer, David Rees, complained that the book would give children nightmares (376). This disparity of impressions might imply a difficulty on the part of the reviewer in placing the novel within the canon of a traditionally recognizable genre: in this respect, *Jacob Two-Two* is superficially misleading. One clue to the question of genre is the connection that two of the reviewers make between *Jacob Two-Two* and the dream/nightmare vision of the *Alice* books.

Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* have been regarded primarily as prototypes of nonsense. They also have been cited as relatively modern examples of dream vision, a narrative mode as old as *The Divine Comedy* and *Piers Ploughman* (Abrams 46). A third genre to which the *Alice* books belong and, at the same time, which they parody, is the so-called "good girl novel, typified by such works as Elizabeth Wetherell's *The Wide Wide World* (1850) and Charlotte Yonge's *The Daisy Chain* (1856) which were immensely popular when Carroll published *Alice in Wonderland* in 1865. These novels depicted the virtuous and sentimental lives of young heroines often faced with poverty, dying relatives and loneliness. The antidote to this misery was the arrival of a handsome and financially stable suitor with whom the "good girl" falls in love and lives happily ever after.[1]

Thomas Kent has explained how the overlapping of conventions and motifs in different genres may produce more complex or "hybrid genres"; yet, ultimately, one genre will emerge predominant (67). In *Huckleberry Finn*, for example, one can observe formulated conventions of "the dime novel, the

'Alger' novel, tragedy, picaresque, satire and Gothic" as well as the dominant genre, the "bad boy" story (69). Kent also indicates that a genre possesses not only "fixed, unchanging formal literary convention"—the "synchronic dimension," but also, through cultural change and development, the literary text becomes part of a larger, "diachronic" system. It is my intent to show that in combining the genres of nonsense, dream vision and "good girl" parody, the *Alice* books provide a model for the updated versions of nonsense, dream vision and "bad boy" story in the generically hybrid *Jacob Two-Two*. As well, it will be shown that nonsense is the predominant genre in each text and that, to a great extent, nonsense modifies and determines the other genres of dream vision and good girl/bad boy novel.

In his landmark study, Wim Tigges, having discussed and assessed twentieth-century criticism of nonsense, enumerates several themes and motifs noted by critics as being common to various nonsense texts (77-81). A comparison of these themes and motifs with reference to the *Alice* books and *Jacob Two-Two* will provide some illuminating connections between Carroll and Richler. A fondness for numbers is an aspect of nonsense which often functions as an expression of pseudo-logic or quasi-exactness. While numbers occur frequently in the *Alice* books—for example, the lessons that lessen each day to the twelfth in "The Mock Turtle's Story" (77), or the celebratory "And welcome Queen Alice with ninety-times-nine!" (200) in *Through the Looking Glass*—the constant presence of "twoness" in *Jacob Two-Two* becomes a fundamental structural principle and device of characterization. The double utterance of everything Jacob speaks throughout the novel, along with the catalogue of his other shortcomings (5), becomes an expression of Jacob's inadequacies in communicating. In the climactic confrontation with the Hooded Fang, however, Jacob scores a crucial triumph by duping the Fang into understanding that he has actually signified in speech the numbers one, three and sixteen, and ultimately converts the Fang into a "two-two" (60-63).

As well as numbers, the themes of time and space hold a prominent position in the world of nonsense. In *Alice in Wonderland*, time runs out for the White Rabbit, stands still and is personified for the Mad Hatter and, in *Through the Looking-Glass*, moves backwards. In the latter novel, Alice is confused by the rigidly logical statements of the White Queen about time:

> 'I'm sure I'll take *you* with pleasure!' the Queen said. 'Two pence a week, and jam every other day.'
>
> Alice couldn't help laughing, as she said 'I don't want you to hire me—and I don't care for jam.'
>
> 'It's very good jam,' said the Queen.
>
> 'Well, I don't want any *to-day*, at any rate.'
>
> 'You couldn't have it if you *did* want it,' the Queen said. 'The rule is, jam tomorrow and jam yesterday—but never jam *to-day*.'
>
> 'It *must* come sometimes to "jam to-day,"' Alice objected.
>
> 'No, it ca'n't,' said the Queen. 'It's jam every *other* day: to-day isn't any *other* day, you know.' (149-50)

In *Jacob Two-Two*, there is a strikingly close parallel in Jacob's difficulty in understanding the passage of time:

> Only two years ago,... Jacob Two-Two didn't even know what a day was, where yesterday had gone, and when tomorrow would come. Waking up one morning, he asked his mother, 'Is this tomorrow? Is this tomorrow?'
>
> 'No, darling, it's today.'
>
> 'But when you tucked me in at night, you said when I got up *this* day would be tomorrow. You promised! You promised!'
>
> 'That was yesterday.'
>
> 'You said it was today.'
>
> 'It was, and then *this* was going to be tomorrow.'
>
> 'But you just said this day is today too. You just said ...' (1-2)

The concept of space as linear movement from one point to another is a central concern for Alice, who decides in her conversation with the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*, that she doesn't much care where she goes "—so long as I get *somewhere*" (51). At the Mad Tea Party in the same volume, time and space are fused so that, because it is perpetually six o'clock and, in order to continue tea time forever, one must move around a table until, as Alice wonders, whatever happens when things get used up (58). The infinity of space suggested in Alice's descent down the rabbit hole and perhaps through earth itself is updated in Jacob's seemingly endless journey to Slimers' Isle which involves travel "by car, train, bus, canoe, helicopter, ox-cart, rickshaw, stilts, dinghy, skis, submarine, flying balloon, camel, raft, dogsled, roller skates, glider and motorcycle" (27).

The traditional dream vision usually consists of a journey with the narrator's being "led by a guide, human or animal" (Abrams 46). In *Alice in Wonderland*, the guide would appear to be the White Rabbit, but, unlike Dante's Vergil, the White Rabbit proves to be nonsensically ineffectual with its continual dartings in and out of the episodes, leaving Alice abandoned and even mistaking her for his maid (27). Jacob's "guides," the humanized Master Fish and Mistress Fowl, while whistling a "happy tune" (30), lead Jacob to the place of terror he has unconsciously been constructing since the beginning of the story.[2] Here, then, aspects of nonsense determine the conventions of the sub genre, dream vision.

Tigges aptly describes the element of identity in nonsense as "crucial" (78) and it is here as well that aspects of both dream vision and good girl/bad boy genres would appear to converge. Identity in nonsense is "highly insecure and erratic" (Tigges 78). The metamorphosis from baby to pig and pebbles to cakes is matched by the sudden change in the Duchess's temperament in *Alice in Wonderland* from chaotic sadist in Chapter 6 to sentimental ninny in Chapter 9. In *Through the Looking-Glass*, the Jabberwock also seems to have a two-sided nature. Although equipped with "jaws that bite," "claws that catch" and "eyes of flame," it, nevertheless, "[c]ame whiffling through the tulgey wood, / And burbled as it came" (118): scarcely a ferocious manoeuvre! Jacob learns that the Hooded Fang is not terrifying at all but, in fact, much more pathetic ("'I want my

mommy'" [85]) than Jacob could ever imagine himself to be. Towards the end, Jacob exclaims triumphantly, "'The Hooded Fang is childish.... He's one of us'" (84)

Connected also with the genre of dream vision is the function of dream in the character development and achievement of identity in both Alice and Jacob. Alice, whose identity is challenged the moment she descends the rabbit hole, learns to assert herself firmly by the time she confronts the Queen of Hearts with her surprisingly aggressive thrusts: "'Stuff and nonsense! ... I wo'n't! ... Who cares for you? ... You're nothing but a pack of cards!'" (97). In *Jacob Two-Two*, the dream acts as a kind of therapy in which Jacob overcomes some physical fears (such as prisons, snakes, crocodiles and the Hooded Fang) as well as his acute sense of inadequacy and consequent lack of self-esteem.

The genre of bad boy novels, discussed by Mary J. Harker in "Tweaking the Canon," encompasses the trait of "the sanctioned rebel." "The Bad Boy's naughtiness never seriously threatens society because he 'does not hold any values which are at root different from those of the community'" (Fetterley qtd. in Harker 24). In their own worlds, both Alice and Jacob are typically "good" girl and boy. Alice brings to Wonderland her above-ground set of values, typified by the piety of "How doth the little busy bee" (16), which would have received the heartiest approval of Charlotte Yonge. Similarly, Jacob politely tries to join in the activities of his family. In both cases, it is through their treatment by nonsensical figures of authority, that they are forced to rebel against the terror and violence of the respective dream world.[3]

It is here that nonsense imposes guilt on the otherwise "good" character and attempts to make both Alice and Jacob feel that they are, in fact, "bad." Alice, who has been belittled by the caterpillar, the Mad Hatter, March Hare, Duchess and Queen, must listen to a nonsensical reversal in the court scene: "'Sentence first—verdict afterwards'" (96). In a parallel situation, Jacob, who from the beginning has been made to feel guilty about his inadequacies, is reminded that "'in this court, as in life, little people are considered guilty, unless they can prove themselves innocent, which is just short of impossible'" (20). The good girl/bad boy genre is thus parodied in the achievement of identity with Alice and Jacob's becoming "sanctioned rebels" in their defiance of the nonsensical order.[4]

Another aspect of the theme of identity for both Alice and Jacob is the problem of size. Alice moves from being too short ("'I must be shutting up like a telescope'" [12]) to being grotesquely gigantic and is made to feel guilty for her inappropriate size by both the Pigeon, who accuses her of being a serpent, and the Caterpillar, who embarrasses her by stating angrily that three inches is not such a wretched height to be "rearing itself upright as it spoke (it was exactly three inches high)" (41). Jacob finds his short stature just another one of his deficiencies: "True, he was now allowed to sit in a big chair at the kitchen table, but what good was it when he could hardly see over his dinner plate and his feet didn't touch the floor but dangled foolishly" (3). Socially, he considers himself

"too little to help anybody" (27).

Following Sewell (101), Tigges also mentions the connection of food and identity. The cakes that change Alice's size so drastically (*Alice in Wonderland* 32) become a threat to her identity. Also baffling for her is the disconcertingly Mad Tea Party which does not provide wine as offered (*Alice in Wonderland* 54), but only endless cups of tea and miserably rude conversation. The equally frustrating banquet at the culmination of *Through the Looking-Glass* requires Alice to be introduced to the leg of mutton which is removed before she has a chance even to consider eating it. In *Jacob Two-Two*, the Slimers' Isle party menu includes crocodile steak or tart of death-watch beetle (46).

Games have been traditionally associated with nonsense[5] but in both *Alice* books, they seem to have a negative effect. Alice cannot understand the rules of either the Caucus Race or Wonderland Croquet. Similarly, Jacob is not allowed, at least in the frame, to join his brother and sister in their play and any semblance of game or entertainment in the dream, such as the ghoulish bedtime story, "Happy Night mare Hour" (40) is just another source of terror for him.[6]

The inability to join in games becomes a nonsensical reversal of the aspect of the "bad boy" genre in which the hero belongs to a gang. Alice, good girl that she is, feels alone, lonely and unaccepted through most of *Alice in Wonderland*[7] while for Jacob, it is only in the nonsensical dream vision that he gains acceptance—and leadership—among the Slimers and ultimate victory over the Hooded Fang.

The ritual of courtship has been noticed as fundamental to nonsense (Tigges 80) and corresponds to the romantic love/schoolboy crush of the good girl/bad boy genre. In nonsense, usually unlikely pairs are brought together (owl and pussycat, for example). In *Alice in Wonderland*, the only "courting" would seem to be the Duchess's repulsive over-affection for Alice (Ch. 9) and in *Through the Looking-Glass*, the sentimental episode between Alice and the White Knight (Ch. 8). In *Jacob Two-Two* there is the clearly incongruous relationship between the title characters. Jacob to Hooded Fang: "'I'm going to hug you and kiss you. I'm going to hug you and kiss you'" (68).

Related to rituals and courtship is the motif of the dance (Sewell 189-94). The "Lobster Quadrille" is the most obvious example in *Alice in Wonderland*, but notice that Alice does not join in. In preparation for her rebellious behaviour in the ensuing court scene, she rejects this form of socializing. While there is no formal dance in *Jacob Two-Two*, the Hooded Fang does a kind of wardance which is immediately repeated by Jacob: "The Hooded Fang bared his sharp, terrifying fangs. He growled. He grunted. He rolled his eyes. He leaped up and down" (67-68); the "dance" is clearly indicated in the illustration.

The connection between dream and nonsense has been recognized by such critics as Émile Cammaerts (32) and G.K. Chesterton (447) and, of course, one must return ultimately to Freud for theories of the unconscious and nonsense games (Freud Ch. 2 and 6). Because nonsense reverses reality in so many ways,

it begs us to question and reassess our familiar world to ask the question, "What is truth—dream or reality?" and this becomes an important theme in both *Through the Looking-Glass* and *Jacob Two-Two*. At the end of the former work, Carroll inquires, "Which do *you* think it was?" (208) when asking who dreamed it. Was Alice's dream real or was it all a figment of the Red King's imagination? Similarly, at the conclusion of *Jacob Two-Two*, Jacob's brother and sister bring him a Child Power uniform which (with the exception of the repeated "Child Power" emblazonment) is identical to the ones worn by Shapiro and O'Toole *in Jacob's dream*. The relation between dream and reality thus becomes the final thematic comment and question in each book.[8]

In combining the genres of nonsense, dream vision and good girl/bad boy story, both Carroll and Richler have created a hybrid construct clearly dominated by nonsense. The terrors and triumphs of Alice are matched and updated a hundred years later in the world of Jacob Two-Two, a world, like Alice's, as superficially orderly, but as essentially chaotic. In creating *Jacob Two-Two*, with its fog machines and supersonic bleepers, Mordecai Richler presents a fine study in the diachronic dimension of genre, but in the final analysis, both Hooded Fang and Jabberwock function within the same recognizable nonsensical tradition.

NOTES

1 For an accessible discussion of the "good girl" story, see Townsend, 76-89.

2 As minor, nonsensical "guides," the Fish-Footman and Frog-Footman, so close linguistically to Master Fish and Mistress Fowl, also impede Alice's entry into the Duchess's house.

3 Note the updating of the source of terror. The Queen of Hearts, a traditional playing card, is replaced in *Jacob Two-Two* with a professional wrestler on television who becomes the Hooded Fang.

4 For a similar parallel between Alice and Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, see my article, especially 62-63.

5 Kathleen Blake's study is comprehensive.

6 The association of games with toys is also negative: Mr. Fox is sabotaging the toystore in Regent Street.

7 The motif of tears and crying, which characterizes the sensitive "good girl," seen *ad nauseam* in Martha Finlay's *Elsie Dinsmore* (1867), is parodied by Alice's nonsensical pool of tears in *Alice in Wonderland*, Ch. 2.

8 Note also the similarity of dream within dream in both Carroll and Richler: in *Through the Looking-Glass*, "'If that there King was to wake,' added Tweedledum, 'you'd go out---bang!--just like a candle!'" (145) and "Jacob Two-Two did have pleasant dreams, in spite of his squalid surroundings" (43). As well, see Linda Shires' article, especially 267 and 272.

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