

Towards Understanding Coincidence in Children's Literature

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The child's love of coincidence has always amused adults and aroused their envy, but it has rarely been examined. If one were to select a random sampling of children's favourite books beginning with *Robinson Crusoe* and ending with *The Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil Frankweiller*, in most classics the common characteristic linking generation to generation would be coincidence—that strange concurrence (irrespective of time and place) of persons and events having no apparent connection. What four-year-old refuses to believe that Toby, Alexander and Linnet, who died hundreds of years ago in the Great Plague, still live and play with Tolly in the castle and gardens of Green Knowe (*The Children of Green Knowe*)? Or what fourteen-year-old is in the least insulted when that arch-contriver, Charles Dickens, manipulates his plot so that the black-hearted Compeyson will emerge as the mutual enemy of both Pip's friends, Magwitch and Miss Compeyson (*Great Expectations*)? From early childhood until early adolescence the young reader has an insatiable fascination with coincidence, a fascination that is not cribbed by the confines of geography. Montgomery, Mowat and Mitchell, as well as Defoe, Dickens, and Konigsberg, have succumbed to the all-powerful lure of coincidence.

The whole plot of *Anne of Green Gables*, for example, is set in motion by coincidence. By chance Mrs. Spencer's niece confuses the Cuthberts' message and, instead of a boy, the girl Anne is sent to Green Gables. In *Lost in the Barrens* the survival of Jamie and Awasin depends on coincidence—"finding" a valley which offers the boys protection, "finding" the caribou when they are hungry, and, finally, "finding" the huskies that bring them back to safety. Similarly, in *Who Has Seen the Wind* "young Ben" outstrips the ordinary restrictions of what is usual and always appears at the most critical moments in Brian MacMurray's development from childhood to adolescence. In both Montgomery and Mitchell the coincidental is strongly associated with the imaginative and the spiritual.

Whereas the adult has learned to belittle coincidence and hesitates even to discuss it for fear of being thought superstitious (or, what is worse, naive), the child remains a child so long as he accepts the coincidental as normal. And in the incalculable permutations and combinations of men and events, who is to say the child's view is merely simple? When the five-year-old asks: "Mommy, could you have taken the wrong baby home from the hospital when I was small?" the parent might be alarmed at the question but not the child. His is a world in which anything can happen. The child is much more willing than the adult to accept his inability to control those secret processes underlying

coincidence. By its very nature coincidence is unpredictable, scornful of the laws of space and time. Consequently, the child's literature treats logic contumeliously. Thus, of the hundreds of wild dogs on the *Island of the Blue Dolphin*, Karana is able to find one — Rontu Aru, the very son of her dead, former companion, Rontu I. Similarly, Velvet Brown, lover of horses, owner of one—an old nag—not only wins the Piebald in a lottery but is deeded five more horses by Mr. Cellini who, immediately after signing the deed, shoots himself (*National Velvet*). Again, it is possible, but highly improbable, that a robin could show Mary Lennox the key to the gate of *The Secret Garden*.

Coincidence, ignoring the imprisoning effects of a mathematical treatment of time and space, is the refuge of the child until he can bear the full demands of the occidental "real" world. As an innocent the child has not yet learned that adult speech may be an instrument of disguise. To the child the word is *always* revelation. That is why, through his literature, the word can transport him into another world of inexplicable magnificence. Enter a wardrobe, and one can be in the kingdom of Narnia with a magic sword to slay the enemies of Aslan the Almighty Lion (*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*). In C.S. Lewis's world, time ceases to have any meaning; it is always winter there, but Christmas never comes.

Much of the animal literature favoured by children leans heavily on time obliterating coincidence. *Sounder*, eager to share his master's fate, is maimed by a gun shot wound when the sharecropper is jailed for stealing food. After an absence of seven years, the master returns, but he, too, is now deformed by a dynamite explosion sustained while working in a prison chain gang. Man and dog die within two weeks of each other—defying time to separate them in death as it has separated them in life.

In *The Borrowers*, on the other hand, Mary Norton is more concerned with eliminating the strictures of space, so she creates the finger high characters of Hominy, Pod and Arietty to dwell in a miniature world under the clock in an old English country house. Lewis Carroll had already challenged the laws of space for children when he depicted little Alice growing so big that she could fill a house, and Carl Jung has demonstrated how the child's preoccupation with the limitations of space is reflected in the infantile dream motif of growing infinitely small or big, or being transformed from one thing to another as is so frequently noted in the fairy tale.¹

Unconsciously realizing that human experience will suck him into a spiralling vortex of contradictions, the child clings to coincidence which allows the highly improbable to be possible. The child's view of reality is essentially that of Thomas Carlyle, who warns the adult readers of *Sartor Resartus* to avoid too rigid a subservience to time and space:

Admit Space and Time to their due rank
as Forms of Thought; nay even, if thou
wilt, to their quite undue rank of Realities:
and consider, then, with thyself how their
thin disguises hide from us the brightest
God-effulgences!²

The adult is forced by necessity to accept a universe limited by the

exigencies of time and space, whereas the child may still cling to a totally unlimited universe, a world wherein there is no cleavage between a consciousness, marshalled by time and space, and the unconscious world of instinct. The child has not yet experienced the "fall" from the grace of unity. The whole process of maturation rests on man's adaptation to the invisible determinants of unconscious instinct, and for the child this separation (symbolized by Jung in the archetypes of the fall of the angels and that of our first parents³) has not yet taken place. Understandably, then, to become adult is not without its discomfort, for the child must relinquish a certain unity he once shared with the universe.

From the earliest moment of pre-natal existence, the child is one with his environment. Piaget's teaching in particular has emphasized that the child does not distinguish between ego and environment. The child does not concentrate on himself as a special entity. He knows nothing of the world apart from his immediate consciousness and cannot distinguish himself from it. He enters the world equipped with a few reflexes such as kicking and sucking, and all his early movements are uncoordinated and without purpose. But sometime after his first month on earth, chance enters. Accidentally his fist finds his mouth. "For him," says Piaget, "the world is essentially a thing to be sucked."⁴ By chance, by accident, the child is introduced into the second stage of "acquired adaptation". The chance meeting of hand and fist is the child's first experience of coincidence. Coincidence becomes part of the ordinary; it eliminates the distinction between what is ordinary and what is extraordinary. The whole growth of intelligence, according to Piaget, depends on the child's relinquishing his egocentrism. The child assumes that the world is made for him; he does not concentrate on himself as a separate entity. Rather he is in a state of mental symbiosis—a comforting extension of the biological symbiosis of the womb. Maturation demands that the child begin to accept himself as an entity, and the child receives his greatest counselling on the rites of passage from childhood to adulthood through his myths and fairy tales.

From their earliest years children are attracted by the fabulous, and they are much more disposed than the adult to give comedy a higher place than tragedy. The happy ending to fairy tales, beloved by children, represents a transcendence and a return to a oneness with the universe. True, the hero or heroine in the fairy tale must follow the universal pattern of every hero. He leaves his home and ventures over dark waters or a darkling plain whereon he encounters the enemy—dragon, serpent, gnome—all embodiments of evil. There is the essential trial and conflict which sometimes ends in death, but the death does not destroy the ultimate victory of the hero who is taken to another existence. Having descended to the nadir, the hero undergoes an apotheosis which in some way expands his consciousness and his being. There is usually a type of resurrection when the hero brings back to earth an elixir or a message which restores the world. There is always some at-one-ment wherein universal unity is restored. In all cases the child's reliance on the heroic in fairy tales supports the ego's rise to effective consciousness and represents the child's or the adolescent's attempts to free itself from the oppression of parental expectations and to become individual.⁵

Coinciding with the child's attempts to attain individuality is a strong desire to cling to the safety of his oneness with the universe. If the world is made for the child, the world shares his feelings and desires. This sense of oneness with the world leads, naturally enough, to the child's assumption of magic omnipotence. He can control the world. The child's very rhymes record this belief: "Rain, rain, go away. Come some other washing day;" or "Step on a crack and you'll break the devil's back." Egocentrism makes the child view the world of nature as something that is alive. Because the parent recognizes "animism" (Piaget, 25-27) in his offspring, he'll cooperate with the child's view by spanking the "naughty table that hit baby". The last vestiges of animism are not relinquished until the child approaches adolescence, and until that time he delights in personable animals like Winnie and Piglet (*Winnie the Pooh*), Water Rat, Mole, and Mr. Toad (*The Wind in the Willows*), and sculpted bushes that have a life of their own (*The Children of Green Knowe*).

Another insight offered by Piaget into the child's relinquishing of egocentrism is that the child's reasoning depends not on logic but on contiguity. Objects and events that occur together are assumed to have a causal relationship. The child is only feeling his way toward logical thinking. His mental life is still unadapted to the reality of the world. It is egocentric, illogical, and delightfully distorted. Perhaps that is why *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is such a classic in children's literature. For the first time the child's mind, not the adult's, was delineated, and adults were taught not to see children as reflections of themselves, but as little people whose thought-life is still unaccommodated to the reality of the visible world.

First, books of fairy tales emphasizing magic, then, books about young people emphasizing chance and coincidence, help the child feel his way towards a "logical" world. Children are in a "boundary" situation - what Mircea Eliade describes as one which "man discovers in becoming conscious of his place in the universe."⁶ During the years from one to eleven the child is becoming increasingly aware of his entrance into adulthood, of his real place in historical time, and to help him over the boundary of childhood into adulthood he relies on coincidence - space, time, and cause - defying coincidence.

In every sense the coincidences occurring in children's literature are meaningful. They are not merely meaningless random groupings. The robin in *The Secret Garden* who shows Mary Lennox the key to the garden acts not by chance alone. Mary's subsequent weeding of the garden parallels the weeding out of her own faults of selfish egotism. The growth of the garden into a place of beauty symbolizes Mary's growth in her ability to love her fellow men. Meaningful coincidences seem to rest on archetypal foundations—a concept which Jung labeled "synchronicity".⁷ If the robin happened to chirp strenuously and Mary stopped to find a key that fit no lock, the coincidence of events would have no meaning. But the facts that the key unlocked the gate to Mrs. Craven's garden and that through this garden Mary has come to a heightened state of self-awareness give the coincidence a richer meaning because of the symbolic overtones society gives to "key" and "garden". Whenever Jung observed meaningful coincidences, it seemed that there was an archetype activated in the unconscious of the

individual concerned, and the underlying archetype was manifested simultaneously in inner and outer events. The common denominator is a symbolically expressed message—in this case about growth. What Jung insists upon, and what children's literature illustrates, is that an inner unconscious knowledge links a physical event with a psychic condition so that a certain event which appears coincidental becomes psychically meaningful. In the story *A Secret Garden* there is a vital necessity for Mary Lennox to know the sour state of her own personality, just as, in *Island of the Blue Dolphin*, there is a necessity for Karana to realize, through the companionship of Rontu I and Rontu Aru, that animal companionship is not enough. Man needs man. So, too, when Anne Shirley dyes her hair, the resultant colour is green—another instance of meaningful coincidence signifying Anne's growing involvement with Green Gables and Matthew and Marilla Cuthbert.

Meaningful coincidences also explain why comedy lies closer to the child's view of reality than tragedy. Meaningful coincidences are manifestations of an all-embracing providence or a universal ordering of events. In the midst of the materialistic, positivist nineteenth-century, Schopenhauer, who had a decisive influence on Jung, wrote:

Coincidence is the simultaneous occurrence of causally unconnected events. . . . If we visualize each causal chain progressing in time as a meridian on the globe, then we may represent simultaneous events by the parallel circles of latitude. . . .

All the events in a man's life would accordingly stand in two fundamentally different kinds of connection: firstly, in the objective, causal connection of the natural process; secondly, in a subjective connection which exists only in relation to the individual who experiences it, and which is thus as subjective as his own dreams, whose unfolding content is necessarily determined, but in the manner in which the scenes in a play are determined by the poet's plot. That both kinds of connection exist simultaneously, and the self-same event, although a link in two totally different chains, nevertheless falls into place in both, so that the fate of one individual invariably fits the fate of the other, and each is the hero of his own drama while simultaneously figuring in a drama foreign to him - this is something that surpasses our powers of comprehension, and can only be conceived as possible by virtue of the most wonderful pre-established harmony. . . . It is a great dream dreamt

by that single entity, the Will to Life:
but in such a way that all his personae
must participate in it. Thus everything
is interrelated and mutually attuned.⁸

The unity envisaged by Schopenhauer relates coincidence to a universal plan, and the child's ability to accept coincidental events as little mystery plays pointing to one central mystery of unity is a most compelling vision of reality. Wasn't this the essence of Blake's dream of flying, captured in his painting "O How I Dreamt of Things Impossible"?⁹ Or, is not the unity of all things the true "kingdom of heaven" promised to those who "convert" to the view of reality possessed by "little children" (Matt: 18)?

Like the gospel's Nicodemus, however, most adults fail to understand what is meant by being "born again". They consider it preposterously illogical to break through the laws of space and time and enter again into the "womb" (John: 3), but at a time in human history when the problems of aging hold so much repugnance, it is therapeutic as well as instructive to explore the child's reliance on coincidence.

Ours is a singular age which ignores the wisdom both of the very old and the very young. A valid part of one's preparation for old age might well be a reconsideration of those inexplicable inner drives which enforce the expansion of life in the young and the contraction of life in the old. For the young and the old are curiously linked if we accept Jung's teaching. In old age we descend again into that condition where we once more, as in childhood, become something of a problem for others. Both the very young and the very old are submissive to unconscious psychic happenings. Because the young child's mind is more easily discernible than the aged adult's, it should be re-examined with more respect because it holds out the promise of a supramundane goal which makes it possible for failing man to live out the last stage of life with as much purpose and excitement as the first. And, if the very young and the very old are necessarily limited in their *activities*, it might be well to recall Patrick White's observation that the most crippling defect in modern man is his twofold worship of action and intellect. Yet spiritual faith, the prerogative of the child, "will propagate the world after each attempt by the men of action to destroy it."¹⁰ The child's-eye view of reality with its trust of meaningful coincidence is not to be ignored, least of all contemned.

NOTES

¹Carl G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1964), p.53.

²Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus and Selected Prose*, with an Introduction by Herbert Sussman (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p.240.

³Carl Jung, "The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche", *The Collected Works of Carl G. Jung*, translated by R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), Vol. 8, p. 157.

- ⁴Jean Piaget, *Six Psychological Studies* (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 10.
- ⁵Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, p. 126.
- ⁶Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1952).p. 34
- ⁷Jung, "The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche", *Collected Works*, Vol. 8, pp. 520-531.
- ⁸Quoted by Arthur Koestler in *The Roots of Coincidence* (London: Hutchinson & Co., Ltd., 1972), pp. 107-108. It was Mr. Koestler's book which led me to investigate coincidence in children's literature.
- ⁹Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, p. 54.
- ¹⁰Patrick White, *Riders in the Chariot* (New York: Viking Press, 1961), p. 202.

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