

Adults, Children, Didacticism, and The Modes in Children's Literature

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"Children's books are, in one sense, an odd product. They are written *by* adults *for* adults *for* children. The parent as middleman is inescapable."¹ This statement, made in a recent article by John Lownsbrough, points to at least one of the difficulties of the writer of children's literature. Adults-as-artists are appealing to the aesthetic (and other) sensibilities of adults-as-parents in order that a child's consciousness might be broadened by a meaningful literary experience. But where does the child fit in? What does *he* want to read? And, most important of all for the sale of children's books, how does the writer for children create a work of art which can stand on its own feet aesthetically and appeal to children as well as their parents? These questions raise the great dichotomy in the creation of children's literature: the role of adults and the role of children. What do adults want children to learn through reading?

Survey histories of children's literature have emphasised the almost purely didactic quality of books written before Carroll and Lear. The urge to teach – or preach – to children had been, it seems, the primary function of art in both Hellenic and Hebraic cultures.² Even Perrault's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* has the predictable tag, *avec des moralités*, attached to some of the best-loved – and entertaining – children's tales of all time. And yet, as Townsend suggests, if didacticism (or the unabashed intrusion of the author to present his sentimental lesson directly) slipped away with *Treasure Island* and the *Alice* books, then "it has come back in . . . wearing modern dress (smart values) and we do not even recognize it."³

What are these "smart values," and how are they made attractive to a generation of children jaded by the sensationalism of TV, the cheap pulp biographies of current "superstars", or the "books" of cinematic horrors? The question is not easily answered, for a number of reasons. Firstly, values seem to change drastically from one decade to the next. The "new permissiveness" in morality among adults has obviously had its effects on attitudes toward freedom and social relations among children: the Judy Blume books would have been unthinkable twenty-five years ago. Secondly, the values being "taught" have been proposed by an adult society for the "edification" of children brought up in a complex and fragmented world, a world in which the generation gap has never been wider and the values of the adult society are too easily dismissed as stodgy or old-fashioned. Finally, there is bound to be disagreement among the adult-artist-educators as to what the important values for children are. What is acceptable to one author may be viewed as radically harmful or even destructive by another.

Granted that children's literature has not yet reached the condition of *l'art pour l'art*, it is still, then, a matter of some significance to discover just what instruction is going on. In doing so, it might seem regressive to use the Victorian era as a hunting ground for basic conceptions of the function of children's literature in the late twentieth century. And yet, if we examine quite closely some remarks made by the novelist, George Eliot, about art and didacticism, I think it is possible to find some helpful and relevant insights.⁴

George Eliot believed that art has both a "social" and a "moral" function. Socially, it should expand our consciousness so that we might learn how other people live and work.⁵ Morally, art should extend our emotions or sympathies beyond ourselves to the other members of society, so that we might achieve a kind of renunciation of our selfish motives for conduct and an enrichment of our emotional life through linking ourselves sympathetically with others.⁶

Although all this sounds typically Victorian and "moral" and a highly unlikely source of attraction in books for either adults or children, the fundamental basis for instruction in children's literature is there: realization and understanding of the self and others, and the achievement of sympathetic bonds with others. This theme seems to be at the heart of any learning process that can be derived from a variety of books for children. It has to do with a child finding self-worth in situations challenging his identity; it concerns the problem of a child becoming accepted by his peers; and, finally, it is at the heart of discovering what the fundamentals of maturity are all about in a constantly changing and often terrifying world.

The tension between the child and the adult world is one of the most prominent in children's literature and one that can ultimately shed light on the vision of the novelist. Whether the child is exalted as hero or whether he is made to feel the authority of the superior adult world is, of course, going to say a great deal about the way the author feels about children in the first place. And yet, if instruction is going to be present in any way in the story, there must be some coming to terms between the worlds of adult and child. How can the writer simultaneously teach and amuse through the setting up of this critical confrontation of adult and child?

In many children's books, the adult world is severely separated from the child's. Adults are seen as stern and aloof or as ineffectual and mildly boring characters, who simply remind the child of his responsibilities and discipline him or else reward him for his "goodness." Otherwise, they move on another plane of life, quite irrelevant to the child's. In contrast, the children (as in the E. Nesbit books, for example) are often dynamic, self-appointed schemers, unacknowledged saviours of the world (or at least of the fortunes of the Bastable family), and they have almost inordinate amounts of fun in the process of being simply what they are: well-adjusted, healthy, and imaginative children.

To bridge the gap between adult and child “worlds,” the “sympathetic adult” (the character who is outside the child’s world, yet understands and sympathises with him) is often used by novelists. Albert-next-door’s uncle in the E. Nesbit series, Dr. Dorian in *Charlotte’s Web*, Matthew Cuthbert in *Anne of Green Gables*, or Ole Golly in *Harriet the Spy*, all reduce that barrier – so necessary to break down – between the austerity of the adult world and the child reader.⁷ But while there are many devices that are at the novelist’s disposal (the role of sympathetic character is only one), I will focus on the functions of various *modes* of literature for children in establishing this child-adult tension while also presenting the values envisioned by the author in an attractive and exciting manner.

It is my contention that if we accept the notion that the modes of nonsense, fantasy, satire, and realism operate on two different levels, then, in children’s literature, the child-adult relationship revealed in the tension between levels is going to have special significance in unfolding the moral vision of the novelist.

In nonsense, for instance, there is (a) the level of everyday reality, “normality,” and (b) the level of distorted, exaggerated or reversed “nonsensical” reality;⁸ in fantasy there is (a) everyday reality and (b) the imagined, created reality of what Tolkien refers to as “Secondary World”.⁹ Satire provides the literary artist with a means of making fun of everyday reality. In doing so, he can distort or caricature reality and consequently create a *new* world or reality: Swifts’ Lilliput is the obvious example. Realism does not so much present another world as give us *so much* reality that we can suggest that there is one ordinary level of existence (everyday reality) and one speeded up, intensified level that exists in many realistic works of fiction. Admittedly, this is a vast oversimplification of the nature and function of the modes to be discussed, but it seems to make sense to say that fantasy, satire, nonsense, and realistic fiction for children can all be seen as defining reality by the creation of a new world or (as in the case of realistic fiction) by an intensification of existing reality.

To make this point clear, it might be helpful to examine the function of the motif of the *map* in these various modes of literature. To begin with, we can say that the up-to-date road map can represent everyday reality. A nonsensical map will tell us absolutely nothing, as does the Bellman’s map in Carroll’s *The Hunting of the Snark*.¹⁰ Maps appear in works of fantasy, such as *The Hobbit* or *The Wizard of Earthsea*, as aids in understanding the new imaginatively created worlds. In a satiric work, we might have a distortion or exaggeration of reality in the form of an exaggerated map. In *Anna and the King of Siam*, one recalls the enlarged map of Siam as presented to the royal children before its correction by Mrs. Anna.¹¹ Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* and Arthur Ransome’s *We Didn’t Mean to Go to Sea* supply maps describing a new, adventurous, and sometimes terrifying reality. In Ransome’s case, it is simply a map of the English Channel with various lighthouses and buoys marked in. (Apparently,

Ransome made the trip across the channel himself in order to supply the accuracy in details of the voyage). The map in *Treasure Island* purports to be a *real* island, whose whereabouts is still a dark secret. Both these maps, however, indicate the new experience, the “other world” discovered by the child in his adventure into realism.

All of this may be summed up as follows:

	Nonsense	Fantasy	Satire	Realism
Level (a)	EVERYDAY REALITY			
Level (b)	distortion reversal	imaginative new world	caricature distortion	reality intensified

It might be best to begin with the most obvious adult-child relationship in the “nonsense” of the *Alice* books. Alice, even though she is a child, represents the world of reality and adult ideas and logic, and she brings her ready-made maxims to the nightmarishly irrational world of Wonderland. The clash between the adult and child becomes significantly complex here. Alice, who tries to reassure herself of her identity through her geographical, mathematical, and linguistic knowledge gained from the adult world above ground, is cheated and betrayed at every turn by the so-called “adults” of Wonderland and the Looking Glass World. Through the distortions of the nonsensical world, she becomes uneasily aware of the fact that rules and laws which are accepted without question *can* turn against one and ultimately be as inefficacious as the severely logical jam on “every other day”: yesterday and tomorrow, but never to-day. Alice does learn a lesson in Wonderland, but it nearly costs her her identity – and her sanity.

Carroll concentrates on the development of Alice in the face of increasingly menacing obstacles to her identity. As a representative of the adult world of reason and as the primary source of unity in the two *Alice* books, she provides a constant index of the child-adult in the midst of the chaotic nonsense of adult-children. Accordingly, the child-reader is capable of sympathising with Alice’s plight of being unable to find order in a seemingly absurd universe. The incessant chatter and circular arguments explaining duties and responsibilities are easily understood by a child daily encountering the babble of adult conversation. The child-reader can also experience the horror of loneliness and the yearning to be accepted socially. Ultimately, the reader and Alice must make their own decisions about life – a step that George Eliot would have appreciated as a function of art.¹³

In the mode of fantasy, the real world is in opposition not to unreason or non-logic but, rather, to an imaginative world of wish fulfilment – an ideal lotus-land, perhaps, but not without its own menaces and hazards. Fantasy is never genuine escape. Accordingly, Tennyson’s “Palace of Art” can be seen as an ideal place to live – for a time – but the soul must return to reality; similarly, Keats’s dream-like vision in the “Ode to a Nightingale” cannot be sustained: he must return to earth, wondering where the vision

has fled, yet somehow renewed in his imaginative appreciation of life. By far the most frequently treated theme in children's fantasy is the necessity of maintaining a child-like appreciation of the imagination into adulthood. As in William Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, children must teach adults to understand the sense of freedom that to Blake and Rousseau was the most natural condition of man. St. Exupéry's *The Little Prince* is probably the most famous – and didactic – example of this statement. The role of reality is carried on by the adults and the narrator, who attempts to ingratiate himself with the child-reader.¹⁴ The little Prince represents the imaginative world of fragile beauty, the fulfilment of self in meaningful relationships beyond the self. The development of the little Prince is, in fact, a practical application of George Eliot's statements about self-renunciation and the extension of the sympathies. The calculations of the adult world obsessed with "matters of consequence" are given a thorough criticism in the symbolic representation of the child's imaginative vision in the rose, the fox, and the stars.¹⁵

St. Exupéry's novel has been criticized for presenting to children a lesson that they know all too well: the adult world is a mercenary place and only by cultivating a child-like imagination can the universe be redeemed.¹⁶ The lesson is not as explicit in Philippa Pearce's fine time fantasy, *Tom's Midnight Garden*. In this novel, through the device of Tom's ability to move backward in time via the consciousness of old Mrs. Bartholomew, we are presented with some highly entertaining yet morally profound statements about human existence. Reality – the world concerned with "matters of consequence" – here is represented by Uncle Alan and Aunt Gwen, and it is against this monotonous life (typified by the imprisoning qualities of the flat and Uncle Alan's middle-class mediocrity and efficiency) that Tom rebels somehow in his hour of freedom when the grandfather clock strikes thirteen.

In one chapter ("The Pursuit of Knowledge"), there is an account of Tom's research into the fashions and customs of the late Victorian Period. The information is interesting, and it is not merely stuffed into the reader as a collection of facts that one should know about the last century. The reader is taken right along with Tom's curiosity as he tries to discover just what is happening to time. But Philippa Pearce manages to convey much more than useful information about late Victorian England.

Tom's relationship with Hatty, first as observer and then as friend, portrays the theme of loneliness and the need for self-confidence as the young girl is rejected and mocked by her cousins and aunt. The growth of the friendship between Tom and Hatty is sensitively portrayed as the young girl reaches maturity (almost without Tom's noticing), and there is a finely delineated moment when Tom realizes that she no longer needs him and that her affections have long since been transferred to young Barty. The striking conclusion links the past and the present to the adult-child tension in that Hatty is really the old Mrs. Bartholomew – the most imaginative

person of all. Time has dissolved; youth and age have communicated in a deeply meaningful relationship while the Uncle Alans and the Aunt Gwens of this world are left standing, bewildered, on the periphery. The “smart values” of Townsend’s remarks about twentieth-century didacticism – as conveyed by Philippa Pearce – are really those nineteenth-century ideas of George Eliot’s social and moral aesthetic.¹⁷

Madeleine L’Engle follows much the same pattern in her fantasy, *A Wrinkle in Time*, but where the experience in *Tom’s Midnight Garden* had been a very private and particular one, L’Engle refers to a much larger consequence – the destruction of Earth – by much the same forces as were at work in Uncle Alan’s personality: mediocrity, automatism, stereotyping, lack of imagination, and, above all, lack of a sensitive relationship with another. Charles Wallace must act as a kind of saviour-victim to the universe as the Dark Thing in Camazotz is successfully challenged by love, individualism, free thinking, and what amounts to the fragments of past culture which supply meaning and direction in a world threatened by stereotypes. It is the children who represent the imaginative values while the adult world is – with the exception of the parents (who, nevertheless, are rather powerless in the situation) – a Brave New World nightmare.¹⁸

If nonsense and fantasy depend a great deal upon the moral vision of the novelist, so does the satiric mode. One of the techniques of satire is to present a new look at reality by the creation of another world or level of existence (e.g. Utopia, or Lilliput), or simply by an exaggeration of the weaknesses and foibles of institutions or members of society.¹⁹ Satire in children’s literature rarely seems to be of the caustic or Juvenalian kind – fortunately, because the butt of the satire is very often the adult world. Here, if we take the plane of everyday reality as representative of what seems to be normal, correct, or simply desirable from a child’s point of view, then the level of existence which is mocked is the adult world. The little Prince, with his quasi-naïve comments about the men he meets on the various planets on his way to Earth, gives us a wry comment upon the nature of adulthood. The important point is that the adult-child dichotomy is still present in satire as part of the comment that the author wishes to make – usually about the deficiencies of the adult world.²⁰

A fine example of Kipling’s treatment of the adult world in *The Jungle Books*. In the early chapters, Kipling presents Mowgli as the child-hero, tutored by Akela and Baloo in the “Law of the Jungle.” In the story “Tiger! Tiger!”, Mowgli meets humanity and Kipling does not spare his criticism of the hypocrisy and greed of Buldeo:

The priest was a clever man, and he knew that Messua was wife to the richest villager in the place. So he looked up at the sky for a minute, and said solemnly: “What the Jungle has taken the Jungle has restored. Take the boy into thy house, my sister, and forget not to honour the priest who sees so far into the lives of men.”²¹

It is not long after that the superstitious Buldeo is mocked by the reasonable and knowledgeable Mowgli, who explodes Buldeo's stories of a mysterious "ghost-tiger" with his startling report:

"Are all these tales such cobwebs and moontalk? . . . That tiger limps because he was born lame as everyone knows. To talk of the soul of a money-lender in a beast that never had the courage of a jackal is child's talk."²²

Significantly, he refers to this ridiculous explanation of the tiger's limp as "child talk." Like Carroll, Kipling sets up his hero and the jungle animals as "adults," while the human adults in the story – as well as the Bandarlog – are consistently depicted as shiftless, greedy, and hypocritical.

One of the most amusing satires of the adult world takes place in the education of the Wart in T.H. White's *The Sword in the Stone*. Several of the chapters deal with the perfection of certain aspects of chivalry, such as tilting, archery, and hunting. The chapters generally begin with a carefully written technical account of the requirements of a particular sport. This image of idealized chivalry is then blasted by the various adults in the story attempting to go through their paces in a very unidealized manner, as in the chaotic tournament between Pellinore and Sir Grummore Grummursum (Chp. 7) or the ridiculous encounter with Mistress Mim after the archery lesson (Ch. 6). Adults – even Merlin – are petty, eccentric, or monomaniacal. The relationship between the Wart and Sir Kay is, on the other hand, delineated as a sensitive, maturing process which allows the Wart to sympathise with all creation, and Sir Kay to be adult enough in the final pages to admit that he told a lie.

It is probably inaccurate to describe the realistic novel of childhood as a "mode" in literature; nevertheless, just as a tension has been observed between child and adult in the realms of nonsense, fantasy, and satire, so too, in the narrative technique of realistic fiction, it is possible to discern a definite "slant" in the vision of the author. The entire *Swallows and Amazons* series by Arthur Ransome presents a family setting in which the children are resourceful and intelligent – almost idealized little adults. In *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*, for instance, we are given the Walker children, presented first in a long expository section as they learn the arts of sailing and then in a gigantic battle against the elements from which they emerge victorious as they blithely sail into the harbour of Flushing. Because the adult virtues of courage, ingenuity, and resourcefulness are associated with the children in these books, the adults remain definitely in the background.

Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (which Townsend would suggest has little overt didacticism) takes Jim Hawkins into a world of horror. The gradual unmasking of Long John Silver from capable tavern-keeper to insidious murderer and the ignorance of who is on which side of the mutiny lead Jim to draw the conclusion at the end of the nightmare that he wants only to

return to his own secure childhood away from the corrupting forces of evil. The adult world is sharply separated from Jim's dreams of childhood here; he has none of the idealized visions of the Walker children in Ransome's book. But he is constantly *learning* throughout the story. He learns to separate the wise Dr. Livesay from the foolish Squire Trelawney and the hypocritical Silver and Israel Hands. But the experience has been too much for him. It is as if he has been initiated too soon into adulthood and, although he has coped better than many of the adults in the story, he seeks in the end to escape from the horror of it all, back to proper boyhood.

What the realistic novel does, then, is to *intensify* commonplace reality into what amounts to a different order of being: the treacherous journey across the Channel in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* or the gruesome adventures on Treasure Island. But the difference in tone is very obvious: Ransome would have all children ready and willing to assume adult responsibilities; Stevenson shows those responsibilities along with their glory and horror but, like Mark Twain at the end of *Huckleberry Finn*, has his hero retreat from such a world.

From all of this, it can easily be seen that there are definite values which are repeatedly being upheld in children's literature. Honesty, tolerance, selflessness, and friendship are just a few. In making these values attractive to children through the various modes, writers often associate the level of normality, desirability, or achievement with the children's world, while the level of dullness, ineptitude, and austerity is relegated to the adults. The following diagram might be helpful in illustrating this:

	Nonsense	Fantasy	Satire	Realism
Level (a)	EVERYDAY REALITY			
	normality		normality	normality
	adult	adult	child	child
	(Alice)			
Level (b)	distortion	imaginative	caricature	realityh
	of reality	new world	distortion	intensified
	child	child	adult	adult
	(Wonderland)			

An examination of the treatment of these modes is an intriguing approach to children's literature in general and provides a helpful insight into an author's vision and his commitment toward "aesthetic teaching,"²³ or, as John Rowe Townsend would say, his letting the "smart values" slip in, "and we do not even recognize it."

¹John Lownsbrough, "Kids' Books," *The Financial Post Magazine* (November, 1977), p. 12.

²See, for example, Zena Sutherland and May H. Arbuthnot, *Children and Books* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott Foresman, 1972), pp. 83-84, 86-88, 94-97; Isabelle Jan, *On Children's Literature* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), pp. 18-29; J.R. Townsend, "Didacticism in Modern Dress" in Sheila Egoff *et al.*, eds., *Only Connect, Readings on Children's Literature* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 33-40.

³Egoff, p. 34.

⁴I am well aware that didacticism is a very complex problem and must be treated with the utmost sensitivity. *Cf.*, for instance, Philippa Pearce: "If a writer has moral standards . . . they will appear explicitly or implicitly in his books; or at least their corrupting contrary will not appear. He should not need to bother about values; his job is imaginative writing'" (Quoted in Egoff, p. 37).

⁵"Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our personal lot" [Thomas Pinney, ed., *Essays of George Eliot* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 270-71].

⁶"If Art does not enlarge men's sympathies it does nothing morally. I have had hard cutting experience that opinions are a poor cement between human souls; the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine and to feel* the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being a struggling erring human creature" [Gordon S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954-55), III, 111].

⁷One of the most elaborate examples of this "breaking down" of the adult image occurs in the opening chapters of St. Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, where the narrator (as adult) takes infinite pains to establish himself with his audience of child-readers through interpretation of imaginative drawings of a boa constrictor in an elephant.

⁸See Elizabeth Sewell, *The Field of Nonsense* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952), pp. 14, 17-20.

⁹J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p. 37.

¹⁰ He had bought a large map representing the sea,

Without the least vestige of land:

And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be

A map they could all understand.

"What's the good of Mercator's North Poles and Equators,
Tropics, Zones, and Meridian Lines?"

So the Bellman would cry: and the crew would reply,

"They are merely conventional signs!

"Other maps are such shapes, with their islands and capes!

But we've got our brave Captain to thank!"

(So the crew would protest) "that he's bought *us* the best —

A perfect and absolute blank!"

(Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark*, Canto II).

¹¹Margaret Landon, *Anna and the King of Siam* (New York: John Day & Co., 1944), pp. 98-99.

¹²For this discussion, I am indebted to the following: Donald Rackin, "Alice's Journey to the End of Night," *PMLA*, 81 (1966), 313-26; Henry Morgan Ayres, *Carroll's Alice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), pp. 14-15, 18-23, 25-27, 30-40, 53-56.

¹³Adult-child rational-irrational "tensions" are much in evidence in Edward Lear's "The Jumblies" and "The Pobble Who Has No Toes", and in Dennis Lee's "Tricking" and "On Tuesdays I Polish My Uncle" [*Alligator Pie* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1974), pp. 32, 47-48].

¹⁴See Note 7, above.

¹⁵The contrast is obviously important in "adult" literature as well: King Lear tries to measure or calculate love as Goneril and Regan do; Cordelia (along with Kent and the Fool) sees only the natural, intangible bond of love.

¹⁶Jan, pp. 76-77.

¹⁷The theme is explicit in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* in the character of Edmund: "'As for you,' said the Witch, giving Edmund a stunning blow on the face as she re-mounted the sledge, 'let that teach you to ask favour for spies and traitors. Drive on!' And Edmund for the first time in this story felt sorry for someone besides himself" (Harmondsworth: Penguin, n.d.), p. 107.

¹⁸The value of friendship is important in animal fantasy as well: *The Wind and the Willows* and *Charlotte's Web* are two examples. Note also the clash between child and adult types here.

¹⁹I am aware of oversimplification of the complex art of satire here; see Leonard Feinberg, *Introduction to Satire* (Ames, Iowa: The Iowa State University Press, 1967), pp. 4, 15, 85, 90, 101-119. On the concept of two levels of satire, see Matthew Hodgart's comments on the theory of "bisociation" with reference to wit: *Satire* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1969), pp. 111-12. There is the suggestion of duality in Northrop Frye's statement that "wit or humour founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd" is one of the requirements of satire: *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 224.

²⁰See the unmasking of adult hypocrisy in the "Lord Tottenham" and "Castilian Amoroso" chapters of E. Nesbit's *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*.

²¹Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Book* (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1967), p. 58.

²²Kipling, p. 62.

²³The phrase is George Eliot's: "My function is that of the *aesthetic*, not the doctrinal teacher – the rousing of the noble emotions, which make mankind desire the social right, not the prescribing of special measures, concerning the artistic mind, however strongly moved by social sympathy is often the best judge" (*Letters*, VII, 44).

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