

# Into the heart of darkness?: Teaching children's literature as a problem in theory

*Stephen Slemon and Jo-Ann Wallace*

**Résumé:** *Les deux auteurs de cet article relatent une expérience pédagogique à laquelle ils ont fait participer leurs étudiants au département d'études anglaises de l'Université de l'Alberta. Ils ont, en effet, mis sur pied un cours de troisième cycle, portant à la fois sur la genèse de la littérature pour la jeunesse dans l'Angleterre du dix-neuvième siècle et sur les mécanismes de production littéraire et idéologique au sein de la pensée coloniale européenne. Le résultat de ce croisement est un essai très concret sur l'enseignement des para-littératures à l'université et très théorique sur la métaphore infantile dans nos cultures d'Occident.*

This article grows out of an experiment in teaching: specifically, an attempt to teach graduate-level "critical theory" in a Department of English through the medium of Children's Literature. The course, entitled "Literatures of the child and the colonial subject: 1850-1914," took place in the 1989-90 academic year; and in its straddling of three normally separate areas of literary inquiry – critical (or literary) theory, children's literature, and the literature of British colonialism – it represented something of a departure not only from traditional period- and genre-based courses in our Department but also from our own individual areas of disciplinary expertise. In the pages that follow, we try to describe this experiment, to analyze our insights and blindnesses, our successes and our failures. But despite the retrospective tone of this paper, our observations here must remain provisional ones; for in a very real sense the experiment of this course and its material is still going on. What follows, we hope, will comprise a set of notes towards a debate over the place of "theory" in the classroom, and over the place of the discipline of "children's literature" within the curriculum of "English Studies."

Our project for this course – according to the university calendar description for "English 571," at least – was to convey to students a sense of how "critical theory" might apply to "literature;" and in choosing to examine theory in the light of the "Golden age of children's literature" we were looking, in the first instance, for a way of grounding what theorists call the question of social "subjectivity" (which we return to later in this paper) in a specific historical moment. But we were also attempting to address a problem in English Studies itself, one that Margaret Meek pointed out in her 1986 Woodfield Lecture:

namely, that courses on children's literature continue to be seen as "soft in the option stakes."<sup>1</sup> In many departments of English, children's literature – "kiddy lit" – is regarded as a sub-literature and as a field of study that proves incapable of sustaining high orders of academic or intellectual engagement. This prejudice we took to be a hangover from the heyday of a "theory" of English Studies – namely, the New Criticism, with its bias towards relentlessly formal exegesis of the text – and therefore an attitude which the course itself should rigorously examine. For in a course on critical theory, the study of those attitudes and assumptions that we carry as though "naturally" to acts of reading and interpreting must always comprise *part* of the course curriculum; and as Margaret Meek has also pointed out, new approaches to "theory" – approaches which emphasize the ways in which all literary texts are "embedded in cultural and historical" moments – have given us tools with which we can better understand the dynamics of all literary writing, and perhaps especially writing for children.<sup>2</sup>

Ironically, we discovered that many of the institutional biases against children's literature also apply to the teaching of literary critical theory – a field with a reputation for its formidable difficulty and for its unquestioned occupation of the "cutting edge" of research. Critical theory is often taught as a series of separate, and abstract, and at heart philosophical texts whose embeddedness in specific historical, social, or even literary contexts remains largely unquestioned. Moreover, a great many of the really big literary theorists – in spite of their absolute commitment to questioning the assumed superiority of that body of "important" literary texts which comprise the "canon" of English Studies (Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, and so on) – nonetheless predicate their anti-canonical energies on that narrow corridor of literary production which comprises European or North American "high" culture.<sup>3</sup> "Theory," like the discipline of English Studies which it seeks to challenge, has become a star-struck field that continues, curiously, to dwell upon the production of "new" readings for the privileged "master texts" of European and American adult literature,<sup>4</sup> and what too often happens when English departments "do" theory is that conventional English disciplinary biases become even more fully entrenched. We understood that if the field of children's literature was an explicit object of prejudice from the mainstream or traditional assumptions of university departments of English, it was equally, implicitly, in danger of disappearance from the perspective of a new, "theorized," model of English Studies.

We went into this course, then, convinced that a course in literary critical theory needed to test "theory" itself against as thick a reconstruction of a particular historical moment as we could manage, and that we needed to enact this testing process upon something other than a set of isolated and unrepresentative master texts from the English Studies canon. In this regard, children's literature – with its relatively brief and fairly well-documented history,

its obvious and usually unashamed ties to the marketplace and to educational practice, and its address to a particular and well-defined readership – had much to offer students of critical theory, for it could help them get at some of the foundational assumptions of the project of theory itself. In return, we hoped, literary theory would help our students to "unpack" an overly formalized approach to the study of books for children and to unravel some of the knotty issues at the heart of the children's literature field. How are readers constructed by texts? How do readers, in turn, construct textual meaning? How do reading practices or "positions" change when inhabited by different *kinds* of readers (adult?, child?, upper class? Third World?)? How do reading practices relate to larger pedagogical meaning? And how is the individual reader called into being *as a social subject* by the stories she reads?

The question mark in our title for this article – "Into the heart of darkness?" – is meant to capture the kinds of questions we wanted to *begin* with in English 571, and in circulating an earlier version of this article to our students at the first class meeting we had in mind a multiple, and possibly contradictory, agenda. First, we wanted to announce the canonical literary text which we would begin with as a group: Joseph Conrad's *The heart of darkness*, which has been justifiably criticized by post-colonial and anti-racist readers throughout the world for the ways in which it *reinscribes* a discourse of European colonialism while setting out consciously to condemn that practice.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, we wanted to raise questions about where the "heart," the centre, of English literary studies really *was*, and about whether the "darknesses" that various centres of power imagine for a world "out there" really are so dark as our mainstream traditions of knowledge would have us believe. Thirdly, we meant to counter the scepticism of those who believe that children's books somehow become tainted by contact with critical theory or that children's literature must in the end prove inadequate to theory's rigorous demands. And lastly, we wanted to signal, both to ourselves and to our students, that despite our attempts in this course to challenge mainstream adultist or racist assumptions about such constructs as "children's literature," or "childhood," or "the Third World," we were nonetheless in a very real sense journeying into a space of plenitude which for twelve white adults in Alberta really *would* appear blank. We wanted to admit at the outset that no simply-defined set of good intentions would remove us completely from the prejudicial attitudes of "English" in which we had all trained ourselves, and that both the territory of children and the territory of colonialism's victims *would* remain unmapped by "English Studies" despite our efforts to understand the lives of Others.

### **Teaching in the graduate program**

The Department of English at the University of Alberta has long been committed to the study of children's literature and – as a result of the pioneering work of people like Alison White, Patricia Demers, Gordon Moyles, and Jon

Stott – has attracted an unusually high number of graduate students to the area. In the undergraduate curriculum, however, enrolment in children's literature courses – while enormous – is still comprised primarily of students enrolled in the Education faculty: teachers in training, whose motives for taking a children's literature course differ vastly from the motives of most graduate students in English. While education students tend to look for a hands-on engagement with the literature and its readers – something that they can "use" in their future classes with children – graduate students in English take courses to *expand* foundational areas they have already encountered at the undergraduate level, and to develop their understanding of how various literary fields are constructed. In other words, graduate courses in our Department of English have objectives that go well beyond the production of competence in a specific literary field or individual course content, and the reason for this is that graduate programs in North America (especially in the humanities) are geared very immediately to the production of university-level teachers and researchers. Students in the Ph.D. program in English at most universities in Canada and the United States typically take from two to four graduate courses (for which they write papers) in addition to passing one or two foreign language examinations and a candidacy or comprehensive examination. Students typically spend the first two to four years of their doctoral studies in these preparations before they begin to write their dissertations. The enrolment in graduate courses varies, though it is always small (in our course the enrolment was 10), and classes are almost always conducted as seminars. This means that students are responsible for much of the course material; in most courses students will present papers which form the basis for class discussion. Graduate courses, then, are not intended to fill in gaps left by the student's undergraduate education; rather, they are intended to push at the limits of critical thinking in *paradigmatic* areas of investigation, and thus to prepare students for professional scholarship by fostering original research and by giving them practice in presenting their findings to their colleagues.

The expectations of a graduate course, however, are complicated when – as in the case of our course – more than one field is involved and when students bring vastly different strengths and backgrounds to the course. Some students took our course because of its content in children's literature, others for its broadening of a "Victorian literature" theme. Some took it in order to broach the field of critical theory, others to expand an already impressive grasp of the field. Some students (we were told later) took 571 purely for its odd-ball content: its unusual combination of disciplinary fields, they thought, at least promised a certain entertainment value.

We therefore assumed that the students in our course would come together with little common grounding in either interest or preparation, and in order to address this problem as well as our broader disciplinary goals we predicated the course project upon a specific approach to professional training: namely,

what does it mean to think *through* a set of problems for which no-one in the profession, as yet, has any really coherent or comprehensive answers? In order to actuate this project, we assumed that students would come to the course expecting the children's texts to be "easy" and the theory texts to be "difficult;" and we took one of our challenges to be the dismantling and analysis of these preconceptions for what they would reveal about cultural and social constructions of childhood and colonization. Going into it, we were aware that this project would be further complicated by the rather ambivalent position of Canadian universities within the Anglocentric discipline of English Studies and the Eurocentric discipline of "theory."

### **Inception of the course**

English 571 was conceived during a set of coffee-break discussions about our separate fields and through a dawning realization that certain correspondences we were beginning to notice between these fields were probably more than coincidental. Perhaps the best way to recreate a little of the flavour of those discussions is to speak briefly in our own voices as we describe our separate research interests.

**Jo-Ann:** I came to the University of Alberta about five years ago, Stephen about three. At that time I was doing quite a lot of background reading on the history of English Studies (especially D. J. Palmer's *The Rise of English Studies* and Chris Baldick's *The Social Mission of English Criticism 1848-1932*) while also reading about and teaching children's literature and the history of childhood.<sup>6</sup> I became increasingly aware of the historical parallels between the rise of English Studies and the growth of the "golden age" of children's literature: in many ways, both were responses to industrialism and the attendant increase in class mobility; both were addressed to largely marginalized social groups; and certain figures had an intriguing way of popping up in both areas. Common to both projects was a vision of the pedagogical subject (the "subject-to-be-educated"), as is evidenced by the fact that many late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers – like Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Hughes, Charles Kingsley, and Henry Newbolt – were active both in educational/social reform movements and as children's authors. This suggested to me that the figure of "the child" was being mobilized to express a social vision, an ideology, that exceeded its ostensible referent, the world of children. The piece of the puzzle that I hadn't yet managed to put into place was whether or how the changes in the foreign civil service examinations (the establishment of English studies at Oxford University was in response to these changes) fit into this historical and cultural complex.<sup>7</sup>

**Stephen:** I came to be interested in the "question" of 571 entirely through the back door. My primary research field is in post-colonial, or what used to be called "Commonwealth," literatures in English,<sup>8</sup> and I was especially interested in why it was that so many ex- or anti-colonial writers wanted to tangle directly with the European literary canon and its representations of the world "out there." In the view of these post-colonial writers, European literature was a social or ideological apparatus which worked to manufacture a set of *ideas* about cross-cultural relationships. The European literatures, they complained, worked consistently to produce colonial subjects as "children" and colonial national literatures as secondary to or dependant upon the European "mother" cultures: child literatures in an adult world. It became clear to me that mapping over the colonial subject with a discourse of childhood was not *simply* a metaphor for European social Darwinism within imperialist exploitation. Again and again, post-colonial literary writing was returning to the scene of colonialist education in order to show how imperial power could manufacture a domination by consent. And again and again, this writing focused on the function of *textual* representation within the ideology of Empire.<sup>9</sup>

In order to understand how post-colonial literature was "working," then, I had to understand the apparatus of power it was attempting to resist. As I was engaged in this, some research started to come in that suggested that the discipline of "English Studies" had its beginning historically in the theory and practice of *colonialist* management, especially in India, and at this point my understanding of the problem seemed to lean up against Jo-Ann's reading the rise of "English Studies" in England in especially interesting ways. In both approaches, the institutionalised discipline of "English" – that discipline in which both of us now work – seemed grounded to a very deliberate strategy of "subjectification" and containment. And in both approaches, the terrain of "the child" became the primary scene upon which social power operated – and perhaps was resisted.

Over more discussion, we began to flesh out the implications of some of the questions we were asking. Perhaps the most obvious question was: "Who was addressed by English Studies during this period?" The answer – that English Studies addressed the marginalized: women, working men, colonial subjects – made us realize that English studies was a pedagogical or didactic discourse before it was a scholarly discourse. In the "colonies," English Studies was first deployed to produce a set of compliant "middle men" between the British colonial administrators and the actual producers of exportable wealth,<sup>10</sup> while in Britain, English studies was first instituted in the women's and working men's colleges as a "soft" or "civilizing" object of study. Charles Kingsley, for example, argued that the study of English literature was especially suited to the sensibilities of women, who could only appreciate historical developments and forces when they were embodied in personal forms and relationships – in

poetry, drama, or the novel.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in the working men's colleges and mechanics' institutes, English literature was taught as a civilizing and *mediating* discourse, one which would socialize a working class which was seen as increasingly unstable and thus dangerous. It was therefore important that women and working men would remain in a relation of consumption with regard to the literature they were reading (a child-like relation), and that they would occupy and maintain a sense of inferiority with regard to literary genius.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, English literature was added as a subject to the foreign civil service examinations both to help curb the barbarisms which English colonial administrators were increasingly inflicting upon their colonial subjects *and* as a tool to help administrators "civilize" those same subjects.<sup>13</sup> The "sound Protestant Bible principles" in Shakespeare, it was argued, the "strain of serious piety" in Addison,<sup>14</sup> could profitably be deployed to the production – as Macaulay put it in his 1835 *Minutes on education* – of a "civilized" class of colonial citizens, "a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern – a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect."<sup>15</sup>

An idea of civility is, of course, dependent upon an idea of barbarity, and it is significant that during this period the working class, women, and the colonized were all characterized by metaphors drawn from childhood. This implies that these marginalized groups were regarded as more primitive and in greater need of socialization into the dominant culture. Certainly many studies have explored the relationship between imperialism and, especially, boy's adventure stories of the period; however, we still need a fuller understanding of the complex of social forces that gave rise both to imperialism and the valorization of childhood so evident in all genres of children's literature during that period.<sup>16</sup> The "golden age" of children's literature has been defined largely by fantasy literature:<sup>17</sup> an age of astonishing projection onto fictional worlds "out there," and a period in which both childhood and colonial spaces were produced as sites of lost innocence. Children and colonial subjects occupied very similar places within that literary discourse, and so we conceived of English 571 as a collective research project into the question of why should this be so. To answer *that*, we needed to foreground the theoretical debate over how social power operates, and we needed to ground that theoretical debate in the very material question of how power relations articulated themselves during the highwater mark of British imperialism: "the Golden Age of children's literature."

### **The course project**

Excited by the possibilities all these questions raised and eager to find a more structured forum in which to pursue them, we constructed English 571 as a course that would attempt to meet a number of needs. It would allow graduate students an unorthodox perspective on the Victorian period of literature by

integrating Victorian children's literature with other texts of the period; it would allow students to approach the field of "theory" in a way that is grounded in a social materiality; and it would allow for an interesting and unpredictable *rubbing together of texts*. In other words, it would require all of us to read one field or area of professional inquiry *in relation to* at least one other field. This would help to break down the ghettoization of children's literature within the discipline, and to draw critical literary theory closer towards the function of an *applied*, as opposed to a "pure," academic practice.

It became clear to us that the central question this conjunction of "fields" brought forward went directly to questions of ideology. That is, the questions raised took up in a different way the kinds of questions that certain forms of critical theory attempt to address – specifically, the question of how a sense of social "subjectivity," a sense of imaginary "being-in-the-world," is produced for various individuals, and the role that the circulation of literary texts plays within this complex process. Critical theory, in very general terms, offers two major models for understanding the process of how social "subjects" are manufactured: structural marxism (through, for example, the work of Louis Althusser, Pierre Macherey, and Michel Pecheux), and feminist appropriations of Lacanian psychoanalysis (through, for example, the work of Jacqueline Rose, Juliet Mitchell, and Teresa de Lauretis).<sup>18</sup> What both of these approaches have in common is a critique of Western, humanist notions of the innate "individual" – the coherent, integrated, self-present and socially autonomous being. Theories of "the subject" emphasize instead the ways in which our subjectivity – everything from our legal status to our most intimate desires – is psychically, linguistically, and/or socially *constructed*.<sup>19</sup>

Obviously, we could only "teach" the questions these conjunctions raised by setting up a course which would work across literary genres and across the usual fields of English studies. One of the most prevalent practices in critical theory – whatever its specific function or moment – has been to "textualize" the social: that is, to interpret actual historical events and experiences as though they were narrative occurrences, elements in a literary text. Our problem in this course would be to work against this tendency, and instead to "socialize," or to "historicize," the textual. We came up with the following course description; the list of texts that accompanied this description is given in the endnotes.<sup>20</sup>

English 571: Critical Theory: "Literatures of the Child and the Colonial Subject: 1850-1914"

"They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented."

Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*

This course will explore the ways in which both the child and the colonial subject were represented in English literature during a formative period of British imperial expansion and consolidation. The course will concentrate on the period of 1850 to 1914 and will

explore conjunctions between the "Golden Age" of children's literature, the consolidation of a professional foreign civil service, and the rise of English Studies in the university. By focusing on the ways in which two orders of "otherness" were produced in the literature of the period, we hope to be able to throw light on recent theories of subject-construction. Our reading will cover a wide range of children's literary texts, travel narratives, political tracts, and theoretical texts. The course will be team taught throughout and should be useful to students interested in children's literature, the literature of colonialism, and/or critical theories of subjectivity.

English 571, then, shaped itself into a course that was structured around neither of the two usual modes of organizing material within English studies – period or genre – but rather around a problem or a series of questions. This, it seemed to us, appeared a highly useful way of throwing light upon that form of institutional work which all of us – teachers and students – carry on within the Department of English. But it also raised a philosophical problem, one which had to do with the role that graduate courses are intended to play in the "professionalization" of graduate students. Students are expected to produce original research at the graduate level, and here our course seemed to offer all sorts of avenues for new thinking to go ahead. The job market in "English," however, is still organized along the lines of mainstream course offerings; and if courses in English remain very much attached to the period or genre model, so much more do job listings, which always demand a *primary* identification of the institutionalized worker with a "field." Would students of this course emerge "thoroughly" saturated in the field of "critical theory," or "children's literature," or the literature of the "Victorian" period? Probably not. Could their decision to opt for *this* course, and possibly this form of professional training in later thesis work, hurt their chances in later job searches? We weren't sure.

The shape of the course also generated some procedural problems. Since neither of us could claim to be a "master" of all the material we intend to cover, we needed to find a pedagogical model that would break down the traditional structures of authority upon which competence, both for teachers and for students, is usually assessed. And since one of the key questions in the course "content" is the social function of an "English" pedagogy, we needed to confront head-on the problem of how to "teach" the ideology of "English Studies" in a way that avoided a reinscription of that ideology. If the institution of "English" has in fact been grounded since its beginnings in a discourse on childhood and in the production of child-like dependency relations for specific social groups, how could we avoid an imposition of this relationship on our own students, whose position within "English" was much less secure than our own?

What we originally envisioned as a challenge *to* the pedagogy of English, then, quickly shifted registers, and we found our own work as teachers and researchers profoundly challenged *by* the critical paradigms we wanted to set in train in this course. Our response to this challenge was two-fold. In the first instance, we committed ourselves to exploring the possibilities of genuine

team-teaching in the course and to working our way through the pedagogical implications of this practice as we proceeded throughout the year. The course would have to remain an open inquiry into the social location of children's literature and its incumbent problems *in* and *about* literary critical theory; it could never close into an "educational delivery system" capable of packaging and export. Our teaching practice therefore would have to remain visibly interactive not only with our students but also with each other; and by stressing this interactive and interdependent condition in our teaching, we would attempt to foreground a *dialogical* model for scholarly inquiry and for pedagogy within the "English" institution.

Secondly, we decided to structure the class as a working *group*, one in which all of us would have to rely to an unusual degree on the findings and the assumptions of others. The project of this course therefore *began* at the intersection of critical theory and children's literature – two massive "fields" of study that have traditionally steered clear of one another – and for the course to proceed in any meaningful way it would have to entail a radical division of labour. In practical terms this meant that students would have to take on a great deal of responsibility not only for developing some highly speculative scholarship but also for imparting their findings effectively to the other members of the class. And as teachers, we would have to find ways to act not only as leaders of a working group but also as participants in a shared process of inquiry.

### **Looking backward**

As mentioned above, this article began as a position paper which we circulated to our students at the first class meeting and which formed the basis for discussion and negotiation. In that earlier version we laid out some of the problems and processes which we *expected* to be exigent in the course. However, as we now reread that document, it is evident that many of the larger problems we anticipated either did not materialize or took a slightly different form than we expected. Other smaller and (seemingly) purely administrative problems also surfaced and occasionally offered scope for further theorizing.

We had anticipated two substantial problems, the first involving the status of knowledge produced by a working group. As we phrased it in our earlier draft:

when productive course work actually depends upon the free exchange and circulation of information, real questions of academic "property" can emerge with especial force.... What would it mean to work in a scholarly environment where ideas really are open coin? what possibilities would this open for the presentation of scholarly research? how would teacher-student relations change, and how would a theory of pedagogy come to terms with so massive a reconfiguration in traditional institutional power?

However, the issue of "ownership" of ideas and of how knowledge circulates

within a working group simply was not a problem. This may have been because the material was so new and challenging – and there were so *many* ideas and angles to explore – that cooperation among students was simply the most exciting alternative. What *was* a problem, however, was our desire – given the fact that neither of us was "master" of this field of inquiry – to shake off teacherly authority and to work more equitably through the group. The students occasionally seemed frustrated by our refusal to speak from a position of authority, perhaps feeling that we were withholding knowledge from them because we wanted to *work through* questions of theory as a group rather than simply to deliver "the theory package." This process was absolutely central to what we saw as the course project: to set two "fields" into dialogue with one another in a way that would prove to be illuminating of both; that is, to historically and geographically *ground* questions of "theory" in a way that would interrogate the social workings of the "Golden Age" of children's literature and its place within English Studies both in England and abroad, but that would also interrogate the often universalist claims of "theory."

One of our responses to students' unwillingness to abandon an idea of the teacher as the "subject-who-knows" was to try to disperse authority through the course assignments and evaluative procedures. The students were responsible for two major written assignments. The first was to produce a 20-minute conference paper; the second was to write an essay as though for submission to a relevant journal, keeping in mind such criteria as recommended length, language of address (intended readership), citation systems, etc. The papers we received in response to the first assignment were so successful that the class decided to redraft them for a conference that they would give in the department, bringing in other graduate students to act as moderators of the four sessions. The conference was well-attended by faculty members and graduate students of our own department as well as others, and the discussion which arose in response to the papers ensured that evaluative authority was not centred solely in us or in the grades which we assigned. Similarly, in evaluating the second assignment we were able to draw upon the practices and requirements of the journals our students targeted – journals as diverse as *The Lion and the Unicorn*, *Textual Practice*, and *Victorian Studies* – in this way again dispersing evaluative authority. We tried to respond to the essays not as teachers, but as vettors and possible editors: that is, as colleagues. This worked in terms of making evaluation possible in what was essentially a working-group situation; in a way, however, it only dispersed authority to other institutional sites. Since one of the projects of the course was to investigate and disrupt the disciplinary apparatus of English Studies, our "solution" to the authority problem left us in some contradiction. (We should also emphasize here our appreciation of the appropriateness of the students' suspicion of our attempt to abdicate authority; after all, we were the ones who were assigning texts, grades, essays, and so on. They were correct to suspect that the

power/knowledge dynamic may have been only nominally disrupted.)

A related problem which we were perhaps hesitant (too polite or too naïve?) to anticipate formally involved the real challenges of team-teaching. Ours was an integrated model of team-teaching, not the more usual division of labour and responsibilities (A does one class, B the next, etc.). We discovered that, in the intensity of a graduate seminar, our different pedagogical styles – one of us is more interventionary, one more "patient" in drawing out students' assumptions and seeing where they go – became markedly exaggerated and occasionally clashed. This meant that we had to meet frequently and speak frankly about teaching strategies. However, it also, and unexpectedly, returned the parent-child dynamic which we were studying in Victorian children's and colonialist literature to our own classroom. Rather than decentring classroom authority, as we had hoped, the fact that we were a male-female teaching team tended to reinforce a mostly unconscious model of "parental" authority. Students occasionally acted out small Oedipal dramas by attempting to play us off against one another.<sup>21</sup> Significantly, this dynamic coincided with a fascination on the part of our students with Lacanian psychoanalysis and its account of subject formation. We found ourselves confronted with a chicken-and-egg problem when we attempted to determine whether their sense of being in a parent-child situation in the classroom stimulated their interest in Lacan, or whether their fascination with Lacan's account of the infant's accession to language through the Oedipal "family romance" contributed to a degree of "acting out" in the classroom.

This preoccupation with Lacan was something we had not altogether anticipated; however, it did touch upon our second major concern. As we went into the course we found ourselves confronted with one of the enduring paradoxes of "English" teaching, and one that all teachers of children's literature are very much aware of: namely, that it is easier to teach excruciatingly "difficult" literature – literature where you struggle simply to understand the words on the page – than to teach literature which at first glance seems entirely yielding of its meaning. As we negotiated the conjunction between "difficult" theory and "easy" children's literature, we worried that we would find ourselves constantly tempted in our teaching to simplify the theory and to "complexify" the writing for children. Of course, neither critical theory nor the field of children's literature is simply "there" or available in some natural, unmade sense, and one of theory's great contributions to literary studies has been its ability to foreground the constructedness – the social, political usefulness – of all literary "fields" and the criticism that comes to surround them.<sup>22</sup> But one of the problems *in* critical theory – a problem "theory" too often attempts to conceal – is that the questions it teaches us to ask are themselves constructed within ideology and implicitly perform a kind of cultural work whose ramifications are complex and elusive of understanding. Recognizing this, we had to ask ourselves: what cultural work was being performed or expressed through our stu-

dents' fascination with Lacan? Or, to be more precise, why was a Lacanian reading of these children's texts more likely to be advanced *in classroom discussion* than an Althusserian reading (which seemed to be the preferred paradigm for their written work)?

On the surface, Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser each seemed to offer a theory of social subjectivity which held enormous promise for our understanding of the reciprocal relationship between the formation of "the child" during the "Golden Age" of children's literature and the function of literature and literary education in that formation. Althusser, for example, has noted the nineteenth-century shift away from the church and to the school as the dominant ideological state apparatus of western culture.<sup>23</sup> This puts an idea of "the child" at the heart of ideology during a period of capitalist and imperialist expansion. Lacan, through his theoretical privileging of Freud's notion of the mirror stage and his emphasis on the accession to both legal and discursive social subjectivity through language ("le non/nom du père"), similarly puts an idea of "the child" (or, more specifically, the infant) at the heart of his psycholinguistic account of subject formation. The difference between them is that Lacan's model is profoundly ahistorical<sup>24</sup> and this may account, in part, for its attractiveness to our students: once they had "mastered" the argument, it seemed to allow them immediate access to a way of talking about the complexities of children's literature that seemed to bypass the formalist question of textual sophistication. One recurring issue in class discussion, for example, revolved around an obvious investment of adult desire in the figure of the child in nineteenth-century children's literature, especially obvious in such texts as *Kim* and *Peter Pan*. Scenes of reading and writing, and thus of obvious social and cultural inscription or interpellation – as in the adult Tarzan's discovery of an English primer in his dead parents' hut, or as in the book-learned natural history which Jack brings with him to the Coral Island – similarly received a lot of focused discussion in class. Lacan provided a language through which to articulate the complicated energy of these children's books.

Thus we found that our original fear that we would have to simplify theory and complexify children's literature was challenged by two interrelated tendencies. We had more difficulty than we expected in getting at the thickly historical, and our students tended to pull towards the theoretical in pure or absolute terms. They seemed sometimes besotted with theory's residual difficulty and showed a tendency in the classroom to be more interested in very broadly unhistorical applications of theory (as in literary critical applications of Lacanian psychoanalysis) than in historically and socially specific *uses* of theory (as in specific applications of an Althusserian model of ideology). We suspect that the reasons for this were largely material. Even in graduate teaching and learning there is simply not enough time to read a representative number of primary and theoretical texts *and* to do the kind of detailed historical research to which our approach aspired. Although our discussion of Tarzan's

engagement with the English primer was enormously fruitful and illuminating, it may have supplanted the discussion which did *not* take place: what were the precise conditions of production of the Tarzan novels? how and where did they circulate? how much did they cost? what gender and class of child-reader was interpellated by them? how did their ideological work differ from that of, for example, *Kim*? Ironically, we had to conclude that the same essentially material reasons which maintained the New Criticism's long hegemony in English Studies (and which contributed to the discipline's devaluation of children's literature) probably also accounted for the appeal of Lacan in our classroom discussion. His model provides an efficient, convincing, and often aesthetically satisfying way of processing large amounts of literary material within a limited amount of time; in other words, we found that the Lacanian model, *in the classroom*, was always in danger of becoming an exercise in formalism.

Luckily, however, material problems and challenges had a way of popping up throughout the course to provide useful reminders of the social embeddedness of all cultural practices and, frequently, to provide grist for further (and continuing) research. Indeed, we found that the texts, the theory, and the constraints of classroom practice brought home to us in very material ways the valency of theories of the subject, often by reminding us of our own positioning as institutional subjects. The issue of the availability of texts provides a good example. Some texts, like Charles Kingsley's *The Water-babies* and R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, were unavailable except in abridged editions.<sup>25</sup> These editions (the Puffin Classics) usually deleted such things as authorial asides, topical references to current educational or social debates, explicit references to class and/or race as well as to the project of British imperialism, etc. – everything, in short, that was germane to our course. However, the practice of abridging classical or canonical children's texts (and, often, of failing to advertise the status of the text in this regard) provided useful insight not only into the institutional status of children's literature (can one imagine an abridged Penguin Classics edition of *Moll Flanders* or *Jane Eyre*?), but also into the ways in which the historical child reader *and the figure of the child* are actively and consciously *constructed*. That is, the social/ideological *function* of children's literature is largely unhidden – unlike literature for adults, it seldom aspires to complete aesthetic disinterestedness – and thus offers valuable insight into the more displaced ideological work performed by literature for adults.

Similarly, our failed attempt to get hold of Helen Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo* for the course provided insight into the social construction of educational models. We were bemused that a course against racism was an object of suspicion from our campus bookstore, which at first simply ignored our book order and then primly informed us that *Little Black Sambo* was a racist book and wouldn't make it across the Canadian border. We then realized that we

were caught in a moment of contradiction between different educational models. The "public" (including the administrators of our bookstore) assume that university courses employ a "top-down" educational "delivery system," where one "teaches" the content of all course books positively – as knowledge to be taken on wholesale. We saw our course, however, as an exercise in critical thinking in the humanities, and we were more interested in examining literary texts as social documents (here, a document whose value for us resided *precisely* in its capacity to reveal how racist thinking is produced within "subjects") than as exemplary works of art. What the *Little Black Sambo* debacle made clear to us was that the burden of social assumption still falls to the positivist model.

### Looking forward

What this course brought home to us most profoundly is the degree to which an idea of "the child" is a predicating, though largely unacknowledged, term in Western philosophical thinking about human existence. An idea of "the child" is absolutely implicit in all our thinking about education, about language, about the "natural" and the improvable, and in all our progress models, and is central to thinkers from John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Louis Althusser. But at the same time, "the child" is very markedly the absent or unacknowledged term, the unacknowledged site, of these philosophical, social, and political Western constructions.

Throughout this article, we have surrounded "the child" with quotation marks, in that way holding the idea under suspension and in (critical) suspicion. However, we want to conclude by moving from a consideration of "the child" to a consideration of historical children; that is, by pointing to the material *consequences* of the kinds of social and cultural constructions that our course examined. Just as "the child" is the absent premise of Western theory, so real children are too often the absent terms in our discourses of criminality, nationality, and ethnicity. Since our culture continues to construct "the child," be it the under-eighteen member of the Western bourgeois family or the native/aboriginal/third-world adult, as the "subject-to-be-educated" – that is, as a subject-in-formation, an individual who often does not have full legal status and who therefore acts or who is *acted against* in ways that are not perceived to be fully consequential – the importance of the kinds of institutionally located issues that our course explored cannot be overemphasized. We are grateful that some of our students will be continuing their research in this area.

### NOTES

We would like to thank the students of English 571 – Bob Carson, Carol Hart, Kathryn Harvey, Jill LeBihan, Sarah Maier, Peter McGuire, Kim McLean-Fiander, Don Randall, Mary Westcott, and Angela Winters – for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper and for their work in the course.

- 1 Margaret Meek, "Symbolic outlining: The academic study of children's literature," reprinted in *Signal*, 53 (May 1987) 97-115.
- 2 "Children's literature cannot be studied as a series of discrete texts any more than we now believe any literature should be. The texts are embedded in cultural and historical studies of childhood and children reading..." (Meek, 100).
- 3 For a useful summary of the debate on the canon see John Guillory's "Canon" in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds., *Critical terms for literary studies* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990).
- 4 This situation may now be changing, at least in regards to Third World literary production. But many forms of literary writing remain out of fashion for the field of critical theory, the most salient of which is still literature written for children.
- 5 See, for example, Chinua Achebe's "An image of Africa," *Research in African literature* 9 (Spring 1978).
- 6 D.J. Palmer, *The rise of English studies* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965); Chris Baldick, *The social mission of English criticism 1848-1932* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983). Our use of the term "English studies" – rather than, for example, "literary studies" – throughout this essay is deliberate and is meant to point to the ways in which the institutionalized study of the English language and English literature served from its inception (often self-consciously) political function of nation-and empire-building. See also Brian Doyle, *English and Englishness* (London: Routledge, 1989).
- 7 See Baldick, p. 72.
- 8 Studies in the post-colonial or "new" literatures in English entail comparative analyses of writing from settler cultures like Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, and from colonized cultures in South-East Asia, Africa, the South Pacific, and the West Indies. For a useful introduction to this field, see Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire writes back* (London: Routledge, 1989).
- 9 It would be impossible to offer here an adequate bibliography of this practice, but three very useful West Indian novels which focus specifically on the terrain of colonialist education are: George Lamming's *In the castle of my skin* (1953; London: Longman, 1979), Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (New York: New American Library, 1983), and Erna Broder's *Myal* (London: New Beacon, 1988).
- 10 See Gauri Viswanathan, "The beginnings of English literary study in British India," *Oxford Literary Review*, 9, 1-2 (1987), 27-58. A version of this article appears in her expanded study, *Masks of conquest: Literary study and British rule in India* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1989).
- 11 Charles Kingsley, "On English literature," *Literary and general lectures and essays* (London: Macmillan, 1989) 249, 257-59.
- 12 See Baldick, p. 67.
- 13 See Baldick, pp. 70-72.
- 14 See Viswanathan, p. 18.
- 15 Cited in Homi K. Bhabha, "Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse," *October*, 28 (Spring 1984) 128.
- 16 See, for example, Guy Arnold, *held fast for England: G.A. Henty, imperialist boy's writer* (Hamish Hamilton, 1980); Patrick A. Dunae, "Boy's literature and the idea of Empire, 1870-1914," *Victorian literature*, 24 (Autumn 1980) 105-21; Martin Green, *Dreams of adventure, deeds of Empire* (Basic books, 1979), Patrick Howarth, *Play up and play the game* (Eyre Methuen, 1973).
- 17 See, for example, John Rowe Townsend's *Written for children: An outline of English-language children's literature* (Boston: The Horn Inc., 1965, 1974) and Humphrey Carpenter's *Secret gardens: A study of the golden age of children's literature* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965).
- 18 Louis Althusser, "Ideology and ideological state apparatuses" in *Lenin and philoso-*

- phy and other essays, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1971); Pierre Macherey, *A theory of literary production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 1978; rpt. 1989); Michel Pêcheux, *Language, semiotics and ideology*, trans. Harabans Nagpal (1975; London: Macmillan, 1982); Jacqueline Rose, *The case of Peter Pan, or the impossibility of children's fiction* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1984); Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and feminism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974); Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice doesn't: Feminism, semiotics, cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984) and *Technologies of gender* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987).
- 19 Some useful introductions to theories of the subject include Chapter Three ("Addressing the subject") of Catherine Belsey's *Critical practice* (London: Methuen, 1980) and Kaja Silverman's *The subject of semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983). Paul Smith's *Discerning the subject* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1988) attempts to articulate the possibility of agency within a theory of the subject, while *Who comes after the subject?* (New York: Routledge 1991), a new collection edited by Edouardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy provides an overview of French thinking on this topic.
- 20 The texts for English 571 were listed as follows:

#### Literary

R.M. Ballantyne, *The Coral Island* (1857); Helen Bannerman, *Little Black Sambo* (1899); J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* (1904); Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847); Frances Hodgson Burnett, *A little princess* (1905), *The secret garden* (1911); Edgar Rice Burroughs, *Tarzan of the apes* (1912); Joseph Conrad, *Heart of darkness* (1899); Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719); J. Rider Haggard, *King Solomon's mines* (1885); Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's schooldays* (1857); Charles Kingsley, *The water babies* (1863), *Westward Ho!* (1855); Mary Kingsley, *Travels in West Africa* (1897); Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (1908), *Stalkey and Co.* (1899); George MacDonald, *At the back of the north wind* (1871); Philip Meadows Taylor, *Confessions of a thug* (1839).

#### Theoretical

- Louis Althusser, "Ideology and ideological state apparatuses," in *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1971); Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of childhood: A social history of family life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage Books, 1962); Homi Bhabha, "Signs taken for wonders: Questions of ambivalence and authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 144-65; Jacques Derrida, "Racism's last word," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 290-99; Frantz Fanon, *Black skin, white masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967); Michel Foucault, "The order of discourse," in Robert Young, ed., *Untying the text: A post-structuralist reader* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981): 48-78; Dan Latimer, ed., *Contemporary critical theory* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989); Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds., *Feminine sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985); Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourse," *Boundary 2* XII and XIII (Spring/Fall 1984): 333-58; Jacqueline Rose, *The case of Peter Pan, or the impossibility of children's fiction* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1984); Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: Dent/Everyman's, 1974); Edward Said, "Imaginative geography and its representations: Orientalizing the Oriental," *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Jack Zipes, *Fairy tales and the art of subversion* (London: Heinemann, 1983); Paul Smith, *Discerning the subject* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1988); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In other worlds: Essays in cultural politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988); Gauri Viswanathan, "The beginnings of English literary study in British India," *Oxford Literary Review* 9 (1987): 27-58.
- 21 Feminist critics have usefully discussed the ways in which the psychodynamics, or

"erotics," of classroom practice map onto the political. See, for example, Constance Penley's "Teaching in your sleep: Feminism and psychoanalysis" and Paula Treichler's "Teaching feminist theory" in Cary Nelson, ed., *Theory in the classroom* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1986).

- 22 On this function, see Homi K. Babha, "The commitment to theory," *New Formation* 5 (Summer 1988), 11.
- 23 "[T]he ideological state apparatus which has been installed in the *Dominant* position in mature capitalist social formations ... is the *educational state apparatus*" (Althusser, 144-45; emphasis in original).
- 24 Jacqueline rose, however, has persuasively proven – in *The case of Peter Pan* – that it can be put to rigorous historical use.
- 25 Oxford University Press has since published a complete and usefully documented World Classics edition of *The Coral Island* with an Introduction by J.S. Bratton (1990).

**Stephen Slemon** writes on post-colonial literatures and critical theory, and teaches at the University of Alberta.

**Jo-Ann Wallace** writes on women's modernism and children's literature, and teaches at the University of Alberta.