

Hana Moravčiková, 'But It's Only a Children's Book: Children's Literature as a Vehicle of Ideological Dissemination'

MA Thesis

Opponent's Review

The present MA thesis takes up an ambitious topic for its analysis as it focuses on three works of children's literature written in English during a hundred years – from the mid-19th to mid-20th century. It is thus legitimate to presume that one of the questions addressed by it could be the progression of this specific literary mode in the studied period. This presumption is also supported by the student's assertion that the emphasis will be put on 'the ideological developments and differences which this wide time span brought into British society' (16). In the light of such a critical goal it is then perplexing why the thesis resigns to chronology and the analytical part begins with a chapter on Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911), followed by a discussion of the work written as the last (Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 1950) and then of the work written as the first (Kingsley's *The Water Babies*, 1863). What is the rationale for such a decision? And why are not the criteria for such a perspective explained in the introductory chapter?

Unfortunately, this formal confusion seems to be indicative of more serious problems which the thesis displays. While the opening part sounds quite promising, mapping adequately principal issues of children's literature as they are reflected in recent critical conceptions and defining the student's goals clearly, the following, practical, chapters meet these goals only partly. It is mostly due to the increasing tendency of the student to approach the studied texts in a descriptive rather than analytical manner and to present ideology, her central term, as a disturbingly vague concept. A definition would be helpful.

What I mean can be illustrated on her reading of *The Secret Garden*: the student identifies several 'ideologies' in the novel, such as racism, Christian Science or gender issues, but treats them mostly separately, not realizing that a literary text is a complex structure of closely corresponding constituents. Viewed in such a way, a work of art would hardly be more than a soundboard reflecting various mutually independent influences. Yet even children's books such as this one are more complex. For instance, it seems obvious that Mary's encounter with Dickon and Colin, whose 'master-servant relationship' we are informed about, parallels her colonial experience and in its analogical character helps her revise and redefine her previous biased class and race attitudes; thus the way dominant motifs are interrelated in the text appears to be more significant than any direct presentation of the prevailing ideologies of the times. Perhaps even the analogy with one of Zola's novels (*L'abbé Mouret*), mentioned in the text, would have proved more productive in this respect, if given more space.

As the following two chapters bring in elements of the fantastic and fairy tale, it would have been useful to include some critical theories dealing with these concepts, such as Rosalyn Jackson's elaboration of Todorov's structuralist approach in her *Fantasy* (1981). This might have helped the student overcome her interpretive problems, especially with Lewis' Narnia series. These problems are evident e.g. on p. 40 where her speculations over possible levels of interpretation end up in nothing more than a discussion of how some biblical motifs are more or less directly inscribed in the text of *The Lion*. The brief Gender and Home chapter then reads, just as its analogical counterpart in the section examining *The Water Babies*, as a mere addendum to the core chapter, not as its organic development.

There are also occasional inaccuracies occurring in the thesis. It is, for example, hard to accept the following statement, even though supported by a critical authority: ‘the publication of *The Water Babies* had a clear impact on British society as “Kingsley was successful where other reformers had failed in finally getting the use of children for sweeping chimneys prohibited: the Chimney Sweepers Regulation Act became law within a year of the publication of *The Water Babies*.”’ (49) In fact, Kingsley’s part in the reform was marginal; the Act was a result of the years-long sustained effort of Lord Shaftesbury and it was far from being an ultimate solution anyway, this coming with the Chimney Sweepers Act of 1875.

The above reservations, however, are not meant to disqualify the thesis entirely. Though raising doubts about its conception and arguments, it clearly shows the student’s attempt to deal with her topic fairly. Nevertheless, it would be perhaps profitable if she could pay more critical attention to the primary texts themselves; ideas transplanted from secondary sources tend to distract her rather than the other way around and result in general statements where concrete analysis would be more welcome.

To conclude: I recommend Hana Moravčíková’s MA thesis for defence and suggest it to be marked as **velmi dobrá** or **dobrá**, depending on the student’s performance during the defence.

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