

From Tradition to Canons to Theories and Beyond: Transition in *Children's Literature* From 1972 to 2003

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The history of *Children's Literature*, the annual of criticism on literature for young people now on its 31st volume, has officially started with Francelia Butler's "The Editor's High Chair" in 1972. As the founding editor and children's literature scholar, Butler sets out to define the function expected of the annual and states its main objective: "The purpose of this collection of essays is to stimulate the writing, teaching, and study of children's literature by humanists — to encourage humanists with the best (and open) minds to enter the field" (8). The brief preface to the first volume of *Children's Literature* defends literature for young people against "many humanists and. . . most critics," the target audience and potential contributors, who, Butler points out in the very first line, have so far ignored it as the area for serious study (7). The term "humanists" alone would probably alienate many of us today, for the ideal universality of humanism along with the function of humanities in academic institutions has been questioned extensively since,¹ but the same word, in a way, reflects the time that led to Butler's then challenging declaration of intent. We witness here the reaction to the lack of serious studies on children's literature as much as the rising academic interests in the area at the time.

It was in 1970 that Thomas Kuhn introduced the concept of "paradigm shift" widely within and without academic disciplines, comparing it to religious conversion that only happens with a leap of faith. Paradigm shift in a field, according to Kuhn, subverts the concepts, assumptions, definitions, standards — the world — up until then taken for granted for the more promising ones, eliciting a totally different set of questions to be explored, vocabularies to be utilized, and experiences to be gained. Although Kuhn comes from the scientific field, the term explains the resonant transitions that took place in society and across the disciplines including English Studies the following decades. Feminist and various post-structuralist theories found voice and put down roots as the social movements of the prior decade that challenged old power structure and conventions became part of the new order, revolutionarizing people's

worldviews.

The birth of *Children's Literature*, in fact, is one of the many changes that mark the critical moment when the traditional notion of the literary canon, humanism, and other "universal" concepts, and the humanities at large have begun to undergo drastic questionings and deconstruction. The scholarly interests in children's literature itself demonstrate one of such changes in academe, where "traditionally" disregarded literature, for example, by women and African American writers, has begun to draw increasing attention. Many essays included in the first volume of *Children's Literature* come from the Seminar on Children's Literature held by the Modern Language Association in 1971. It could not be a coincidence that the year 1970 saw the birth of two scholarly journals on children's literature: *Signal* in January and *Children's Literature in Education* in March. This was followed by several other respected academic journals we still see around today, including *Children's Literature* (1972-), the *Canadian Children's Literature* (1975-), the first of the kind in Canada, *The Lion and The Unicorn* (1977-), and the *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* (1977-). By examining the four volumes of *Children's Literature* that appeared approximately a decade apart between 1972 and 2003, I would like to analyze how the topics, approaches, and the writing itself reflect the changes in the field that followed these publications on children's literature. What are the differences between the first issue and the subsequent issues, and what do they signify? How does the transition that appears in the essays included in *Children's Literature* over the past three decades reflect the history of academic literary studies in the United States, and possibly the history of other related disciplines? I choose *Children's Literature* specifically because it places more emphasis on literary studies than other periodicals on literature for young people. I will be examining the four volumes chronologically from volume 1 (1972), volume 11 (1983), volume 23 (1995), to the most recent volume 31 (2003) to show the sometimes obvious and sometimes subtle shifts and contrasts between each volume over time.

To demonstrate the basic characteristics of the first volume of *Children's Literature*, we should go back to "The Editor's High Chair" again as it more or less mirrors the style and concern of the essays included in the collection. Butler establishes the professional, scholarly ethos in the essay, using but few personal pronouns and keeping to seemingly objective, assertive tone, introducing historical facts and background for the field. Since she implies her target audience in the very first line as those theretofore indifferent to the study

of children's literature, who are now welcome to explore the new frontier, most of her essay is devoted to validating children's literature as the subject for future studies with serious potential. Simplicity in many works for children, Butler points out, is falsely perceived to be lacking by the traditional standard instilled in higher education; at the same time, the actual lack of criteria for children's literature has allowed commercial interests and "expert" opinions to dominate and discourage the academic attention that it deserves. Her repeated appeal to the "humanists" is based on her dissatisfaction with the prior studies in the field — or lack thereof — which is in want of scholarly professionalism: "Children's literature is almost entirely in the hands of those in education or library science, who emphasize the use of literature in classroom, methodology, biographies of current writers, graded reading lists, book reports — good things but not the concern of those in the Humanities" (8). Instead of imparting educational advice on the use of children's literature or reviewing the new arrivals, Butler draws on history to establish the legitimate foundation for children's literature and poses a big question for the "humanists" to study, encouraging them to consider the quality of literature available for contemporary youth.

It could be said that the whole of the first issue of the annual attempts to establish, or prove the existence of, the long-standing tradition of children's literature, and thus, the legitimate demand for its serious study. Mostly keeping to historical studies, the annual sets itself apart from periodicals that came out before the 1970s such as *The Horn Book* (1924-), *Bookbird* (1963-) or the ones in the 19th century with commercial and educational interests more in the forefront, which mostly provided a forum for poetry and literature for children or offering parents and educators helpful book reviews. Of twenty-one essays in the first *Children's Literature*, more than half deal with literature before — many far before — the 20th century, from Aesop, whose English translation came out in the late 17th century, to the Old English literature, the medieval literature, folktales, La Fontaine, *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Locke and the 18th century juvenile fiction, Charles Dickens, Lewis Carroll, John Ruskin, Charles Kingsley, Andrew Lang, and Louisa May Alcott. Considering the noticeable lack of secondary sources on their respective essay topic in the lists of works cited, it is understandable that most critics rely on history and influence studies that give background and pseudo-genealogy to provide certain foundation for the field and back up their interests in the topic. The fact that the essays more or less appear in chronological order, in addition,

demonstrates the editor's intention or desire to cover as much of the past history as possible so as to show the potential continuity and the tradition of children's literature to be traced further back in history.

The essays which appear earlier in the volume, dealing with literature before the 18th century, concur that there had been no reason to produce "children's" literature at the time, for it was before the new concept of childhood became common and demanded children to be reined or catered differently from adults (although today some scholars would argue against it). For example, Meradith Tilbury McMunn and William Robert McMunn begin their essay on the representation of children in medieval literature by stating exactly that: "Because western notions about children have changed radically since the Middle Ages, modern conceptions of 'children's literature' are anachronistic as applied to that earlier period" (21). What we see here is more of a desire to cover longer history and claim larger territory for children's literature; its relatively short history in the academy, especially in relation to literary studies, is balanced against such an attempt to establish firmer foundation for the field of children's literature.

However, the conspicuous weight on history in this volume could be double edged, whose conflicting aspects are already apparent in the editor's introduction. Providing the history of children's literature, tracing back four centuries to point out the assumed time literature for children had been set apart from the rest for mostly didactic, propagandistic reason, Butler regards the moment as when "the trouble started" (7). By doing so, she seems tempted to assert that children's literature should be taken seriously because it is no different from that for adults, at the same time paradoxically demanding respect for children's literature in itself. She even continues to state that "the great books for children have been those which adults and children shared" such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Winnie-the-Pooh* (7). I agree that great books for children are often great read for older readers, and that younger readers have claimed and will continue to claim any book they find intriguing as theirs. Indeed, this blurry boundary between literature for children and for adults — not to mention the confusing and ever adjusting line between children, young adults, and adults — continues to generate interesting questions in the field today.² However, at a glance, such seeming desire to prove part of the "adult" literary tradition and to seek "adult" appreciation implies that children's literature cannot stand on its own, or is the lesser in some literary hierarchy, which, in turn, necessitates the historical approach to

establish continuity and tradition, seeking the “adult” or “common” root for literature now in the hands of children.

The line up of canonical works in the collection also reflects this zeal to elevate children’s literature to the respected field of study, which is probably natural at the budding stage of children’s literature criticism in the academy. Among the contents are more modern and popular topics, including comic strips. However, R. Loring Taylor’s study on German comic strip artist Wilhelm Busch relies heavily on old-fashioned historical approach as well, focusing on the artist’s influence on American descendants in the 20th century. Moreover, John Rodenbeck’s evaluation of the cartoon Tin-Tin series concludes by tracing its “tradition” as far back as to the *Odyssey* and as close as to *Moby Dick*. Tin-Tin, according to Rodenbeck, should be appreciated as part and representative of “the great literary tradition” of epics and tales, which manages to uphold “traditional humanism”(97). The list of classics Rodenbeck lists to advocate the high quality of Tin-Tin books, not to mention such defining terms as “tradition” and “humanism” repeated in his article, only adds to an impression we have had throughout the first volume of *Children's Literature*. It promotes a certain body of canonical work as quality standard, setting them apart from other commercial products that supposedly undermine the efforts made by those devoted to serious study of children’s literature, creating the respectable tradition for itself, still deferring to the “greater” literary tradition of adult literature.

Among the relatively modern writers referred to in the essays that I have not yet mentioned are George MacDonald, L. Frank Baum, A. A. Milne, Jean De Brunhoff, J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, T. S. Eliot, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, E. B. White, and Maurice Sendak, many of whom addressed in more than one essays. Only Harriet Beecher Stowe, Alcott, and Frances Hodgson Burnett are women listed along with these writers. Even then, Alison White’s study compares *The Secret Garden* to Eliot’s “Burnt Norton,” and Stowe and Alcott are only briefly mentioned among numerous other writers whose works for children incorporate the concept of death in Butler’s “Death in Children’s Literature.” In the same essay, Butler gives a blunt assessment of the children’s literature field, which deserves a closer look as it summarizes the attitude consistent in the volume. In her opinion, the separation of children’s literature in the late 17th century due to commercial and didactic reasons is what resulted in “so little good literature for children. . . that the whole field is not even considered worthy of investigation by most departments of the Humanities” (104), and

“This neglect by scholars has resulted in a lack of respected criticism and has led to an indiscriminate lumping of all books for children, classical and commercial, into the category, ‘children’s literature’” unlike the case of “adult literature” (104). It is obvious that for Butler the “classical” works are to prove the worthiness of children’s literature, and by producing “respected” criticism, critics are to raise the quality of children’s literature and, accordingly, the field. The collection’s focus on canonical works for children and its tradition is a demonstration that such notion was more likely shared by many critics at the time. It is another ironical paradox that these so-called children’s classics had been considered marginal in terms of the “greater” or “adult” literary tradition, with the exception of those works originally appreciated by older readers, or those written by the writers who had established their names before they ventured into writing for children.

Although its topics of study still serve to maintain certain canonical framework, volume 11 of *Children’s Literature* gives a different impression just from a look at its contents, compared with the first collection. While the latter is dominantly male and canonical in its favored topics, the former, which came out in 1983, has a distinct imprint of feminist influence, with nearly half of the twelve essays concerning women writers and their work. In addition to the first two essays on Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*, apparently one of the major classical texts to inspire critical attention, we see the names like *Little House on the Prairie*, the Green Knowe series by L. M. Boston, and the Dutch poet, Annie M. G. Schmidt in the titles of three other essays. The other noticeable change is the inclusion of more contemporary works studied in Lois R. Kuznets’ “The Fresh-Air Kids, or Some Contemporary Versions of Pastoral” or Thomas H. Getz’s “Memory and Desire in *Fly by Night*” in addition to such classics as *Alice* books, T. S. Eliot’s *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*, *Pinocchio*, and *Babar* books.³

The critical approach varies depending on the essay, unlike those collected in the first volume, most of which share similar historical approach. Even with the ones that study works by women writers, we could see diverse approaches being applied to fit respective purposes. Henrietta Ten Harmsel’s “Annie M. G. Schmidt: Dutch Children’s Poet” is more or less an old-fashioned biographical study that introduces the poet whose English translation has come out, comparing her work with that of Andersen. In contrast, Hamida Bosmajian’s “Vastness and Contraction of Space in *Little House on the Prairie*” owes as much to Gaston Bachelard and his study of images and imagination as to reader-

response criticism. Bosmajian explores the way cozy safety of embracing spaces are provided for the child readers in the face of immense vastness of prairie in Laura Ingalls Wilder's work. Considering that thematology and structuralism in French literary studies became quite popular in the 1960s, it is natural that two decades later, Bosmajian examines the shortcomings of "phenomenological criticism." While clarifying the method she would apply in the essay, Bosmajian modifies Bachelard's approach with the insights provided by Wolfgang Iser, adding to it the awareness of the cultural and historical dimension that influences the way readers perceive images (50-51). This process of establishing one's method and locating one's position in the conversation of literary criticism is more regularly observed among the essays included in volume 11, while in the first volume, it was often substituted by the examination of history surrounding the works and the author or the list of similar or related works. John C. Stott's "From Here to Eternity: Aspects of Pastoral in the Green Knowe Series" studies the image of pastoral and its thematic importance throughout the six books in the series. In comparison, feminist approach and concerns strongly mark Elizabeth Lennox Keyser's "'Quite Contrary': Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*" and U. C. Knoepfelmacher's "Little Girls Without Their Curls: Female Aggression in Victorian Children's Literature," the first two articles of the volume, which set a less conservative tone for this issue. Both essays focus on the subversive qualities in the unique characterization of young female protagonists in the Victorian works by women writers such as Burnett and Juliana Horatia Ewing.

The overwhelming drive to defend the position of children's literature study in the first collection is rather absent in this volume. This could be a reflection of the steadily expanding field of children's literature and its criticism, or it could also be the influence of various theories emerging in the literary studies as evident in the diverse approaches taken by the contributors for this issue. Reader-response criticism seems to have given weight to child readers' perspectives, which we see, for example, in Bosmajian, and in Getz. Getz' study of Randall Jarrell's *Fly by Night* (1976) illustrated by Maurice Sendak places authority in children's response, being aware of unequal adult influence and power in the production and promotion of children's literature. His opening paragraph demonstrates the changes in the attitude from the earlier, uncertain stage of children's literature criticism to a more stable stage, in addition to the influence of reader-response theory: "The interaction — of the author, the child in the author, the child, the author in the child — works against the notion

that children are merely childish as they read and that authors must reduce themselves to childlike personae as they write for children. There must be no condescension" (125). Although C. S. Lewis has long ago made a similar point that good literature never writes down to child readers in "On Three Ways of Writing for Children"(1963), part of the credit should go to reader-response in disseminating such an attitude widely.

The growing maturity of the field can also be detected in the way increasing number of essays — over half in the collection — refer to literary studies in children's literature field as naturally as they refer to critical texts on the "grown-up" literature, seemingly obliterating the hierarchy between literature for older readers and that for younger readers, if not the boundary itself. Keyser and Knoepfelmacher's essays create a dialogue between each other, as do the two *Babar* essays by Ann M. Hildebrand and Harry C. Payne. Such dialogues prove the existing community of children's literature scholars more clearly than anything else. When Knoepfelmacher begins his first paragraph where he cites *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), we see that Knoepfelmacher stands on the same plane as Gilbert and Gubar as a literary critic: "The expression of anger by female writers has become of increasing interest to literary critics. We are now far more aware of the rich implications — cultural, biographical, artistic — that this subject entails. . ." (14, emphasis mine). There is no apology or unnecessary defensive posture for the field or for the "quality" of children's literature apparent in volume 11.

Such changes and the gradual expansion of children's literature field are as evident in the last section of the annual as in the works cited list of each essay. While volume one of the annual introduces "Suggested Texts to be Read in Conjunction with these Essays," consisting mostly of primary texts and anthologies, the later volumes have "Reviews" and "Dissertations of Note" sections that introduce related materials to the field. The first volume poses a sort of challenge in its final section, "Areas for Research": "Since so little research has been made by humanists into children's literature, almost any serious study is likely to turn up fresh material which will enrich knowledge of the field" (181). The subsequent issues show that this challenge has been answered. In *Children's Literature 6* (1977), reviews are mostly on primary texts that introduce award-winning books, poetry, "Juvenile Science Fiction, 1975-1976," recent books with post nuclear war themes, and other anthologies and collections. More than half the titles under the "Criticism of Children's

Literature" section of the reviews are also thematized anthologies and guide books, such as Bobbie Ann Mason's *The Girl Sleuth: A Feminist Guide*. Of sixteen dissertations introduced, about a quarter of them study children's literature, half study childhood or representation of children in literary works not necessarily for children, and the rest have parts that relate to the field. *Children's Literature 11* has a few critical studies along with primary texts reviewed, and 43 dissertations listed with more direct relation to the field.

Significant leap is made during the decade between the publication of volume 11 and volume 23. In volume 23 issued in 1995, the reviews are all on critical studies in the children's literature field and not on primary texts or any collections or annotated editions, and the number of dissertations listed reaches over a hundred. Increasing number and range of criticism of children's literature during the decade is also evident, for example, in the texts that came out during this period such as *Children's Literature: the development of criticism* (1990) and *Literature for Children: Contemporary Criticism* (1992) both collections of criticisms edited by Peter Hunt. These critical texts testify to the body of work produced in the discipline during the period with wide range of methodology and subject matters. The reviews in the annual volume 23 also attest to this growing wealth of literary studies on children's literature. In one of them, Gary D. Schmidt remarks on the shared notion prevalent among children's literature critics of the day that "the battle to legitimate children's literature in the academy has been won" (243). Schmidt accepts the accuracy of such "bravado" with reserve, for he cannot help noticing the awkward position children's literature still occupies within, or in relation to, English Department. However, in reviewing *Teaching Children's Literature: Issues, Pedagogy, Resources* (1992) edited by Glenn Edward Sadler and published by the MLA, Schmidt maintains that this text is a telling example that children's literature is now "a subject for literary studies" instead of the property of education department (244).

The development of children's literature criticism from the 1980s into the 1990s is mirrored in the essays collected in *Children's Literature* Volume 23. All the essays have a considerable body of children's literature criticism to rely on, which is there for anyone to see in each notes and works cited; many essays are in dialogue with the preceding studies. Especially among the first four essays sectioned separately as "Forum" in this issue, the essays by Mitzi Myers, Jean I. Marsden, and Naomi J. Wood generate an interesting conversation concerning a female child reader/writer, literacy, agency, and the question of

representation. Gender studies and new historicism clearly mark this volume as demonstrated in the topics and approaches of the essays such as the Forum essays and Perry Nodelman's "Reinventing the Past: Gender in Ursula K. Le Guin's Tehanu and the Earthsea 'Trilogy'." Not only do female contributors outnumber male contributors by two to one, there is little trace of the male-dominated children's literature canon we detected in the first volume (but for one essay on Baum, and perhaps another one on Dr. Seuss, although the latter could have been considered too commercial to be placed high in the canon). The change here is far more drastic than the change from the first collection we see in volume 11 with its more inclusive but still persistent canon. Almost all essays in the 1995 issue focus on women writers' texts, and the literary texts studied in the essays are diverse: Mary Lamb's *Mrs. Leicester's School*, a text written by an eighteen-year-old Barbara Newhall Follet, historical novels for children, Astrid Lindgren's text in translation, Le Guin's Earthsea series, Patricia MacLachlan's texts, and the Chicana writer, Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*.⁴ More importantly, however, the redefined, expanded notion of "texts" pervades this whole volume. That is, literary texts are obviously not the only subject of criticism in most essays. Instead, their connections to or intersections with such questions of literacy, construction of gender and/or subject, agency, power relations and ideologies become the focus of the study to be revealed, analyzed, and critiqued. In the essays like J. Karl Franson's "From Vanity Fair to Emerald City: Baum's Debt to Bunyan" and Marsden's "Letters on a Tombstone: Mothers and Literacy in Mary Lamb's *Mrs. Leicester's School*," child readers themselves are read, reconstructed, and studied as possible texts. In many of the articles, the constructedness of such concepts as childhood, children, and gender is unmasked and questioned through the interpretation — or reconstruction — of the texts.

"The Erotics of Pedagogy: Historical Intervention, Literary Representation, the 'Gift of Education', and the Agency of Children," the top article by Mitzi Myers, exemplifies the changes mentioned above (if the length of its title — and subtitle — does not already clue us in). Myers' applies new historicism, but her approach shows the influence of gender studies, cultural studies, psychoanalysis, and other theories as well. Through the reading of Maria Edgeworth's "Madame de Fleury" (1809) juxtaposed against the journals and correspondence of Edgeworth's younger contemporary, Marjory Fleming, Myers challenges the representation of children and childhood in the tradition of Romanticism, blaming its function to close off children's literature field in a less

productive confine of presumed innocence on the part of children and childhood. Myers makes clear that not only literary texts but everything from the abstract notion of childhood and child to a living (or dead) girl is a text to be read (as she does in the article), all a construct of interwoven personal, political, and cultural influences defined by power relations and ideologies of the time: "Childhood' is. . . a historically constituted locale within a complex web of power relationships and signifying practices, a something we have come at through words written by somebody at a particular moment for a particular purpose," and "the child [is] historically constituted signifier" (3). Myers' aim in this essay is to reconsider the condition that produces children's literature, although in the process she equally examines the condition under which it is read: "I want. . . to think about what it means to write under the sign of the child, to author a work *about, for, and as a child* — how doing so might constitute a radical gesture, an intervention in public history as much as a nostalgic personal regression" (3). The personal is weighed evenly against the political and the cultural, and a young girl's journal reads as critical and revealing a text as the well-known writer's texts. Myers summarizes the post-structuralist notion of interpretation, composition, and text, which more or less equates the act of reading with the act of constructing, and the act of writing with the act of reading in the concluding paragraph: "Sensitized to our own interpretive location as well as to the historical location of the story's contemporary readers, we know that no interpretation can achieve total truth or final validity" (19). Foucault's influence is clear, if filtered through the new historicist criticism: "writing only acquires force in historically specifiable situation," and neither writing nor interpretation exist outside the "site for ideological struggle and dominance" (19).

This shift in the concept of text is not new, considering that Roland Barthes' "From Work to Text" came out in 1971, but it appears to have taken the rise of new historicism in the 1980s and the following decade for the notion to sink in and emerge in the critical essays in *Children's Literature*. Although often considered one of the founding critics of structuralism, Barthes' essay has moved the focus of literary studies from the conventional idea of literary work by an author to cultural (con)texts and artifacts more open to interpretations, preparing the field for cultural studies and new historicism. Reader-response theory in the 1970s also has given interpretive, or even creative, responsibility on the side of the readers, whose reception of a text is conditioned both by what is in the text as well as what is without that makes it meaningful. Throughout

all these shifts was the influence of feminist criticism, and also of gender studies more prominently after the mid-80s (after the publication of volume 11), working to question the dominant values, including the American literary canon.⁵ During these periods, the field of composition also established itself, following up the movements started in the 1960s, tackling the questions of class and race first, then gender, ethnicity, and culture more so in the 1990s. The shift runs in parallel in composition, as social constructionist theory and epistemology have become more and more crucial in the 1980s and onward. If we look back at the noticeable influences of feminist and reader response theories in volume 11, we might be able to postulate that the ripples starting with the emergence of new theories take about a decade or two to flow into the rest of the field, permeating the critical essays in *Children's Literature*.

In any case, *Children's Literature* 31 which came out this year shows that the direction implied in volume 23 is followed through with less drastic adjustments. Alcott is discussed in two essays, and other essays discuss Mary Norton's *Borrowers* series, Alice books, Myron Gibson's "Herm and I" (1984), David Klass' *California Blue* (1994), Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995, 1997, 2000) as well as the two films, *Ashpet: An American Cinderella* (1989) and *Ever After: A Cinderella Story* (1998). Andrea Schwenke Wyle's "The Value of Singularity in First- and Restricted Third-Person Engaging Narration" focuses on the frequent use of certain narrative strategies characteristic of children's literature by using various contemporary texts. Instead of a certain set of canonical texts, interests in the art of storytelling, narratology, and the function of stories thread through these essays. Intervening years saw more publications on children's literature criticism in relation to critical theories such as *Children's Literature and Critical Theory: Reading and Writing for Understanding* (1995), *The Nimble Reader: Literary Theory and Children's Literature* (1996), and *Understanding Children's Literature* (1999), the last of which is another collection edited by Peter Hunt that introduces critical theories and their application in the field. In the most recent volume of the annual, the reviews do not specifically refer to theories, but on the history of picture books and illustrations, the way picture books tell their stories, fairytales, Children's films, and Alcott. The drastic changes examined in discussing volume 23 appear to have become part of the shared knowledge in the community. After acknowledging that histories, ideologies, cultures, ruling concepts of any particular age, or even our selves are all textual construction, woven like any stories, it is probably natural that the focus once again returns

to storytelling and the functions and strategies of stories, which have always been a predominant feature of children's literature.

In the introduction to *Literature for Children*, which collects eight essays produced between 1988 and 1992, Peter Hunt notes the parallel between the shifting status of children's literature and other non-canonical literature ("national, ethnic, feminist, post-colonial" [2]), in the literary studies:

[The 'new' literature (texts and criticism)] can either adapt itself to, or present itself as recognizably similar to canonical literatures; or it can attempt to engineer a change in mainstream attitudes; or it can wait until such a change occurs; or it can find a home in another discipline; or it can set itself up as a new, independent province, with its own laws and standards. (3)

The analysis of four issues of *Children's Literature* over the past three decades demonstrates how children's literature as an emerging field has done all that are mentioned above, and possibly come back full circle to actually examining its own strength and features.

Children's Literature, which first appeared in 1972, marks and follows the transitions academic literary studies and related disciplines went through. Its history shows the move from its desire to prove part of the traditional canon and the mainstream literary history in the first volume to its contribution in modifying or revisioning the said canon by its offer of alternative canons a decade later. To an extent, canon reformation or revision is still an on-going project, especially in maintaining or defining a discipline and institutionalizing it. But by the mid-90s, the main focus of most essays in the annual has shifted to the theories, reflecting the redefined concept of texts. Hunt, for example, remarks on the role of emerging theories in breaking down the traditional literary canon, and the growth of children's literature alongside such transitions in literary studies (10). Hunt's anthology which came out in the early 1990s already demonstrates the focus on theory at the time. Gerald Graff, in *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (1987), also reaches similar conclusion as he reflects on the direction English department and literary studies have been heading in. In the introduction where he questions the "Humanist Myth" long dominant in the discipline, Graff summarizes the drastic shift of perspective in the field of literary studies he observes in the late 1980s and how "the concept of 'literature'" as well as the so-called universality of

humanism have been re-examined as a result, citing both Terry Eagleton and Michel Foucault (11). Later chapters follow the transition in the field since it took over the place of the classical studies during the 19th century, the gradual process in which the study of modern American literature was established as a legitimate discipline in the academic institution with the influence of nationalism, and the predominance of Old Historicism in the American literature studies until the rise of New Criticism in the mid 20th century and other theories after the 1960s. However, Graff's final chapter focuses on the increasingly significant role of literary theory in the discipline in examining the ideological implications and the cultural context in which certain concepts such as humanism or "tradition" and particular definitions of "literature" or "classics" are privileged over others.

Since then, theories have become more of a background, a given, allowing new questions and possibilities in the field to be foregrounded as the most recent issue of *Children's Literature* implies. In his *Arts of Living* (2003), Kurt Spellmeyer — having one and a half decade advantage over Graff in reviewing the situation faced by the Humanities, and by the department of English — also reflects on the direction a step further than what Graff proposed in his study. While Graff refuses to simply perpetuate the easy dichotomy between theory against "tradition" (248) or "literature itself" (254), redefining the potential role of literary theory in the profession, Spellmeyer's emphasis is on questioning the danger of routinization and institutionalization of theories as he tries to reconnect the field to the "real world" and every day needs of people not necessarily steeped in the academy. Although it might be a little on the conservative side and slower in incorporating the most radical perspectives in the field, the current issue of *Children's Literature* seems to corroborate the continuing turn in literary studies where the focus is moving away from theories themselves, and in the case of children's literature, more into the art of storytelling (which for a while seemed to have been "reduced" to a property of young or marginalized people in the fast-paced technologically "advanced" world of multimedia), the narrative itself, and the way it functions — that is, what make the texts appealing to the readers who are trying to make sense of the world and find their place in it.

Notes

¹ Although their approaches are quite different, and their conclusions even more so, Gerald Graff and Kurt Spellmeyer both pose the possible directions for the English Department and, in Spellmeyer's case, the humanities in their work. In the process, they both question the legacy of Arnoldian humanism. Graff points out the unifying façade of humanism which coats over the specialization and differences within literary studies (6), and Spellmeyer talks about the "the division of cultural labor" (20) that places humanities "above" business and politics in the cultural hierarchy. Whatever their reasoning, both Graff and Spellmeyer see the similar harm in the effect of Arnoldian humanism and its supposedly universal standard, in that it enables "humanists" to pretend immunity from the clashing ideologies and remain falsely aloof from the real life concerns of economy and politics. Sharon Crowley also reveals the constructed hierarchy based on the prestigious "taste" that divides the privileged and the rest in the tradition of Arnoldian humanism, which she sees still working in Freshman English as a universal requirement.

² The recent popularity of fantasy literature alone — in Britain, in the United States, and also in Japan, the trend which is often attributed to the wide readership generated by Harry Potter series — attests to the artificiality of age-based marketing and expected readership. In this case, older readers appear to be joining the enthusiasm of younger readers in their appreciation of fantasy, although many "adult" readers always have kept such appreciation before this.

³ It is telling that I have my own assumptions (or expectations) on what counts as part of a canon, not only those changing canons that have come to include more and more rediscovered writers, female writers, and writers from parallel cultures, but also what is traditionally considered (or used to be considered by the experts and the authorities) as children's literature canon. Since the first issue of the annual, it could not be denied that the canon or a canon has been maintained or formed, and certain titles and names come up repeatedly, if for during a specific period when that text yields more to new theories applied.

⁴ The last, *House on Mango Street*, is the first text by an ethnic writer that came up in the three volumes I have closely examined, which makes me wonder about its implication, considering more dissertations listed in volume 23 study African American, Hispanic American, Chinese American literature for young people. Although the names of such writers as Virginia Hamilton (in three issues during the 1970s, when African American women writers began to draw serious academic attention in the mainstream literary studies with the rediscovery of Zora Neale Hurston and the appearance of such writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, to name a few) and Mildred Taylor (once in volume 24) have appeared in the history of the annual, and international children's literature has had its section in many of the issues since the first volume, the conservative aspect of *Children's Literature*, even

compared to other journals like *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, cannot be denied. This could come from the annual's position in regard to mainstream literary studies since the first volume, where the editor's address plainly showed its concern to be part of the larger or greater literary history and tradition.

⁵ It is interesting to consider why the two of the reviews — one by Schmidt and the other, "Toward the Definition of a Canon" by Darwin L. Henderson on African American and African children's literature — in volume 23 end up discussing canon reformation or alternative canons, if without much bravado or preamble. The American literary canon in its most traditional sense had been under question for over two decades by then, and the place of children's literature in literary studies is the result and cause of such questionings. Yet, perhaps because children's literature is strongly tied to pedagogy, the question of canon, whether redefined or pluralistic, still seems like a haunting one in the field. Or perhaps, this is inevitable in relation to courses and curriculums in academy and not necessarily limited to children's literature.

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