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Insights and Discoveries: Illuminating Textual Criticism

INTRODUCTION

Textual criticism—two simple words that present a host of challenges. The topic immediately introduces the problems of relationship and emphasis. What arcane relationship connects these two words? Does textual criticism mean literary criticism? What roles does critical theory play in the practice, process, and products of criticism? And what roles does it play in the evaluation of children's books? Textual comes before criticism, so does focus fall on the text? Or, since textual modifies criticism, perhaps criticism should ground the discussion.

CRITICISM AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Where you place the emphasis reveals a great deal about you as a reader and as a critic. Many a critic of children's literature would find text the appropriate place to begin:

Criticism that does not deal with the text is worthless. It may be useful as history or biography and, indeed, critics often dally along some rather peculiar paths; but criticism disqualifies itself as criticism if it does not deal directly with the text.

The first law of the critical jungle, therefore, should be "Loyalty to the Text." (Kingsbury, 1984, p. 18)

Paul Heins (1970b) keeps company with this primary placement of the text. He questions those who champion child appeal as most crucial:
Interestingly enough, John Rowe Townsend looks upon "acceptability to a child as a preliminary hurdle rather than a final test." Personally, I question whether Mr. Townsend has not put the cart before the horse. In discussions of recently published children's books, generally after a discussion of a book of rare value, one often hears the voice of the devil's advocate: "But, will children like it?" or more pessimistically, "What child will read it?" Surely the question of acceptability to a child is a question concerning book selection and not a fundamental critical question—not a question of literary criticism. (p. 270)

Underlying a textual focus may be the "most insidious and dangerous of critical . . . misconceptions: that a story has a single meaning" (Hunt, 1984-85, p. 191). The assumption that adults can determine that meaning and then communicate it to children persists as even more insidious. After all, children couldn't possibly discover that meaning themselves, could they? And where would we be if they did? It's that attitude which scares me and causes my hesitancy to position "textual" solely at the nexus of my critical approach. True, life-experienced and reading-experienced adults bring knowledge to a text, but can we afford to imbue their reading with greater seriousness—with greater value—than a child's reading? Can we risk acting as if children don't read critically? Believing that children and adults read differently, and recognizing the awkwardness of adults reading literature directed at the child audience, Peter Hunt (1991) calls for a childist approach to criticism. It would

involve a total re-reading of texts. . . . Simply to invite adults to read as children is scarcely novel, and it is likely not only to revive old prejudices, but, as we have seen, to prove remarkably difficult. Rather, we have to challenge all our assumptions, question every reaction, and ask what reading as a child actually means, given the complexities of the cultural interaction. (p. 191)

Basic to Hunt's concept is the belief that a child reads differently, not simply, not less effectively, nor less intelligently; the critic should not confuse a childist with a child-like reading (Hunt, 1991). Speculating on what the term "children's literature" means may expose ways in which "reading children's literature is, for the adult, a more complex process than reading an adult book" (Hunt, 1991, p. 45). Nearly every textbook, every special section of a journal, every guide to research and theory in the field, attempts to articulate a manageable and practical definition of children's literature. In his lucid and insightful book Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature, Hunt (1991) devotes an entire chapter to this activity and considers the complex value judgments implicit in naming any book as "literature." The very word suggests not just good, but the best—genuine excellence. His chapter concludes by asking for a definition of child because "children's literature, in separating itself (for administrative convenience), defines itself in terms (uniquely) of its audience" (p. 56):
All of this suggests a species of literature defined in terms of the reader rather than the authors' intentions or the texts themselves. It also demonstrates the closeness of the relationship between the text and the reader, and, consequently, the peculiar honesty and realism required of the children's book critic. (p. 1)

This "peculiar honesty and realism required of the children's book critic" turns my discussion to the relationship between text and critic, therefore to a consideration of criticism.

THE ROLE OF CRITICISM

If "criticism" is the emphasis, then the activity (criticism) takes precedence over its subject (the text). What inherent assumptions does that perspective carry? It supposes that the activity of literary criticism, of thinking and writing about literature, has a purpose and a merit which extend beyond the literature itself. Further, it implies that criticism can yield a product or products and that those products themselves deserve attention. By extension, the products may even take precedence over the original subject: the text. We read criticism about books, not the books themselves. Paul Heins (1970b) believes that "every time we pass judgment on a book or express enthusiasm for it, we are engaging in a critical act" (p. 265). Therefore, reviews and annotations are one act of criticism. Criticism also generates longer pieces, developed articles and books that examine a specific genre, author, or work or group of works from an individual vantage point. Still, the criticism here revolves around a specific text or sets of texts.

Textual criticism often yields additional criticism in the form of written responses and defenses, the apologetics of children's literature. "Just as romantic poets and realistic novelists have had in the past to defend their positions, just as fiction itself and drama have had to withstand puritanical and other kinds of religious attacks and criticism, children's literature . . . needs constant defending" (Heins, 1970a, p. 372). While justification lies at the roots of apologetics, construction of a defense can prove liberating and illuminating to writer and reader. It presents an opportunity to sharpen some axes a critic may be grinding (Kingsbury, 1984, p. 20) and to realize how they dull with lack of use or how they may need to be exchanged for more advanced instruments. Apologetics offer an opportunity to affirm and to change attitudes, to move children's literature from considerations of practice and pragmatics into persuasive, philosophical discussions as well. The dialogue can heighten awareness of the creativity, artistry, and excellence in children's literature and prove it a field for rich exploration and original work. In one influential apologetic, John Rowe Townsend
(1971) demonstrates the absurdity of an anti-intellectual view of children's literature:

The few to whom children's literature is central cannot expect, within one working lifetime, to master sufficient knowledge of the related fields [e.g., psychology, linguistics, sociology, history] to meet the experts on their own ground and at their own level. And yet, while the children's literature person obviously cannot operate at a professional level in all these various fields, the people operating in the various fields can and quite properly do take an interest in children's reading as it affects their own specialities, and are able to quite frequently pronounce upon it. But, understandably, such people are often unaware of or have not thought deeply about the aspects of children's literature that do not impinge upon their own field. The subject is one on which people are notoriously willing to pronounce with great confidence but rather little knowledge. Consequently, we have a flow of apparently authoritative comment by people who are undoubtedly experts but who are not actually experts on this. (pp. 375-376)

Avi (1986) makes the same point anecdotally:

A recent fiction review for the New York Times appeared with this credit line: "... lives in Vermont and writes about national security issues." In his review, this reviewer concluded by saying, "But maybe, living in Vermont, I just don't understand the reading habits of children, the requirements of libraries, or the business of publishing." I say, why blame Vermont? (p. 115)

Avi implies another possibility of criticism, one which Virginia Woolf (1939) also explored. These authors look to criticism for serious, informed commentary about art—their art. Woolf goes so far as to propose a system that generates a consultation between a reviewer and an author, "bring[ing] both parties together in a union that is profitable, to the minds and purses of both ... [giving the author] the advantage of coming into touch with a well-stored mind, housing other books and even other literatures. ... " (pp. 20-21). If criticism affects the artist, then it also affects the future of art itself. Thus, there exists a real possibility that one product of criticism just may be to challenge writers to push the artistic boundaries of literature.

Peter Hunt (1984-85) asserts that "wherever you look, there seems to be an inevitable link between children's literature and modern criticism" (p. 191). Theorizing results when readers of criticism and critics themselves reflect on their work. It's a self-reflexive process. In challenging each other, these readers question each others'—and their own—driving assumptions. What basic beliefs, attitudes, and values operate beneath a given critical statement or critical act? On what inclusions does criticism depend? What does it exclude? "Theory is an uncomfortable and uncomforting thing, for by seeking to explain what we might have thought was obvious, it draws attention to some of the hidden problems. ... Theory may not solve any of these problems directly, but it forces us to confront them" (Hunt, 1984-85, p. 191). Additionally, participation in critical theory can "extricate children's
literature from the narrow boundaries of the past and to place it in the foreground of literary scholarship, facing the future” (Shavit, 1986, p. x). While this last statement sounds simultaneously deprecating and ambitious, it does recognize the marginalization of children's literature, and therefore of children themselves (and all who work with and on behalf of children), as it avows the potential of children's literature to enlighten other literatures, other texts, other criticisms.

Skimming the table of contents in the June 1990 The Lion and the Unicorn proves this point. The issue's theme is “Politics and Ideology”—note, not “the politics of the playground” or “ideologies evident in the nursery” but something fuller, more expansive. It features articles such as “Taking Political Stock: New Theoretical and Critical Approaches to Anglo-American Children's Literature in the 1980s,” “History and the Politics of Play in T. S. Eliot's 'The Burial of the Dead' and Arthur Ransome's Swallows and Amazons,” “Children of the Revolution: A Literary Case Study,” and “From Little Black Sambo to Popo and Fifina: Arna Bontemps and the Creation of African-American Children's Literature” (Politics and ideology, 1990, p. 5). If these long titles, complete with their telltale scholarly colons, weren't enough to put such essays within the academic arena, their perceptive, original, and cogent arguments would serve as models for others. On a similar note, the Modern Language Association recently published Teaching Children's Literature: Issues, Pedagogy, Resources (Sadler, 1992) as one of its “Options for Teaching” series intended for college and university instructors. Children's literature keeps company in this series with other theoretical considerations of curriculum, study, and methods. The introduction to the volume states:

Although the dismissal of “kiddie lit” has certainly abated in academic circles in recent years, the segregation of children's literature seems to persist as much as before, even though attention to its texts should be of enormous concern to the student of “adult” classics.

Literary historians, too, might benefit from a closer look at the relation between child texts and adult texts.

We will have to go beyond the parochial (or territorial) attitudes responsible for [this] segregation. . . . [to overcome] those who still welcome the isolation of a field once confined to schools of education, who continue to regard the study of child texts as a less demanding and less rigorous enterprise. . . . submissions of essays to journals [devoted to children's literature continue]. . . . as more and more serious articles in children's literature appear in these journals, as well as in PMLA [Publications of the Modern Language Association], ELH, Nineteenth-Century Literature and Critical Inquiry, the standards (and stakes) are steadily raised. (Knoepflemacher, 1992, pp. 3-5)

**LITERARY THEORY**

But what is the role of theory in textual criticism? Kay Vandergrift (1990) finds that “the purpose of . . . theory is to bring readers closer
to literary works” (p. 1). As an outcome of criticism, the most valuable contribution that theory makes seems basic. Like criticism, theory offers occasion for illumination. Exposure to and consideration of critical theories can initiate reflection on ways of reading and thinking about books and can foster greater knowledge about ourselves as readers and as critics—as readers of literature but also as readers of criticism. Vandergrift (1990) views theory as a metaphor and warns:

Keep in mind that all theories are themselves products of the imagination. . . .

Literary theory, therefore, is a metaphor about metaphors. Theories are fictions without the full strength of “make believe” engendered by a fictional work of art, but, nonetheless, they are fictions which may lead to insight and discovery. (p. 1)

Insight and discovery: the two final, hard-won, desirable products of criticism. In trying on different theoretical personas, one can follow new paths to perspicacity about a given book. Furthermore, having a range of theoretical lenses enables one to be a knowledgeable consumer of criticism; to read reviews with discernment of the reviewer’s precarious location “out on a limb” (Heins, 1970b, p. 264) but also with a cognizance of the reviewer’s possible biases and critical approach; to read collections of essays about literature with an experienced eye and a practiced mind; and to participate in debates about children’s literature in an open, confident way. Ultimately, exploring a variety of critical theories may lead one to recognize her own agendas, to see what critical axes she may be grinding and why.

Criticism needn’t be negative; perhaps it needn’t even be judgmental. To earn the title, the critic cannot function only as another reader, albeit a better one (Heins, Townsend, Hunt); he must also embrace the responsibility to offer fresh perspectives. The critic stands obligated to give a thoughtful reading of the text and to provide an expansive vision of it, not always to show what the text does not do, but to explore what it does and what promise it exhibits.

How does one demonstrate this illuminating potential of criticism? One could attempt to trace critical theory in the practice of reviewing. In doing so, one could sample book reviews currently available and consider them in terms of what theoretical influences appear in them. That exercise is based on two arrogant assumptions: one, that the reviewer wrote directly out of a theoretical framework; and two, that theoretical principles of criticism direct the review more than attention to audience or to text does.

One could examine a single text, one well known to a general audience. Then, one could overlay this textual base with an assortment of theoretical transparencies. While this strategy holds tantalizing appeal, it falsely assumes that each theoretical gauze exposes a single meaning; for example, that a feminist approach will yield one way
of reading that text. In fact, theory shifts the frame of critical vision; it works against a static interpretation as it allows the reader/critic to adopt a variety of ideologies with any given reading and with any given text. Further, to apply diverse theories to a single text, one must select the text. Heins presents that very selection as a critical act, so the exercise of theory will have influenced that decision. Even more problematic, though, stand the concealed values and judgments in the selection itself. From what element of literature does one choose? Does the choice come from historical children's literature? From contemporary books? In choosing, should one try to define a canon of children's literature? Ideally, each "school" of critical thought can explore every text with precision and elaboration, so how does one justify a particular text? And to change texts based on the theoretical frame threatens to result in easy correspondences rather than genuine illumination. For example, one could choose an archetypal reading of The Wizard of Oz focusing on the elements of Dorothy's quest, her journey from home and return—aspects obvious within the text and helpful in making a point quickly. However, a Marxist or a reader response interpretation could be more challenging to develop and could be uniquely penetrating and rich.

In "Enigma Variations: What Feminist Theory Knows about Children's Literature," Lissa Paul (1987) discusses a historical text, The Secret Garden, and a contemporary text, Margaret Mahy's (1984) The Changeover: A Supernatural Romance, through feminist poetics. In the process, she realizes her own dissatisfaction with the shift away from Mary as Burnett's central character and the emergence of Colin as hero; she shows Mahy's effective use of the popularity of the romance novel to texture the character of Sorry Carlisle, to imbue him with qualities stereotypically ascribed to women, and to enable him to serve as guide to Laura on her journey to heroism. Paul's most extraordinary achievement, though, is this idea: "There is good reason for appropriating feminist theory to children's literature. Both women's literature and children's literature are devalued and regarded as marginal or peripheral by the literary and educational communities" (p. 187).

Feminism and Marxism share the common ground of oppression in their theoretical foundations. While it may be argued that Marxist criticism belongs under the umbrella of sociological criticism or of political criticism, its fastidious emphasis on economic power, on the Marxian concept of the dialectics of history, and on the revolutionary potential of literature carve out a unique niche. Jerry Phillips and Ian Wojcik-Andrews (1990b), in "Notes toward a Marxist Critical Practice," suggest that the critic/reader must "[open] a dialogue within the text between the historical condition of its production and the moment of its reception" (p. 127). That is, in fact, just what they do in the

Psychoanalytic criticism refers to a different sort of oppression, to repression, in its view of literature. It moves away from a new critic's attempt to view the text scientifically as a way of unlocking literary meaning and turns to analysis of the characters, their motives and operation within the text. Mary Lou White (1976) includes four articles on a psychological approach via “character analysis.” Roni Natov (1990) combines a feminist and a psychoanalytical overlay in considering “Mothers and Daughters: Jamaica Kincaid's Pre-Oedipal Narrative.” Here, she not only sheds light on the adolescent ambivalence of the title character, Annie John, toward her mother, but also touches on possible connections to the author's own experience.

White (1976) identifies biographical criticism as a subset of psychological criticism. Biocritical studies, such as the Twayne series about young adult authors which began with Patricia Campbell’s (1985) *Presenting Robert Cormier*, strive to consider the fiction in the context of its creator, his intentions, and his life.

Archetypal critics are active in children's literature probably because of the dominating presence of folklore and fairy tales. Archetypal theory addresses the mythic and folkloric patterns evident in fiction, more often in fantasy but also in realism. Ursula Le Guin's (1979) “The Child and the Shadow” articulates her view of the Jungian archetype of shadow as it appears in literature, from Hans Christian Andersen to her own fantasy. The article itself serves as guide to reading Le Guin's (1968) archetype-rich novel *A Wizard of Earthsea*, in which Ged must face, name, and claim his own shadow in order to be whole. Natalie Babbitt's (1987) “Fantasy and the Classic Hero” both celebrates and bemoans her unknowing return to and employment of Joseph Campbell's archetypal heroic journey. Babbitt outlines the separation-initiation-return model in a handful of children's books and discusses the other necessary elements to make the literary hero's journey a successful one. She concludes affirming the inevitability of the motif:

> The total round of the hero's path is vitally important. Without it we cannot tell stories that satisfy us. . . . To carry on in that tradition, to take the hero through his round and bring him home again, over and over, is an ancient and honorable exercise that will never lose its vitality or its value. It has always existed somewhere in literature. . . . (p. 155)

*The Children's Literature Association Quarterly* (Moss, 1982) devoted a special section to essays on a structuralist response to children's literature. “Literary structuralists believe that literature is non-referential; they neither discover meaning nor assign meaning to a work, but attempt to identify how one uses various semiotic conventions in making sense of texts” (Vandergriff, 1990, p. 15). In pursuing a
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structuralist chain of exposition, Stephen Roxburgh (1982) isolates the visual and textual elements of Anno’s Counting Book (Anno, 1977) and unfolds the layers of visual and textual elements which build to develop meaning in the picture book. Jonathan Stott (1987) applies structuralist concepts to a classroom situation. He drives toward understanding ways in which children become proficient readers as they master the symbolic structures of stories. Literary works read and discussed in school “become increasingly more complex in their uses of the various elements of the literary codes” (p. 153), and Stott describes ways in which “each work becomes a building block in the foundation on which increased literary understanding is built” (p. 153).

Reader response critics place the text in a secondary position and focus attention on the reader. Aidan Chambers (1983) writes, “as we read our whole lives—our personal histories—are open to the book and can be engaged, can be brought to memory, by features in the book...” (p. 176). This activity includes life experiences and reading experiences. Ever aware of educational practicality, though simultaneously appreciative of the complexity of its implementation, Chambers maps “a critical blueprint” (p. 174).

Peter Hunt’s (1990) call for a “childist” approach to criticism of children’s literature exhibits a reader response bias. However, Hunt’s advocacy of a childist poetics exerts an even greater demand on adult critics, challenging them to acknowledge the baggage they bring to the text and to strive to discard some of it as they endeavor to enter the text with an uncluttered attitude, yet one open to and aware of the culture of childhood.

In a 1990 cultural pluralism column in The Children’s Literature Association Quarterly, Opal Moore and Donnarae MacCann (1990) employ a Black Aesthetic framework in writing “On Canon Expansion and the Artistry of Joyce Hansen.” As do feminists, they focus on writers who have been ignored, undervalued, or devalued by mainstream criticism, and pay genuine critical attention to the work of those writers. They reveal Hansen as “establishing an historical and ethical context for the young within which they can interpret and respond more positively to the circumstances of their present lives” (p. 37). Based on “general principles of inclusion and empowerment” (p. 33), this theoretical application proves crucial for all readers, not only the excluded.

In discussing new historicism and its use in college English classrooms, Brook Thomas (1987) charges American culture, and therefore critical theory, with amnesia (p. 509) and calls for examining literature within a historical context. “A product of the past, forever capable of reproduction in the present, literature can help create a historical consciousness that reflects upon and judges our present situation...” (p. 521). Thomas (1989) puts this theory to practice
in “Preserving and Keeping Order by Killing Time in Heart of Darkness” where he moves from general ideas about history to their enlightenment of the text. He begins by naming Conrad “a historian of human experience” (p. 237) and concludes with having stripped the novel “from the cloak of time ... to imagine a radically different form of temporal narrative” (pp. 254-255).

Geoff Moss (1990) considers the presence and success of metafiction, fiction about fiction, in children’s literature, while David Lewis (1990) uses the conceits of self-conscious, self-reflexive fiction to elucidate the picture book:

The metafictive in picture books can now be seen as an extreme and exaggerated manifestation of a tendency already deeply rooted in the form itself. By its nature, the picture book tends towards openness, the playful, the parodic—fertile ground in which the metafictive can flourish (p. 143).

New books, such as Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith’s (1992) The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales, dramatically indulge this playfulness. Story, text, design, author and illustrator’s biographies, cover art, and flap copy don’t escape self-comment and manipulation. The sheer narcissism delights a reader.

And a final lens: deconstruction, which has been somewhat tardy in attending children’s literature criticism until relatively recently. In fact, art in picture books such as The Jolly Postman by Janet and Allan Ahlberg (1986) operates successfully via the deconstructive idea of intertextual game playing. Avi’s (1991) young adult novel Nothing but the Truth requires the reader to construct the narrative by frequently dislocating the reader (every time you think you know where you are, who’s speaking, what’s happening, either place, speakers, event, or document shifts). One aspect of deconstruction, this dislocation, connects to another as the text forces the reader to attend to the role of gaps and silences as generative of meaning within the novel.

**CONCLUSION**

A discussion of the application of critical theory to critical practice must remain incomplete always, because the theories themselves change over time, begin to question themselves and their effectiveness, and generate new, more “relevant” theories. “When a particular theory can no longer encompass new ideas or new works of art, new theories are developed . . . Each offers a system of useful, but incomplete, organizing constructs which continually lead to new solutions, new problems, and new theories” (Vandergrift, 1990, pp. 1-2). This look at modes of critical theory-in-practice is not meant to be thorough or comprehensive; rather it aims to suggest the illuminating potential of theory in textual criticism.
REFERENCES


