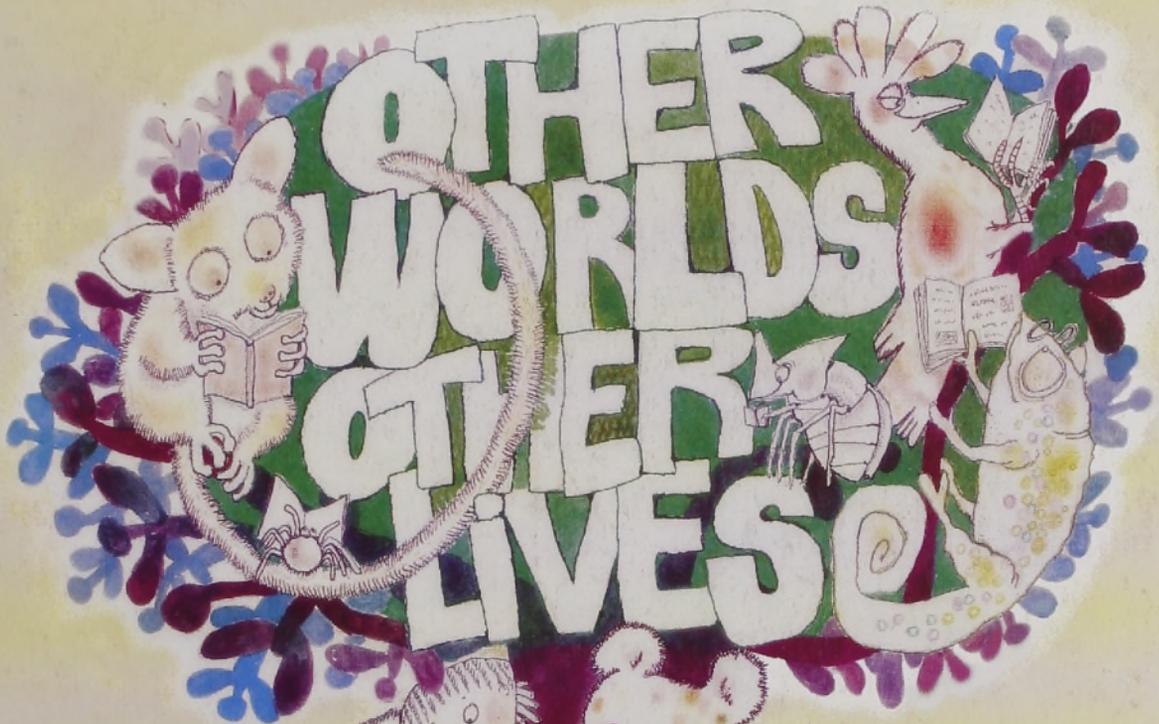


volume 2



children's literature experiences

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Unisa

monograph series 2

Other Worlds Other Lives

children's literature experiences

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A Comparative view of children's literature:

a discussion paper

jean webb

Everywhere there is connection; everywhere there is illustration. No single event, no single literature is adequately comprehended except in relation to other events, to other literatures. Matthew Arnold



Introduction

During the past few years I have been working on the study of Children's Literature from an holistic perspective, that is, to see the literature contextualised within social and historical influences, as well as the purely literary. The theoretical roots are a Marxist-New Historicist approach. I began with a study of Children's Literature in England as influenced by the publishing industry during the early 1990s, a time when the UK economic climate was in a period of recession. This study was accidental, for the intention was originally to take a literary focus which centralised on analysis of the text. However, in discussion with writers, illustrators, publishers, librarians, and booksellers I discovered that there were a considerable number of barriers debarring the literary from being the prime area of consideration, despite the populist notion of books for children being in a particularly "innocent" category of life. Curiosity aroused, I then contacted seven experts world wide to find out what they thought about this perspective on children's literature in their situation, and it is this information

combined with on-going research which informs the discussion presented here. Hopefully the work will be developed and published as a "Comparative Reader in Children's Literature", a collection of essays which inter-relate and discuss the literature on a truly comparative basis, rather than parallel accounts. I am therefore indebted to Jay Heale, South Africa, Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer from Canada, John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, Australia, Andrew Casson, Sweden, and Michael Rosen, England for having stimulated the thought which has led to the production of this paper. For the purposes of this discussion, I wish to focus on the theoretical parameters and two case studies, that of Ireland and England. The work presented is in process, a consideration of ideas rather than formulated conclusions.

Comparative work always raises questions of what is the basis for comparison, what the points of parity or difference are which enable comparison to be meaningful. The requirement for publishing is the commonality here, for there are direct elements of comparison and meaningful diversions which give insight into the literature itself. The following summation of Marxist literary theory further clarifies the particular importance of the publishing industry for Marxist theory views culture "not as an independent reality but" as "inseparable from the historical conditions in which human beings create their material lives"; the relations of exploitation and domination which govern the social and economic order of a particular phase of human history will in some sense "determine" the whole cultural life of the society.¹ The subject of this paper therefore becomes an examination of the result of collision between the literary consciousness, which Marx and Engels recognised as being able to change the culture, and the capitalist determinism which underpins the culture. The resultant phenomena are also related to the time at which events occur. The phenomena discussed here, as indicated earlier, are contemporary to the early 1990s a period of economic recession following the boom of the '80s.

The choice of Ireland and England as the main case studies, is in order to interrogate another interface at which collision occurs, that of the dominant culture and the subject colonial culture, for interestingly there are parallels to be drawn between the political demonstrations of imperialism and the contemporary state of the publishing worlds in these two countries.

Publishing in England is a matter of expanding empires. Companies consume companies in a bid to dominate all. The individual house which once displayed a particular identity is probably a small part of a large publishing machine and consequently governed by the business and literary requirements of the parent body. Individuality does not earn sufficiently in a highly competitive market. No longer is the intimate, nurturing relationship between editor and writer/illustrator the norm, for within an economically focused climate the rate of turn over dominates. Speed and movement militate against close involvement with the literary artist as producer, when the demand for a new book in terms of economic success is a mere 18 months. Storage space, either in the book shop or the warehouse is a costly consideration, therefore the backlist, the traditional publishing approach to storing the work of an author has been abandoned. For each foot of shelf space saved the pressure is exerted upon the writer as they can no longer depend upon previous work to produce a livelihood. A book can be on the way to the remaindering book shops in little over a year from being fresh from the press, and within a further six months it will be unavailable except through library access. The situation is exacerbated by short print runs. For example, in the summer of 1993 the winner of the Mother Goose Award for the best picture book of the year was announced and publicised. I decided to set this text for my students in the following autumn. By then the book was unavailable for purchase. By the time the literary process of selection had taken place the commercial world had moved on. The sad irony of this particular anecdote is

that the Mother Goose Award is for the most promising new illustrator of the year. How can new talent be nurtured and recognised if the work disappears before it has had time to be appreciated and read by a wider audience? Problems arising from the interface between the economic and the literary go beyond the immediacy of the relationship between writer and publisher and impinge upon the world of education in its various guises.

Currently in the UK the major refereed critical journal which covers the area of children's literature is part-funded from America, and without that support could not have existed for the past 25 years, and the value of that journal is being here loudly applauded. However, the case is that unless the critical material falls within the international parameters of interest, then the article cannot be included. Commercial censorship is uncomfortably insidious.

We are all driven variously by inescapable economic realities, for we have a publishing industry which has to support itself. Neither is this an unprecedented or contemporary circumstance, one only has to read George Gissing's *New Grubb Street*, a 19th century adult novel which documented the lives of writers in a commercially driven literary world, to realise that at a certain level of production to satisfy a level of market demand, that particular forms of commercial organisation will impinge upon the literary producer and the product. The pressures are intensified by the multi-national aspects of publishing in the UK which derive from the need for a book to sell not only in the UK, but America, Australia, New Zealand and, if at all possible, in translation in Europe and Japan, for example. The danger is that the literature begins therefore to depict and investigate an overview of a culture which exists somewhere-nowhere in the mid-Atlantic. The richness and diversity is depleted because in the view of publishers, the books will not be understood by readers outside that select

cultural enclave of the implied reader in the publisher's mind. This is, to me, a fallacious argument, unfortunately it is the position put forward by publishers, in that if it will not sell to a world market it is not a viable proposition. Notably it is an Anglo/American-centric Western world market, which returns us to the notion of empire and literary imperialism.

The mass culture engendered in these books, as it were, the "imperialist" domination of the reading space, therefore becomes a vital area of consideration as to what is and also what is not being published for the multi-national market. Historical books, for example, outside of a popular and mythic range, are becoming taboo, for it is argued that the reader has to have knowledge of the context to understand the work.² Political correctness and censorship hold a weight of import where there is insufficient space for other views to be exercised. The pleasure of variety can be easily lost when strong local features are debarred. For example, an English illustrator, Heather Buchanan resorted to starting an independent publishing co-operative because her work was set very much against the Welsh countryside, and Welsh cottages were not perceived to be acceptable architecture for the multi-market! The discussion so far has been Anglo-centric. The use of "English" has been a conscious inclusion rather than British. Regional differentiation and richness are becoming muted within the small areas of experience which are within my knowledge; my question is "what of others?"

The circumstances of the domination of the publishing corporations are interlinked with corporate selling strategies. Book selling to the general public in the UK is split between the high street stores who sell stationery goods, et cetera, book shops which are linked in a national chain and independent booksellers. The high street stores and the chain book shops are owned by the same corporation. One might go to store "A" in Birmingham and "B" a 100 miles away in Oxford,

and they will both be serviced by the central office which determines what they will stock from a centralised list. There is some modicum of variation depending on how far the local manager can justify a children's book specialist on the staff. The implications of centralisation go to the top of the commercial triangle, for decisions about which books are to be published are based upon decisions made by the book buyer from the corporate booksellers. The opportunity for variety is therefore marginalised to the independent book sellers, of whom there are few, and the specialist book clubs, such as the "Letterbox Press" where one can obtain books from overseas, for example. Nevertheless, Irish books are difficult to obtain in the UK.³ Books outside of the central stock list are usually obtained from the representatives who visit the shops, a circumstance which further compounds the restrictions on what is available.

Restriction and segregation are arising from commercial reasons and therefore in danger of enclosing the literary experiences of children and channelling their reading into particular cultural knowledges. Cultural division has torn apart the lives of people who live in Eire, Northern Ireland and England for the past 20 years of war. In this period of hope for a sustained peace it seems sadly ironic that the possibilities for interchange through literature are so limited, and I would suggest unwittingly so. The passage of books is from England through the channels discussed above, with little being able to break out from the marginalised position of the Irish children's book industry. The dominant multi-national book culture remains deaf to the richness and deep-seated quality of Irish children's literature, still, as it were, somewhere out in the colonies.

It is this awareness of the negation of cultural identity which has stimulated the rich flowering of the Irish children's publishing industry during the past 15 years. Initially there was a considerable concern regarding standards of literacy and the absence

of texts which reflected Irish life. This was backed up by an injection of money, and the Irish children's book industry began to flourish. Ironically because the culturally specific books are not perceived to be of interest outside of Ireland, this has maintained the particularities of the fiction produced. The Irish industry works from small publishing companies who can retain independent identities and the close contact with their writers and illustrators. Nonetheless, those authors and illustrators who wish to make a bigger reputation need to work outside in the multi-national market.

To set Irish children's literature within a historical perspective, books specifically for Irish children had been written prior to the formation of the Republic, but with the suppression of Irish culture under English rule, it is a most difficult task to locate the texts and formulate a history.⁴ As such there is no fully documented history of Irish children's literature, however, there is an excellent exhibition of 20th century writers and their work compiled by Robert Dunbar in the Writer's Museum in Dublin.

The nature of contemporary Irish children's literature interestingly parallels the upsurge of Irish literature *per se* with the Celtic Revival at the end of the 19th century, and the early years of the 20th century in the work of writers such as WB Yeats, JM Synge, Sean O'Casey, and James Joyce. Yeats created an Irish consciousness through the use of mythic heroic narratives. Myths, epic fantasies are vital to a subject people. From the time that England invaded Ireland in the early 15th century the English had engaged in a conscious process of deculturalisation. Gaelic was banned, as was Celtic dress, and hairstyles. Henry VIIIth issued an *Act for the English order, habit and language* which stated that

no persons or persons, the king's subjects within this land being ... shall be shorn, or shaven above the ears, or use the wearing of hair upon their heads, like unto long locks called 'glibes' or have any hair growing upon their upper lips, called or named a 'crommeal' or use or wear any shirt, smock, kerchief or linen cap coloured or dyed with saffron, nor yet use, or wear in their shirts or smocks above seven yards of cloth, to measure according to the king's standard, and that also no woman use or wear any 'kyrtell' or skirt tucked up, or embroidered or garnished with silk, nor couched nor laid with 'usker' ornaments after the Irish fashion ... And it be enacted that every person ... shall use ... the English language ... and shall bring up his children in such places where they has occasion to learn the English tongue, order and condition.⁵

Over the following centuries of subjection the Irish were debarred from voting, access to education, practising their religion, owning property, passing on their wealth to their families, even to the quality of equestrian transport they could own.⁶ When one is unable to exist in reality, then the worlds of the imagination and heroic deeds become vital for the life of the culture, for therein is the "history" of the people, albeit an imaginary set of events. Therefore Yeats revived and revised the Celtic myths. JM Synge endeavoured to bring that sense of mystic mysticism into the borders of reality in his Aran Island plays. *The Playboy of the Western world*, for example, is about the creation of the cultural hero from fantasy, and that heroism, although misplaced, is embodied in a "real" man. Sean O'Casey's drama was centrally concerned with the working class hero, his dreams, fantasies, mythic adventures. Captain Boyle in *Juno and the Paycock* loses family, wealth and friends because he is locked into a self-image of mythic heroism. The reality which surrounds him is one of a crumbling tenement rather than a Grand House of the Colonial style, he has never been across the sea, yet conjures scenes of battling in storm tossed seas, and gives himself the title "Captain". The women of the Boyle family address the problems of living in Dublin strafed by bullet fire, and torn by civil war. O'Casey's work called for the creation of a living heroism which could shake off the stultifying

restrictions of a fantasised history to enable people to live in the present and thereby shape the future. James Joyce struggled against what he called the “nets” of history, patriotism and religion,⁷ looking towards a cultural approach which regarded the individual who happened to be Irish as opposed to the Irishman who might also be an individual: a cultural and individual maturity.

The literary and cultural development embodied in the writing for adults is also mirrored in the contemporary development of Irish writing for children. Some of the Irish children’s writers have generally adopted the fantasy, mythic mode of writing, creating worlds untouched by political realities, for example Michael Scott in *Windlord*, and Cormac MacRois in the Giltspur series, whilst others such as Joan Lingard, have taken their stories into the streets of Belfast and the reality of conflict. There is a third position in the growing literary debate which argues that Irish children should be able to read of the realities of their lives outside of the state of war.⁸ Interestingly this debate is reflected in the following three books for children by the contemporary Irish writer Siobhan Parkinson: *The Leprechaun who wished he wasn’t* (1993)⁹, *Amelia* (1993)¹⁰ and *No peace for Amelia* (1994)¹¹.

Siobhan Parkinson was asked by her editor to write a book about leprechauns, a suggestion with which she was not particularly happy, for she felt that it was time the domination of fairy tale and fantasy was broken. Hence the title *The Leprechaun who wished he wasn’t*. The opening passage is as follows:

Laurence was fed up with being a leprechaun. He was tired of sitting under a boring old rainbow, guarding a mouldy old crock of gold and making endless shoes. He wanted to be a human being. And besides, he longed to have a Best Friend. But nobody is ever Best Friends with a leprechaun. Leprechauns spend all their time tricking people and laughing wickedly and stealing things and not letting people have their crocks of gold.¹²

Laurence meets a plump teenage girl, Phoebe, who wants to be thin because she is going to be a bridesmaid at her sister's wedding. Phoebe and the Leprechaun are both in a state of dissatisfaction wanting to be something different. The debate surrounding genre in Irish children's literature, that centres round the tension between Fantasy and Reality, is embodied in these two characters. The story is about how the pair negotiate their relative problems and help each other. Both feel themselves to be perceived as ridiculous. At one point Laurence is upset, and pulls out a handkerchief which was red with large white spots. Phoebe exclaims:

'Oh, just look at your hanky! ... It looks like a handkerchief in a fairytale. It's a very *leprechaunish* sort of handkerchief!'

Lawrence examined his handkerchief glumly. 'Now you see what I mean about being a leprechaun ... People think I'm ridiculous. Or else they don't believe in me.'

'Who doesn't believe in you?'

'Oh, you know – people. Children nowadays are only interested in the ozone layer and computer games. Leprechauns are just too old-fashioned for them ... I mean, look at you. You're not even interested in my crock of gold.'

'But you said you hadn't *got* a crock of gold,' said Phoebe.

'No. But if I had, you wouldn't want it anyway. There's no fun in *not* giving people your crock of gold if they don't want it in the first place.'¹³

In an available and amusing way the story asks questions about whether the coming generation want to remain with a traditional mythic history which is a fantasised construction, that is, as suggested by the extract, layer upon layer of deception, or whether the Irish want to take the construction of their history out of fantasy into reality. The links with a theoretical approach to Irish history are very strong. As discussed above, a method of colonisation is to remove cultural

identity from the subject people; cultural amnesia occurs. The Irish, therefore, have an understandable concern with history. Currently there is a great deal of revisionist work being carried out in the area of Irish history from a perspective which endeavours to combat the previous tendency which glamorised the Irish hero at the expense of less palatable realities. It has taken a considerable time to get to this point of cultural confidence. Although histories had been variously written since medieval times there has been no systematic study of Irish history until it was formally instituted in the 1930s when the Ulster Society for Historical Studies was founded in Belfast and the Irish Historical Society in Dublin. They started to publish a joint journal *Irish historical studies* in 1938 seeking to understand the implications of the forces at work in their past. Professor Lyons of Trinity College Dublin wrote at this time:

To understand the past fully is to cease to live in it, and to cease to live in it is to take the earliest steps towards shaping what is to come from the material of the present.¹⁴

Laurence the leprechaun uses his special skills with a needle and shapes himself a very presentable pair of denim jeans, so that he can become the modern image of a very modern leprechaun, symbolically clothing himself in the fashion of the present in order to move into the new world of the future with his friend Phoebe. Clothing plays an important part in one of the following sub-plots. An American Uncle comes to stay and there is much entertaining play on the stereotypical imaging of the Irish and Phoebe's resistance to such. When the Uncle innocently tries to contain Phoebe within the restrictive and incorrect stereotypical framing, she corrects him, pointing out the connections with Irish language and behaviour.

Now, Uncle Joe is a very nice man, I am sure. But he did wear everyone out. He wanted to buy lots of green cardigans and jumpers because he thought that was what you did in Ireland.

'We wear other colours too.' Phoebe tried explaining to him.

'Yes, but real Irish sweaters are green,' insisted Uncle Joe.

'Well, Aran sweaters aren't,' said Phoebe. 'They're made of bainin, which actually means white.'¹⁵

There are further instances until Uncle Joe explains in disappointed fashion:

'I suppose the next thing you'll say is that you have no leprechauns either.'¹⁶

The fantasy figure of the leprechaun then comes into the reality of the present and is offered a future in America, when Uncle Joe wants to take Laurence back to become a media star.

'I'd be famous would I?'

'Oh, yes, indeed. The country would go wild for you. They might even want to make you president! A real Irish leprechaun. Unbelievable!'

Laurence came down to earth with a bang.

'Unbelievable? I'd be unbelievable, would I?'

'Well, thank you very much, your honour,' said Laurence, giving a stiff little bow, 'But you know, I can be unbelievable right here in Ireland.'¹⁷

As this witty and succinct story observes, there is a place for fantasy, individuality, and resisting the lure of Anglo-Americanisation. For Siobhan Parkinson the crisis of the leprechaun is past, having securely found his place in the present. Her next two books, *Amelia* and *No peace for Amelia* also approach history, but from a realist perspective rather than fantasy. The shift mirroring the development in adult Irish literature outlined above is thus occurring in the children's literature.

Amelia is a historical novel set in Dublin 1914 before the outbreak of the First World War. A New Historicist consideration is enlightening when thinking about this text, for the notion of the marginalised becoming a central focus which then alters the perspective on the dominant. Amelia's family are middle-class Quakers; her mother a fully active suffragette. The stereotypical expectations of an Irish historical novel set in the period of the First World War have already been subverted. The Protestant-Catholic divide has been laid aside, and the pacifist Quakers are the unusual subject. Nineteen hundred and fourteen replaces the expectation of Easter 1916 and the events leading to the Uprising. Amelia's family are well-to-do middle class, whereas the norm derived from reading adult novels leads one to expect to read of the working-class poor, for at the turn of the century the social conditions in Dublin were said to be worse than in Calcutta. Finally, to read of the suffragette movement is refreshingly surprising in a patriarchally dominated society. These comments are not meant to patronise, but rather to explode the myths which readers from outside Ireland have about the expectations of Irish literature which are inherent from reading adult Irish literature. Therefore within the marginalised genre of children's literature which Lissa Paul has equated with writing for women, Siobhan Parkinson has given the reader knowledge of what lies beyond the margins of the marginalised.

The form of Realism adopted enables the reader to think through the problems of re-adjustment with Amelia for this novel is in the style of the 19th century "Bildungsroman" as Amelia grows through the selfishness of childhood into cultural and political awareness through the difficulties of her experiences. The family lose their money in the financially precarious circumstances leading to World War I. Amelia's mother is imprisoned for her political activities. The result is that Amelia has to assume an active and mature role in life rather than the elite comfort of the moneyed middle-class. The representation is psychologically

convincing because the novel works from the interior world of the child outward to appreciation of the world which impinges upon the consciousness and acts of the individual. Ideologically the work is underpinned by a pacifist, feminist perspective of co-operation and unselfish realisation of self-worth, which if applied to the multiple of situations which currently bedevil our time would eradicate war.

The sequel *No peace for Amelia* is set in World War I, and amongst other matters unsentimentally examines the problems for a Quaker community in a state of national and civil war. Thereby the characters move onward because the considerations move beyond the domestic into international conflict, and that of civil war, which is the most insidiously divisive circumstance of aggression. Again the female characters dominate in intelligent politically aware roles, engaging with the problems of their time.

What is particularly interesting about the structure of *No peace for Amelia*, is that Siobhan Parkinson has elected to include a preface which historically documents the background to the fiction. Acknowledgments give the sources, both oral and written, whilst there is also a short history of the period. Here therefore, is the self-conscious confidence which enables a revisionist, albeit fictionalised reading of a strata of society and events in Dublin during the period 1914–1916. Should one call it World War I, or the years of the Republican Uprising?

The historical note runs as follows:

This novel is set in Dublin in the spring of 1916. World War I (1914–1918) which was mainly between Britain and Germany, was almost two years old, and many thousands

of Irishmen had already joined up and been killed. These men joined Irish regiments of the British army, for of course there was no Irish army at the time, as Ireland was still part of the United Kingdom.

Before the war started, the government had promised Home Rule to Ireland. This meant that although Ireland would still remain within the United Kingdom it would have much more independence and would have its own parliament and would be able to pass its own laws about things that had to do with everyday life in Ireland ... another thing the government had promised was votes for women.

Some Irish people didn't think Home Rule was enough. These people were nationalists and they wanted complete independence from Britain. Other people, who were unionists, mainly Protestants in the northern part of the country, didn't want Home Rule at all. They wanted to stay as part of the United Kingdom and to have no parliament in Dublin ... Then the war came and Home Rule was put aside for the moment ...

Amelia was a best seller, and short listed for the prestigious "Bisto" prize. There has been no sign of the book in England. The only historically self-conscious Irish text which I have been able to trace as having been taken up in the wider market is Marita Conlon-McKenna's *Under the hawthorn tree* which deals with the Great Potato Famine, which, whilst not wishing to detract from the book itself, is to be seen within the purposes of this discussion as a predictable inclusion of "Irishness" in a multi-national market: the stereotypical subject, whereas the work of Siobhan Parkinson offers far more of international import although it would seemingly be locked within the parochial.

So where do we lie, comparatively thinking? Currently in the UK there is no book which takes a truly comparative approach to children's literature. Peter Hunt's Encyclopedia, which is forthcoming in 1996, will be a most valuable documentation of separate entries. The comparative combined with the holistic approach, taking account of Marxism and New Historicism, as well as Feminism,

amongst other literary theory perspectives, enables a wide and also deep understanding of the literature and the implications it holds in terms of both literary and cultural studies, for if we understand our literary heritage then our children can

take the earliest steps towards shaping what is to come from the material of the present.

Notes and references

- 1 R. Selden and P. Widdowson. 1993. *A Reader's guide to contemporary literary theory*. Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, p 71.
- 2 I wish to stress that the discussion is about fiction only. There has been a great upsurge in educational publishing in the UK in non-fiction and information books due to the influence of the National Curriculum. Dr Margaret Meek, Institute of Education, University of London, is currently engaged in an analytical consideration of information books.
- 3 "Irish" herein refers to books written in English not Gaelic, and published in Ireland.
- 4 I am indebted to Robert Dunbar, Church of Ireland College, Dublin, for this information.
- 5 Magnus Magnusson. 1978. *Landlord or tenant*. London: Bodley Head, p 63.
- 6 Magnus Magnusson. 1978. *Landlord or tenant?* London: Bodley Head. Gives an accessible social history of Ireland.
- 7 See James Joyce. 1992. *Portrait of the artist as a young man*. London: Penguin.
- 8 See *Children's Literature Association of Ireland Journal*, back copies.
- 9 Siobhan Parkinson. 1993. *The Leprechaun who wished he wasn't*. Dublin: O'Brien Press.
- 10 Siobhan Parkinson. 1994. *Amelia*. Dublin: O'Brien Press.
- 11 Siobhan Parkinson. 1994. *No Peace for Amelia*. Dublin: O'Brien Press.
- 12 *The Leprechaun*, p 6.
- 13 *The Leprechaun*, p 24.
- 14 *Landlord or tenant?* p 64.
- 15 *The Leprechaun*, p 63.
- 16 *The Leprechaun*, p 64.
- 17 *The Leprechaun*, p 71.

Ideological inscription in children's fiction:

strategies of encodement in Ngugi and Achebe

peter t simotei

It may be argued that whereas the presence of ideology in literary texts is inevitable and indisputable such presence is more pronounced in cultures which have been adversely affected by the colonial process. If texts emanating from such cultures have come to be increasingly viewed as constituting sites of ideological contestation in which ideological positions are constructed to affirm or counter existing views of the world, then it is because such a function is inextricably bound with the more urgent need for self-assertion and self-definition. Hence in most literatures of Africa and the Black diaspora, ideology reveals itself as the agency which functions to subvert hegemonic positions engendered in imperialist discourses.

But in these literatures, ideology operates more overtly in writings conceived for adults than in those written for children. And yet in the latter fiction, ideological representation, whether overt or covert is more urgent than in the former. This has to do with the objectives of children's literature for it is generally agreed that writing for children inevitably involves an attempt to inculcate in them norms and other ethical practices which the writer assumes are upheld by the society as its essential premises of cultural formation. John Stephens (1992:3) has, for instance argued that

Writing for children is usually purposeful, its intention being to foster in the child reader a positive apperception of some socio-cultural values which, it is assumed are shared by author and audiences. These values include contemporary morality and ethics, a sense of what is valuable in the culture's past, and aspirations about the present and future.

In most African writings for children, these aspirations about the present and the future, and this so-called sense of a valuable past, occurs as inversions of attitudes fostered by colonialism and neocolonialism. Socio-cultural values in Africa have themselves come under the onslaught of imperialism so that decades after the end of formal colonialisation, the task remains one of reconstituting national cultures and values. What this means to African literature – adult and children's alike – is that ideological construction remains the overriding concern of fictional texts. In these texts are created

Songs, poems, (dances), literature, which embody a structure of values dialectically opposed to those of the ruling class of the oppressing race and nation... the songs of the coloniser (is) given entirely different meaning, interpretation and emphasis (Ngugi 1981:27).

Hence, African literature attempts to create an alternative world to the one already dismembered by European imperialism and it does this by falsifying the ideological assumptions of colonialism. Like Ngugi, Chinua Achebe envisages the same function for his writings. He perceives himself as a teacher with the noble task of re-educating his society against acceptance of denigrating colonial prejudice. He says

Here, then, is an adequate revolution for me to espouse – to help my society to regain its belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-denigration (Achebe, as quoted in Ngugi 1972:51).

My task in this paper then is two-fold: firstly, to show in Ngugi's children's fiction how ideology operates overtly as an agency aimed at subverting entrenched colonialist values; and secondly, how in Achebe, construction of ideological positions, though subtle and covert is nevertheless directed against an hegemonic culture.

Ngugi's most ideological children's fiction is to be found in a trilogy featuring the adventures of a child hero, Njamba Nene. These are *Njamba Nene and the flying bus*, *Njamba Nene's pistol* and *Njamba Nene and the cruel colonial chief* published in that order by the then Heinemann Kenya. We will limit ourselves to the first two.

Njamba Nene and the flying bus is strategically set in Kenya of the 1950s, a time of turbulence. This is the time when the colonial regime is finding it increasingly difficult to control a restive population which is demanding self-rule. Armed resistance is at its peak and so is colonial determination to crush it. But unlike in *Njamba Nene's pistol*, the child hero is not immediately placed within the actual fighting, although a glimpse of this is presented to the reader towards the end of the story. Instead, Njamba Nene is presented as a pupil in Tie and Tie African Primary School (TAPS). This too is a tactical move by the writer, for it is in the colonial schools that Western values and their denigrating ideas of the "others" are inculcated and justified. Indeed, TAPS was founded by a white settler for the purpose of developing "Africans who would think like Europeans and hold the same views about the world as they held" (Ngugi 1982:6).

The Settler founder of the school is given the name Pious Brainwash to signify the obvious role of the coloniser which involves propagation of imperial values

through Christian philanthropy. More than this, Brainwash has not visited the school ever since he started it so that like the tramps in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the pupils are threatened constantly with the spectre of him visiting unannounced. In this regard their teacher tells them

We must always be ready in body, mind and soul so we may not be caught without oil in our lamps like the five foolish virgins of the parable (1986:6).

The teacher's warning connects intertextually with a Judeo-Christian ethic which urges readiness in preparation for the second coming of Christ. But whereas Christian vigilance prefigures the existence of a desirable world alternative to the present, colonialism appropriates the idea in order to implant apathy to things material and in so doing effect the dispossession of the colonised.

In Tie and Tie school, Njamba Nene is the only child from a poor family. The rest of the boys come from wealthy homes and to be wealthy in Kikuyu land in the 1950s meant that one was positively connected with the colonial system.

Njamba is however admitted to the school through a principle in the school which allows for one or two boys from poor backgrounds to be accepted. Nene is therefore placed in an antagonistic relationship with every other member of the school. In this relationship too, Nene represents the imperialistic stance which his mother, Wacu, has been unwittingly fostering in him through a rendition of traditional wisdom. It is in fact this constant reference to Wacu as the originator of Nene's anti-colonial diatribe that tries, rather unsuccessfully, to save Nene from being too intelligent for his age.

One of Ngugi's pet topics, the place of language in the construction of African cultures, features at the beginning of the story when Nene's first clash with Kirogoru, the teacher, occurs over his inability to communicate in English, the coloniser's language, and which is designated as the sole medium of communication in the school. When challenged to speak in English, Njamba Nene retorts

Language is language ... No language is better than another (1986:3).

Such intelligent remarks, uttered with the confidence of an adult tend to portray Njamba Nene as more of the author's mouthpiece than a typical character of children's fiction. Indeed one of the serious flaws in Ngugi's children's fiction lies in his overindulgence in polemics so that ideological intentions become too central as to undercut the inscribing genre. This may be the indulgence which Nana Wilson-Tagoe warns against when she says

The greatest harm a writer of children's books can do to the validity of experience in his books is to allow his own tastes and pre-occupations to influence how a child will react to particular experiences and situations (Ikonne 1992:19).

Stephens (1992) agreeing with Hollindale, has rightly argued that children's books with implicit rather than explicit ideological expressions are the more powerful ideologically because implicit ideological positions are invested with legitimacy through the implications that things are simply "so". Paraphrasing Hollindale, Stephens (1992:9) writes that

... explicit advocacy tends to provoke reader resistance to the message, and at the same time it concedes that the advocated value or behaviour is still a minority social practice, whereas the ideal behaviour can be in effect muted if presented as though it were normal social practice.

An anti-imperialist culture is a well established fact of life in Kenya where Nene's story is set. It is not therefore a minority tendency and yet Ngugi's overt and therefore emphatic representation of ideology tends to disempower the narrative discourse as a tool of persuasion. The effect of this is that the child reader rather than be situated inside the text is expelled from it. The adult interpreter on the other hand would see not a gripping story for young minds but watered-down versions of his earlier novels.

In the fiction he writes for adult readers, Ngugi's encodement of ideology is subtle and powerful, an element which disappears in children's fiction. In the latter ideological construction appear schematic with characters being heavily manipulated.

Hence, Njamba Nene's utterances and action connects with revolutionary rhetoric and projects while all the characters are caricatures hewn from a comprador petty bourgeois class.

For instance, John Bull, one of the boys who is contrasted in terms of class to Njamba Nene, is described thus

a small, dark boy with *chubby cheeks and fat little legs and arms* (1986:6) (my emphasis).

This is in Ngugi's diction a popular image of an over-fed, parasitic bourgeois. It is an image which recalls Pious Brainwash who is nicknamed Hangbelly because he had a hanging belly which he used to support with braces. In Hangbelly is signified destructive capitalistic greed.

If John Bull is viewed as a caricature, it is because he is presented as nothing else other than an embodiment of stereotypical attitudes instilled in Africans by years of colonial denigration and prejudice. John Bull

... spoke English with the nasal accent of an Englishman. He also knew a lot about Europe. He knew about its rivers, seas, lakes, trees ... but if you asked him about his own country he would disdainfully shake his head and say that he did not have the slightest clue (1986:5).

There is no doubt that colonialism produced such self-hating masquerades but what provokes resistance to this kind of description is the blunt way in which the original idea is appropriated in fiction. In the description the character of John Bull is used to give expression to an epigram originating from Mao Tse Tung and which Ngugi himself quotes in the beginning of the first chapter of his *Writers in politics*.¹ In other words, the political ideas of Mao or those of Ngugi himself do not undergo any change once appropriated as fictional elements.

The narrative sequence in *Njamba Nene and the flying bus* demonstrates the emergence of an anti-imperialist spirit in the young Nene and shows how this infantile assertion connects with the ongoing national war of liberation. The link with the wider struggle is effected by relocating the pupils away from school to a physically strange and hostile environment which leaves them helpless. This is an act of deconstruction which effaces symbols of class and erodes the power of its owners. Money and sophisticated attire become meaningless in the thick dangerous forest in which the boys find themselves. This deconstruction also allows for the growth of Njamba Nene's philosophy of life which as we have seen is rooted in the indigenous culture; a culture whose essence is communal. "We must share tasks, and ideas and burdens," he tells the other pupils. Collective action is envisaged as the only solution to the impasse they are in.

As they try to locate their way back home, the boys realise that they have to rely on the knowledge of Njamba Nene. His is the knowledge of the local country which goes hand in hand with versatility in Gikuyu language – the constituting mode of Kikuyu landscape. In fact, the search for a way home becomes symbolic of the journey back to the past which will enable a people to grapple meaningfully with the challenges of the future. Njamba Nene says to his confused colleagues

We must first of all find out where we have come from and where we are now. Then only then can we know which way to go ... We cannot know where we are, without first finding out where we came from (1986:9).

Outside the text, this refers to Ngugi's own reconnection with the creative culture of his people, a search which has seen him abandon English as the medium of his writing.

In Njamba Nene's story, the attempt by the boys to retrace their way corresponds in some way to the nationalist struggle (in Kenya) to break the links with a perverse colonial past and a destructive neocolonial present. In his other writing, Ngugi envisages this struggle to be between two forces: a progressive nationalistic segment of society pitted against a retrogressive and exploitative imperialistic one. In Njamba Nene's story, these Marxist categories are figured in the symbolic struggle that comes to characterise the relationship between John Bull and Njamba Nene. All the other boys have to choose between the two, but a decisive choice has to be made later when the boys' journey back home leads into two groups of armed men who are diametrically opposed – white and black colonial askaris on the right and Mau Mau fighters on the left². Njamba's siding with the latter group leads to his later expulsion from school, something he takes

quite calmly. As he leaves the school compound, “his eyes were shining brightly. They were filled with courage and hope for great victories to come” (1986:23).

The optimism and courage which ends this story is given form in *Njamba Nene's pistol*. The latter is really about Nene's initiation into the volatile world of adults, marked by intolerable colonial oppression and the violent reaction to it by the people. Unlike in the first story, the present story is told without burdening the discourse with ideological rhetoric. Colonial injustice and the necessity for rebellion is brought to the fore in the unbearable starvation inflicted on the people by the destructive effects of the emergency. The child hero is not, like in the first a know-it-all youngster with socialist leanings but an innocent boy inevitably jolted from infantile solipsism by entrenched colonial injustice. Nene's initiation into the secrets of the Land and Freedom Army (Mau Mau) begins when a disabling hunger forces him to steal bread from a shop but returns it because his conscience does not allow him to eat what has been stolen from his people. It is when he is returning the bread that he meets Ruheni, a disguised Mau Mau general whose mission in the neighbourhood is to kill Kogorogoru the local chief, and who in the first story is the teacher who expels Njamba Nene from school. By killing Chief Kogorogoru, General Ruheni has not only acted generally for the people but also for Nene as an individual.

As is the case in the earlier story, Nene is again faced with the dilemma of choice and his choice to side with the Mau Mau is interpreted as a commitment to a patriotic cause. Indeed, Ruheni impresses upon Nene what Ngugi has been impressing upon us elsewhere, that Kenyan history is about domination and resistance, collaboration and rebellion. It is in this sense that Ngugi's children's fiction can be read as watered-down versions of the works he conceives for mature readers. For instance, in *Njamba Nene and the flying bus*, Njamba Nene

is so unmistakably a miniature of Karega in *Petals of blood*, a correlation which transforms Nene into a caricature because he cannot bear the same ideological burden as does Karega. This problem in Ngugi's children's fiction arises from the fact that the fiction is deeply imbued with history, a fact that must make it predominantly ideological since colonial histories, Brydon has argued

... contain both oppression and resistance. We make a strategic choice when we stress one above the other. To stress our helplessness and despair is to continue our oppression, to stress our power to effect change is the first step toward realising change happen. (Brydon 1990:8).

It is his sensitivity to the unique post-colonial situation that reflects sometimes negatively on the structures of Ngugi's fictional texts.

We can now turn to Achebe's *Chike and the river* and *The Drum*, texts which by their covert encodement of ideology present their own problems of reading. In Ngugi, ideology as the referent of the literary text, is concretised through situating the characters in an immediate historical reality which almost disrupts verisimilitude. In Achebe's texts a high degree of fictiveness is preserved which in effect demands for any discussion of ideology a focus on their thematic and moral significance.

In *Chike and the river*, the development of Chike, a young boy who has just moved from his parent's village home in Umuofia to his uncle's urban home in Onitsha takes place in a world already structured by societal moral attitudes. Chike's growth then consists of coming to terms with the implications of the society's "do's and don'ts". Societal values appear as bottle necks to his infantile desires, the most burning one being the desire to cross the River Niger by ferry.

When leaving for Onitsha, where he was also to attend school, his mother had sternly warned him never to wander about the city nor go near the River Niger. But on reaching Onitsha, the mother's position is contradicted not only by the popular practice of Chike's newly found urban friends but also by his curiosity and a growing interest in adventure. In spite of Chike's popularity with the other boys, his attempts to fully integrate are thwarted by inexperience and hence a paucity in the vocabulary of adventure. The greatest part of his friends' conversation is centred on the adventures of crossing the Niger and what it means to be in Mid-Western Nigeria. Such exclusivity does not only make Chike look ignorant; it also challenges him to shed conservative village values. But to cross the Niger one needed sixpence, something Chike would not afford and which his strict uncle could not proffer either. It is a precarious position which almost forces Chike to use unethical means.

In the story, the narrative places emphasis on conformity to societal norms as the only way to avoid punishment and trouble. Chike's friends like Ezekiel get punished by the Headmaster because they deviate from accepted forms of behaviour. Chike's problems too arise because he fails to heed his mother and uncle. He is misled by his closest friends. His suffering at the hands of Professor Chandus, the money-multiplier [sic], follows his acceptance of Samwel's advice.

But we need to acknowledge the contradictory meaning implied by the text, that a child's growth takes place ironically through that child's violation of norms which the society considers sacrosanct. Conservative moral positions are therefore challenged since they reject adventure as complementary to the child's growing interest in the complexity of human interrelationships. It is Chike's decision to challenge his mother's advice which fosters a comprehension of the subtle existence of evil. For example, when Chike finally crosses the Niger and is unable

to recross on the same day because he misses the return ferry, his adventure takes on an unexpected dimension but one which leads to a surprising discovery. Chike discovers that Peter Nwana, the man he has known as his uncle's great friend and neighbour in Onitsha, is in fact a racketeer, a thief! He now understands why he has often seen Nwana with huge bundles of money. Nwana's arrest conveys a moral to Chike and points to the fact that he would have met a similar fate had he yielded to the temptation to steal money in order to pay for his journey to Asaba. His discovery earns him a high school scholarship from the Manager of the shop which Nwana had burgled.

Chike's transition to mature social awareness is also captured symbolically through the act of crossing the River Niger and is presented as a rejection of the normative structures of the mature society. Across the Niger, there exists, in the fanciful minds of the boys, Asaba and beyond it Lagos, second-to-London, a Midsummer Nights Dream, the Isle of Man. These illusory images of Lagos gain their attractiveness from their associations with false images of London's unsurpassed beauty, goodness and civilisation. Chike's experiences in Asaba subverts these images. In Asaba, he wonders

Was this Asaba about which he had heard so much? There was nothing to see except a few miserable-looking houses (Achebe 1990:50).

But this disappointment aside, Chike was happy he had achieved the most important thing: "he could now talk like the rest of his companions".

We may say about *Chike and the river* that concealment of an operative ideology is total and that a discussion of the supposedly signified ideology runs the risk of absurd abstraction. Mention may, however, be made of the fact that the narrative

mediates tension arising from destabilised traditional African structures, the destabilising element originating from the West in the form of capitalist competition. Asaba is tempting to the boys because it is conceived as a Western-style city with the luxuriant lifestyle it denotes.

The Drum is adapted from traditional African folklore and can be read secondarily as a discourse on power in so far as it focuses on the collapse of a fledgling oligarchy. The main character in this fable is Tortoise who is well known in African folktales for wit, trickery and treachery. The essence of the plot in *The Drum* lies in the tragic possibilities of these elements.

In the story, Tortoise stumbles accidentally into the land of the spirits as he tries to retrieve his fruit which has fallen into a hole. In the Animal Country, a devastating famine has forced animals to traverse territories in search of food. Tortoise had just come across a palm tree with plenty of fruits and had been lavishly feasting when one fruit slipped through his fingers and fell to the ground and into a hole.

In the spirit world, Tortoise is given a magic drum to compensate him for his fruit which had already been eaten by a spirit boy. Tortoise needs to merely beat the drum gently and a variety of food would appear. Upon his return to the country of animals, Tortoise chooses to exploit the drum as an instrument of power. He seeks now to construct a hierarchy of power relationships with himself at the top, a move which he begins by recasting his incidental crossing to the spirit world as a messianic mission which he undertook in order to redeem the other animals from perpetual suffering. He says

I said to myself: All the animals in the country will perish unless somebody comes forward to save them. Somebody who is prepared to risk his own life for the sake of his fellows. And so I decided that person had to be myself ... (Achebe 1988:16).

Ideological encodement here is achieved through appropriation of a messianic diction in which self-sacrifice is invoked to legitimise ascendancy to absolute power. (Here, a parallel to the self-serving ideologies of the post-independence political leadership may be read). If Tortoise is to project himself as the unquestioned leader of the Animals, he must fashion new terminologies to define this new role and induce acceptance from the other animals. Hence, he now insists on referring to the animal country as “Kingdom”. “Kingdom” is a strange term which is cleverly introduced by Tortoise in order to presuppose a “King” and the hierarchical structures which go with it. Indeed after several days of feasting, the Animals come to acknowledge Tortoise as leader and benefactor:

Everyday the animals returned to the Tortoise’s compound and ate and drank and went home singing his praise. They called him Saviour, Great Chief, the One Who Speaks for His People. Then one day a very drunken singer called him King Tortoise! Thereafter the great Chant of the Animals became:

We! Want! Our! King!

Our! King! Of! Kings! (Achebe 1988:20).

Plans are then made for Tortoise’s formal coronation. But if the appropriation of the magic drum ensured Tortoise’s ascendancy to power, its misappropriation was to become the cause of his downfall. Kingship and the hierarchical order it goes with, demands that Tortoise cease to play certain roles that are deemed to be incongruous to his position. One of these roles is the beating of the drum. A tragic blunder is made by Tortoise when he appoints Elephant to play that role. Elephant’s so-called gentle tap on the drum breaks it and this effectively dislodges Tortoise from the position of power. His second journey to the world of the Spirits in search of another drum ends in disaster when he picks one whose beating yields all kinds of dangerous masked spirits, swarms of bees and

wasps. He later unleashes them on the other animals who “scattered in every direction and have not yet stopped running”. This kind of ending notwithstanding, the genre merely conceals a powerful ideological construction.

Conclusion

What comes out in this comparative reading of Ngugi and Achebe is the fact that overt ideological presence in literary texts tends to rupture the narrative by destroying the gap between fiction and reality. Covert representation on the other hand maintains this gap and in so doing preserves its power of persuasion.

Notes

1. Ngugi quotes Mao thus “ignorant of their country, some people can only relate tales of ancient Greece and other foreign lands”.
2. Ngugi is deliberately placing the Mau Mau on the left to imply his leftist leanings.

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