

A Tale of animals:

a study of animal fantasy for children from
Aesop's Fables through 1986

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Introduction

Stories of talking animals have been around for a long time. They tend to be the very first stories given to young children. Any anthology of masterpieces or classics in children's literature will include mention of *Aesop's Fables*, the animal tales of Beatrix Potter, Kenneth Grahame or Rudyard Kipling. Animal tales do not appear outdated and outmoded nowadays, for the mid-20th century witnessed a deluge of animal fantasy on both sides of the Atlantic.

This study takes as its starting point two concerns: the didacticism in children's literature and the anthropomorphism in animal fantasy. These two concerns prompt the following questions: why have animal fantasies endured and even flourished for more than 2 000 years since Aesop and how have they been employed in the service of didacticism in children's literature? In a broad sense, the answers to these questions are significant for understanding what children's literature was and is, and its function in society in general. More precisely, through examining animal fantasy, the interrelationships among the underlying values, objectives, and literary merits of children's literature are likely to reveal themselves.

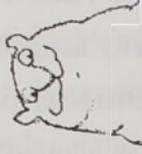
A history of animal fantasy

The perspective used to investigate these issues is that of a historical overview of selected samples of animal fantasy since *Aesop's Fables* through the 1980s, focusing on thematic concerns and characterisation of animals. The historical development of animal fantasies can be arranged under two headings: the classical and the modern. The former covers from *Aesop's Fables* (around the sixth century BC) to the Middle Ages (approximately the sixth to 16th centuries) through the 18th century. The latter starts from the early 20th century and continues through 1986 in this study. Between these two, the Victorian and Edwardian periods serve as a pivotal transition from the classical to the modern. This historical evolution is shown in Figure 1.

Aesop's Fables

The fable is a didactic narrative using animal actors in a difficult situation. The hallmark of the fable is the morals attached, however, the morals are not applicable exclusively to the animals involved. Indeed they comment more on human nature than on animal nature in general.

“The Ant and the Grasshopper” is such an example to demonstrate the interrelationship between animal nature and human nature. Two contrasting life philosophies, work and play, are epitomised by the ant and the grasshopper. More explicitly, a difference in anatomy of two insects is employed to explain a difference in life habits in human terms – hard-working for the ant and pleasure-seeking for the grasshopper. Human traits are thus embodied in the natural history of animals, and now we find every ant is working hard, and



HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF ANIMAL FANTASY

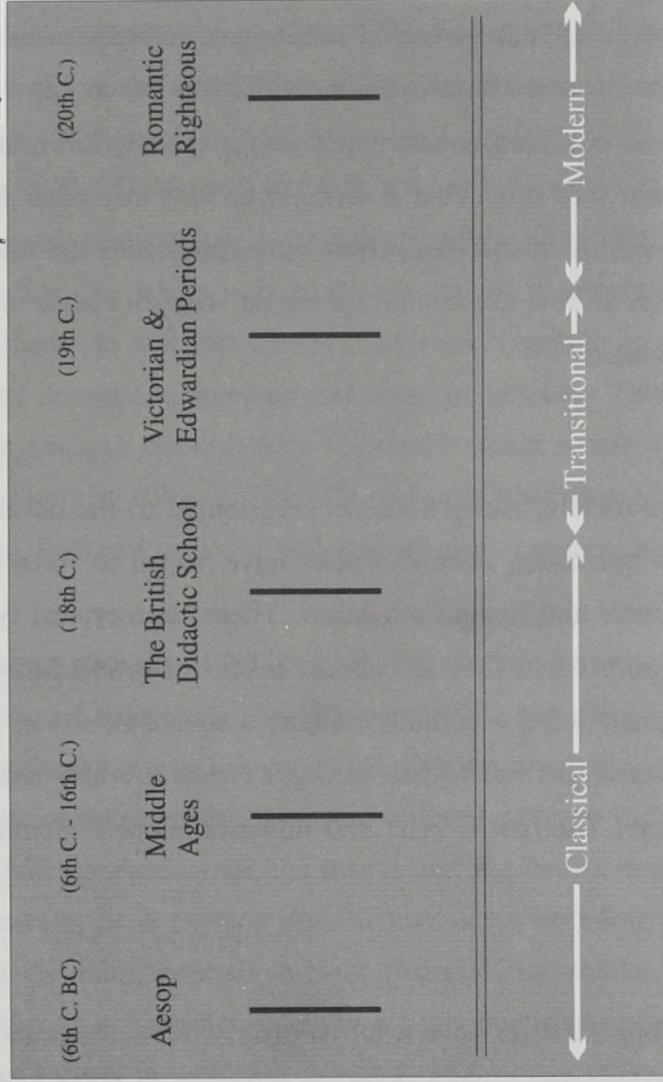


Figure 1: Historical evolution of animal fantasy

every grasshopper is chirping merrily. But, does the ant actually work hard or does the grasshopper seek pleasure? Probably not (Shepard 1978).

Also, through such a neat analogy, every species of animals is assigned a human trait, and a web of human-animal stereotypes emerges naturally. The animals in the fables are no more than living embodiments of virtues and vices. These animals are so consistently associated with a specific (arbitrarily assigned) trait of “nature”, that they must find it difficult to play any other character parts “except wrenching themselves perhaps unhappily into the roles allotted” (Blount 1975:37). This is how the animal nature of *Aesop’s Fables* is yoked to the service of human nature.

And yet, historically, *Aesop’s Fables* contributed to the development of animal fantasy. For one thing, *Aesop’s Fables* have helped to form the regimentation between animals and human attributes. These stereotypical typecastings have stood so steadfast that they are almost taken for granted in any animal story, and this regimentation eventually became a source of stories for subsequent writers of animal fictions to use. *Aesop’s Fables* are also animal fantasy in its primitive stage. The plot is brief and under-developed. Characterisation is hardly present.

Even so, *Aesop’s Fables* have a lot to offer writers. It seems that from the very beginning, didacticism – the relentless intention to teach and preach – is a natural ingredient of children’s literature. And this insistently moral, didactic stance continued to make its way into works of children’s literature in later centuries.

Fictional biographies of animals from the British didactic school

In *Aesop's Fables*, animals were employed as a vehicle or mouthpiece for demonstrating social expectations and commenting on human nature. In the late 18th century, the fables were transformed into fictional biographies of animals by the British Didactic School (MacDonald 1986). This transformation was easy and smooth, because both the fables and fictional biography in essence are moral tales studded with animal characters, except that the latter are longer. Moreover, the animal characters in the fables and fictional biographies are all humans with animal heads or the mere personification of human values. The only difference is that the morals tagged to the fables refer to human nature in general, while the animal protagonists from the late 18th century fictional biography predominately preach the message of appropriate, humane treatment of animals. Three animal tales from the British Didactic School, Mrs Trimmer's much acclaimed *Fabulous histories* (1786), and Dorothy Kilner's *The Life and perambulation of a mouse* (2 Vols, 1783–1784) and *Rational brutes* (1799), are of great concern here.

Mrs Trimmer's *Fabulous histories* (1786) is probably *the* best-known moral tale and fictional biography of animals in the 18th century. It has great bearing on the development of animal fantasy in two senses. On the one hand, thematically it summarises the relationship between man and animals prior to the 19th century: the human had dominion over the brutes and the brutes ought to serve human's use and pleasure, or if nothing else, at least serve as a living text of moral edification. In this light, animals in these fictional biographies are not very far from their ancestors in the medieval bestiary; both were meant to admonish and instruct, only the former in secular terms and the latter in religious terms.

To go one step further, various characters have expressed their concern for the decent treatment of animals. For instance, Mr Wilson acts "toward all dumb

creatures, as I would to mankind, upon the principle of doing as I would be done by” (Trimmer 1786:337). He also makes a point, “As there are no Courts of Justice in which they can seek redress, I erect one for them in my own” (Trimmer 1786:338). He is echoed by Harriet Benson: “I am sure I shall never kill any thing without first magnifying it in my mind, and thinking what it would say for itself if able to speak” (Trimmer 1786:330), or Mrs. Benson: “I shall, on all proper occasions, be ready to lend my tongue to the dumb, and to speak for those who cannot utter their own sorrows and injuries” (Trimmer 1786:338). This is exactly what the latter-day writers of animal fantasy are doing – erecting a Court of Justice for the animals and lending tongues to the dumb creatures.

On the other hand, despite all the typical drawbacks of moral tales, *Fabulous histories* contributes to the artistic development of animal fantasy, in terms of the ways animals are portrayed. In *Aesop's Fables*, animals all appear in a crude sketch, while in *Fabulous histories*, the four nestlings of the red-feather family are drawn with precise, minute strokes, and each stands out as an individual.

Dorothy Kilner's *The Life and perambulation of a mouse* (1783–1784) should be noted for its artistic advancement in making an animal story interesting – in featuring a wild animal as protagonist and adopting the tone of a reciprocal trust and cordiality between the narrator and the animal character (Blount 1975; Goldstone 1984). Moreover, in spite of imparting moral lessons, Nimble is a flesh-and-blood mouse in every inch, retaining many of the innate traits befitting the rodent. In this sense Nimble is so much the true prototype for later realistic animal characters in children's books. This advancement in characterisation from the crude sketches to minute close-ups points the way to animal fantasy in the Victorian and Edwardian periods, for it upgrades animal tales to what we know as animal fantasy: a tale of some length which retains the authentic, innate habits of animal characters.

Dorothy Kilner's *The Rational brutes or talking animals* (1799) is artistically inferior to the previous two, but it deserves a mention for the thematic interest. This tale strikes a blow to the prevalent notion that man is a rational animal, and it also attacks the maltreatment of animals by man based on his conceit that he is the lord of creation. Thus, *The Rational brutes* provides a scene in the Court of Justice for animals to seek redress, where the prosecuted animals are on the offensive, no one is present for the defense, and we readers serve as the jury. Kilner evidently aims to induce the reader/jury to a condemnation against cruelty toward animals, and foreshadows two of the major concerns in later animal fantasy – the animals' right to exist as they were created to be, and the superiority of animality to humanity.

The Victorian and Edwardian animal fantasy

Four Victorian and Edwardian animal fantasies, Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877), Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1901), Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the willows* (1908), and Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle book* (1893), all have been influential children's classics. For one thing, they either inherit the deep-seated tradition of didacticism or echo the romantic manifesto in the broad historical context. For another, they precede the two predominant thematic strands of animal fantasy in the 20th century – the Romantic and the Righteous. To put it more concretely, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and *The Wind in the willows*, reflect the sentimental, romantic image of animals dating back to the turn of the century, and have much to teach later writers of animal fantasy in the romantic camp. *Black Beauty*, resonating in the moralistic, didactic tradition of both fable and fictional animal biography, would find many companions in subsequent writers of righteous animal fantasy. Kipling's *The Jungle book*,

belonging to neither camp, stands on its own with fresh reflections on the duality of man and animals.

This group of writers of animal fantasy all deserve mention in various ways. As Egoff (1981, 1988) reminds us, humanisation can be successful only if something from the animal nature is maintained. Potter's cast of animal characters bears testimony to Egoff's decree, for these unforgettable, charming animals are such an unerring mixture of realism (a naturalist's observation of animal life) and fancy (an imaginary representation of the animal's character). To cite Peter Rabbit will suffice to make the point. For the whole story, he remains pretty much a rabbit. When he wriggles out and bounds away, he is such an agile rabbit (Sendak 1988). And yet he is a human boy, too. Dressed in his new jacket with brass buttons, he goes into Mr McGregor's garden for no other reason except that Mrs Rabbit has forbidden it. When he slumps against the locked door, finding no way out, and cries pathetically, he is such an endearing little boy. He pays for this adventure (or misadventure) with his two shoes, his blue jacket with brass buttons, and going to bed with camomile tea and no supper. What retribution could be more befitting to a naughty human boy?

Potter's nursery tales and Grahame's *The Wind in the willows* (1908) both feature a group of innocent animals, moving around in a pastoral setting. The romantic tendency for carefree, naive animals, either humanised or nonhumanised, to live in a secluded, pastoral world, is found especially in Grahame's *River Bank*, and also links Grahame to the tradition of a past golden age, a harmony between the human and the animal (Kuznets 1987).

As Blount (1975) contends, the historical import of Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877) as a transitional landmark in animal fantasy lies in its being "the first real

animal novel” (p 18) and “the last of moral tales, the last great first-person narrative in Listen-to-my-life style” (p 249). In contrast to the maltreatment and cruelty on the part of humans, the meek, submissive pose on the part of suffering animals creates an emotional appeal to the reader. This is also how the persistent moral bent in the beast fable tradition continues in *Black Beauty*, which petitions for the decent, humane treatment of the working horse in Victorian England. This is also what Mr Wilson of *Fabulous histories* envisions as a Court of Criminal Justice for granting the dumb animal a chance to speak to humans. *Black Beauty* in spirit is thus closer to the moral tale tradition of animal biography in the 18th century; yet in techniques it is closer to the modern righteous tradition of animal fantasy in the 20th century. It is in this pivotal position that *Black Beauty* stands as a historical landmark of animal fantasy.

Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle book* (1893) is an unprecedented piece, pondering on the gulf between the human and the brute, and trying to fulfil a deep-seated wish to bridge the gulf. Mowgli’s outcome clearly indicates that man and animal can never meet, for there exists an unbridgeable gulf between them, no matter how much man wishes it to be the other way round (Blount 1975).

The golden age of the Victorian and Edwardian periods adds a gallery of animals to the cast of unforgettable celebrities in children’s literature, Peter Rabbit, Benjamin Bunny, Black Beauty, and Mowgli, to name just a few. A significant contribution was made. For one thing, this age inherited the age-old form of moral tale. This tradition, probably begun in the time of Aesop, was highlighted in the 18th century British Didactic School, and culminated in Sewell’s *Black Beauty*. For another, a new tendency to romanticise and sentimentalise animals manifested itself in Potter’s nursery tales and Grahame’s *The Wind in the willows*. Also, these three writers have a great bearing on later fiction. Potter and

Grahame precede many romantic animal fantasies in this century. Sewell is both a conclusive and germinal figure, for *Black Beauty* shares much in spirit and intention with the moral tale, and yet precedes the emotional intensity in later righteous animal fantasy.

Twentieth century animal fantasy: romantic and righteous

The deluge of animal fantasy in the 20th century can be categorised according to two themes: the romantic and the righteous. These two themes are by no means new; they have their roots firmly set in the past. The righteous animal fantasy is a hybrid of the moral tale and the satire, while the romantic animal fantasy extends the 19th century tendency to romanticise and sentimentalise animals, and reflects the pastoral tradition dating back to ancient Greece.

The tradition of the romantic, with carefree, naive animals, either humanised or nonhumanised, in a secluded, pastoral world, finds its way into the River Bank Scene and the Barnyard Scene of the romantic animal fantasy in the 20th century. Furthermore, the features common to the romantic animal fantasy are light-heartedness, simplicity, and almost a naivete in tone and in plot. Lyrical passages of natural beauty occur frequently. The school of romantic animal stories include Thornton Burgess's *The Adventures of Reddy Fox* (1913) and *The Bedtime story-books* series, Russell Erickson's *Warton and Morton* (1976), Arnold Lobel's *Frog and Toad are friends* (1970) (all belong to the Riverbank Scene), and Walter Brooks's *To and again* (1927) [later named as *Freddy goes to Florida* (1949)], EB White's *Charlotte's web* (1945), and Dick King-Smith's *Pigs might fly* (1980) and *Babe: the gallant pig* (1983) (all belong to the barnyard scene). This

romantic school of animal fantasy generally impresses the readers with its decidedly endearing and enduring characters, for instance, Burgess's River bankers, Brooks's Freddy, Erickson's Warton and Morton, Lobel's Frog and Toad, King-Smith's Babe, and, above all, White's Wilbur.

The insistent moral bent in the beast fable tradition reveals itself in Sewell's *Black Beauty*. The trend of moral instruction further grew into a series of thundering demands for animal rights, environmental preservation, and ecological concerns in this century. Clearly, writers of righteous animal fantasy attempt to wrestle with the complex relationship between animal and man, and the triangular relationship of man-nature-animal. This triangle is played out in many guises and sometimes in a thoroughly didactic way. A selected list of animal fantasy in this school includes Hugh Lofting's *The Story of Dr. Dolittle* (1922) and *The Voyages of Dr. Dolittle* (1923), Robert O'Brien's *Mrs. Frisby and the rats of NIMH* (1971), Walter Edmonds' *Beaver Valley* (1971), Richard Adams' *Watership Down* (1972), NM Bodecker's *The Mushroom center disaster* (1974), Robin Hawdon's *A Rustle in the grass* (1984), and Sandy Landsman's *Castaways on Chimp Island* (1986).

Animals have long been employed to teach moral values or functioned as mere mouthpieces for something other than themselves, mostly a moral code, but their roles have undergone a drastic change in this century. They now are no longer humans disguised as animals. They are animals to the fullest degree. Their animal nature is not ignored or sacrificed; their anatomical and biological truths are also recognised as an integral part of presentation. A good example are the rabbits in Richard Adams's *Watership Down*. To establish his rabbits as credible heroes, his first task is to grant them linguistic capability. But he needs to establish their lapine credentials too: he painstakingly bases his story on his own observation on

the Berkshire Downs, and, what is more, on Ronald Lockely's *The Private life of the rabbit* (1964). His meticulous stance illustrates how a writer of animal fantasy, or fantasy in general, has to base his story on the cornerstone of hard facts.

Also, it is instructive to compare how natural history plays a role in both romantic and righteous animal fantasy. If fantasy (the fantastic, imaginative) and realism (the natural history, the realistic) are the two ingredients of a formula for animal fantasy, then the proportions of these two elements are evidently different in the romantic and righteous animal fantasy. On the romantic side, the fantastic, imaginative elements preside over the realistic, for all the human apparel, diets, housing, and so on. On the righteous side, the animals involved possess more realistic than fantastic elements. As seen from the above sample of righteous animal fantasies, the authors usually have done their homework on the natural history of the animals involved and learnt about their physical capability, life habits, habitats and so on, though the animals may perform fantastic tasks in fantastic situations.

To put it in another way, books which merely offer hard facts will not stretch the imagination of a child. Fantasy goes beyond reciting facts to offer something *extra*. In the case of animal fantasy, the something *extra* is the usage of anthropomorphism. For the romantic animal fantasy the source of anthropomorphism derives from external accessories, that is, having the animals don human apparel, or installing the animals in human living quarters and facilities transformed into animal equivalents. On the other hand, in the righteous animal fantasy human sentiment is probably the primary motive for anthropomorphism. In some cases, the animals can demonstrate the base, mean portions of human nature: Roger in *Castaways on Chimp Island* behaves manipulatively in a human manner. In other cases,

animals also take on the noble, dignified aspects of human nature. The courage and leadership of Hazel in *Watership Down*, and the determination and morality of the Rats of NIMH in *Mrs. Frisby and the rats of NIMH*, surely would be impressive even if the characters were humans. Therefore, for good or bad, animals teach the lessons we must learn. Either as a mirror of scorn toward man, or beacon of glory to admire, it is this something extra that appeals to the child reader and the adult as well. On the part of the reader, there is something extra too – the reader has to look beyond the facts known about animals and willingly suspend disbelief. In so doing he not only allows his fancy to fly, but also looks into the real nature of humans and animals.

Given all the above, what can be deduced from this historical survey? Firstly, the didactic tradition in children's literature persists to the present within animal fantasy. Secondly, looking back through the history of animal fantasy, a gradual shift from the emphasis on human nature over animal nature to respect for animal nature is observed. It is hoped that through such a narration of historical evolution, animal fantasy is established as a worthy, legitimate subgenre within children's literature from the ancient to the modern.

Animal nature and the art of animal fantasy

Fantasy is a genre of illusion-making, wherein the writer seems to cast a magic spell enticing the reader into willing suspension of disbelief, and also into the world of fantasy – be it primary or secondary. Writers of animal fantasy face a special task: how to characterise the animals? How to render the animals true-to-life and fanciful at the same time? As Blount (1975) contends, how to cope with

the barrier between fantasy on the one hand and naturalism/realism on the other is the challenge for animal fantasy writers. A balance of credibility is difficult to maintain. What can be deduced from this historical survey of animal fantasy is that, unless something of the original animal is retained, a work of animal fantasy cannot be successful. A spectrum of animal nature in animal fantasy is offered in Figure 2.

Richard Adams (in Wintle, 1974) furnishes an apt description of a formula to achieve a convincing illusion, depending on the degree of anthropomorphism. On the spectrum of anthropomorphism, the animal writer has to make a choice: how much is animal and how much is human. On the ultraviolet side beyond the spectrum stands something like Henry Williamson's *Tarka the otter* – a factual account of the life history of an otter from birth to death. It is a piece of natural history (or nonfiction according to our evaluation criterion). Next, Thompson Seton's animal tales are somewhere around the middle of the spectrum: a straightforward portrayal of animals in danger, fear, and death. Seton's stories go beyond the matter-of-fact presentation of natural history of an animal, and give the reader the feeling that an animal is like a human being (Adams, in Blishen 1975). At the other end of the spectrum is the infrared, the humanised animals. Mole, Rat, Badger and Toad in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the willows* are barely animals and have human attire, sentiments and conduct. They are so vividly humanised that they are probably less humanised animals (animals with human heads) than animalised humans (humans disguised in animals' bodies).

Any writer of animal tales has to make his choice somewhere along the line. Dorothy Kilner is perhaps the first writer to pay tribute to the true nature of animal characters – in Nimble, the mouse narrator. Potter in her nursery tales also

THE SPECTRUM OF ANIMAL FANTASY

A dual challenge for writers of animal fantasy:

Fact	Fiction
Animal Nature	Human Nature
Natural History	Fancy/Make-Believe
Anatomical Truth	Imaginative Truth

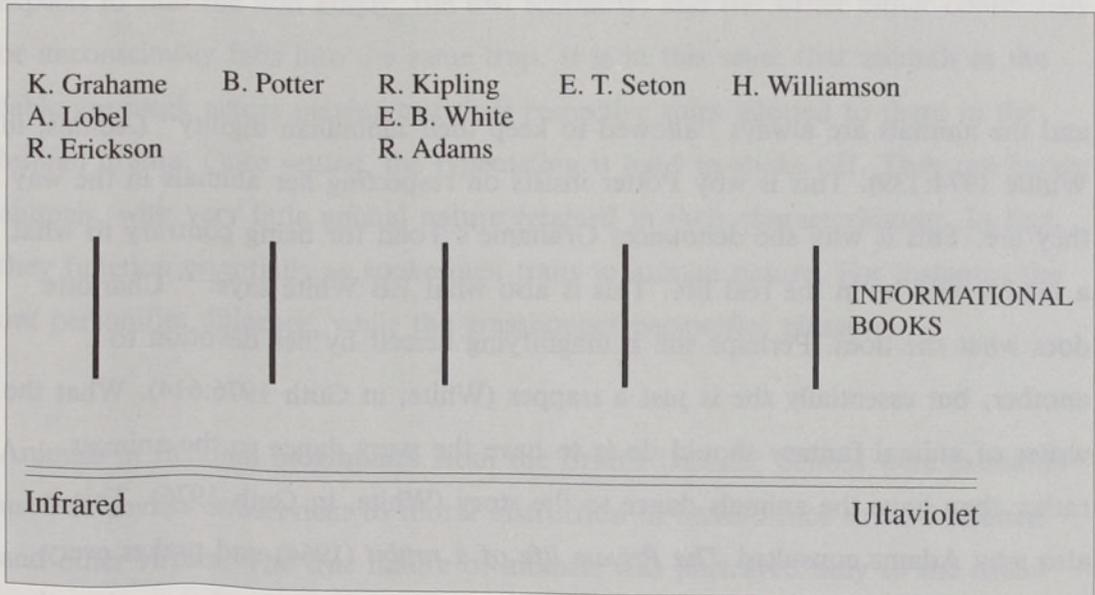


Figure 2: The spectrum of animal fantasy



stresses respect for animals as they are, rather than ridiculing or caricaturising them, or distorting their features (MacDonald 1986). This is why Peter Rabbit remains pretty much himself, in spite of his fanciful human clothes.

The paragon for animal anthropomorphism in Adams's mind is Kipling,

who attribute[s] to your animals motives and incentives and ideals that real animals wouldn't have ... On the other hand, their animal nature is always retained, for they never do anything of which real animals would be physically incapable (Wintle 1974:139; Adams, in Blishen 1975:172),

and the animals are always "allowed to keep their animalian dignity" (Adams, in Wintle 1974:139). This is why Potter insists on respecting her animals in the way they are. This is why she denounces Grahame's Toad for being contrary to what a toad would be in the real life. This is also what EB White says: "Charlotte does what she does. Perhaps she is magnifying herself by her devotion to another, but essentially she is just a trapper (White, in Guth 1976:614). What the writer of animal fantasy should do is to have the story dance to the animals, rather than have the animals dance to the story (White, in Guth 1976). This is also why Adams consulted *The Private life of a rabbit* (1964) and makes every effort to make his rabbit heroes authentic: his rabbits have no other motives than feeding, survival, and mating, and would not do anything the real rabbits would not do physically (Adams, in Wintle 1974).

Therefore, from careful observations of the historical evolution of animal fantasy, one can conclude that humanisation is successful, if something of the original animal nature is kept (Messer 1968). Looking back at the history of animal fantasy, there seems to exist a gradual shift from the emphasis on human

nature over animal nature to the respect for animal nature. But this Copernican shift was not achieved overnight; it took a while – from the ancient to the modern.

In *Aesop's Fables*, along with the bestiary flourishing in the Middle Ages, human nature and animal nature seem to formulate into a neat and tidy correspondence – a sense of decorum and typecasting. This practice of typecasting has an enormous impact on both the reader and writer of animal stories, as the reader expects to find the lion kingly, the owl scholarly; and the writer either consciously or unconsciously falls into the same trap. It is in this sense that animals in the fable are meek actors playing out their respective roles allotted to them in the human drama. Once settled, the typecasting is hard to shake off. They are barely animals, with very little animal nature retained in their characterisation. In fact, they function essentially as spokesmen traits in human nature. For instance, the ant personifies diligence, while the grasshopper personifies pleasure.

Animals in fictional biographies from the British Didactic School were primarily used as devices subservient to moral instruction in benevolence toward animals and other virtues. The true nature of animals was portrayed only to the extent that it could point at a human moral. This is perhaps why the robin family are less bird-like characters than humanised. This use of moralising animals is true of most British Didactic fictional biographies. One notable exception is Dorothy Kilner's *Nimble the mouse*. He is luckily allowed to retain most of his rodent nature, without being subjected to awkwardly applied human moral standards.

Starting from the 19th century, however, animal characters began to assume new faces. As urbanisation and industrialisation proceeded, the rural landscape and

animal habitats were gradually idealised. Along with the tendency to sentimentalise and romanticise rural life and wild animals, came a nostalgia for childhood (MacDonald 1986). This romantic strand asserts itself in Potter's barnyard and Grahame's riverbank, and continues to find its way into a number of animal fantasies in this century, for instance, in the works of Arnold Lobel, EB White, Dick King-Smith, and others. The Victorian and Edwardian periods also witnessed the continuation of moral tales from *Aesop's Fables* through the 18th century animal fictional biography and culminating in Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty*. A strong vein of outrage and the formation of a court of criminal justice for the dumb creatures contributed much to the "righteous" group of later animal fantasy.

Overall, the long span of the 19th century into the early 20th century found animal fantasy undergoing a gradual change from the relentless, indefatigable, didactic moral tales of animals to the sheer joy of Victorian and Edwardian animal fantasy. Meanwhile the long moral tradition was preserved for later generations of animal writers. It is in this sense that the Victorian and Edwardian Ages are the transitional pivots in animal fantasy.

Conclusion

As Sale (1978:77) says, while "other kinds of literature had abandoned and forgotten [the usage of animals] before the nineteenth century", animals continue to be a "major source of power of the best children's literature", and constantly find their way into the classics in children's literature. Undisputably the garden of children's literature would be forlorn without the presence of the animals.

From the ancient times, animals in story have hardly been themselves. They were the actors in the human drama of *Aesop's Fables*. They were the bait to lure the child into reading. They were the sugar to coat the pill of moral lessons, which sometimes are dull and hard to swallow. The large numbers of animals in the romantic animal fantasy are certainly humanised, enjoying their life on human terms. The true identity as animals probably first appeared in Nimble of *The Life and perambulation of a mouse*. Their true nature shines through in *Black Beauty*, and eventually triumphs in *Charlotte's web*, *Watership Down*, and a few others.

Aesop's animals are moral teachers. Mrs Trimmer's robins and Kilner's mouse brothers are emblems of virtues to follow. Sewell's *Black Beauty* pleads for a humane treatment of his fellow horses. Grahame's *River Bankers*, along with Lobel's *Frog and Toad*, represent a nostalgic longing for a gilded world of innocence and naivete. A surge of righteous animal fantasy burst out around the mid-century, with the infuriated animal characters asking for animal rights, and charging humans for the wrongs they have done to both the animals and the environment. In recent years, animals seem to find their way into a deluge of informational books on environmental conservation and protection for endangered species. Animals have spoken to us for thousands of years, and they will continue to speak to us.

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Children and nature: ecological workshops become a book of stories

monica lavin



Nature in Mexico is rich and diverse, distances are wide. The north is arid and semi-arid, there is pine forest in the high sierras, the south is tropical, there is humid forest and marshlands, there is a broad coastline on both east and west, numerous rivers and lakes, cities, in fact, the biggest city in the world: Mexico City. Such a diversity and the need to make this natural heritage part of the cultural background of the children in our country was the motivation for a singular proposal which was accepted with enthusiasm by a government institution in 1981. The following is the resumé of a project, done with children for children, that resulted on a book of ecological stories for children, a novel experiment (in an unexplored field) at that time.

Ecological workshops were designed and carried out with children living in different ecosystems in Mexico by an interdisciplinary group: an anthropologist, a biologist, an ecologist and an elementary school teacher. The main spirit of the workshops was to have the children express their relationship with their natural environment by means of activities that promoted written and graphic expression. The children were enthusiastic knowing that they were part of a major project where other children from another part of Mexico would let them know what the place they lived in looked like. For the pine oak forest the state of Morelos was chosen, for the desert a place near Caborca, Sonora; for the jungle, Chiapas; for the marshes, the Tabasco coastline; for the marine ecosystem, the seashore in

Jalisco; for the lake, a huge dam – Presa Miguel Aleman – in Oaxaca; for the urban ecosystem: Mexico City.

The first part of the project: the ecological workshops, had a precise methodology which was adapted from ecosystem to ecosystem. One week's work was done in each location by a group of professionals in different fields: education, anthropology and biology. The children, throughout the different activities that included field work as well as classroom dynamics, described their environment, the current use their families or social groups made of it, the way they enjoyed it and the evidence of certain disasters or future perils. The experience was repeated in seven locations representative of the broader biomas of Mexico: the desert, the marsh, the jungle or tropical forest, the oak pine forest, the city, the lake and the coastline.

The field work: ecological workshops

The workshops were undertaken with a group of children in a rural elementary school belonging to the chosen ecosystem. For example, for the chapter regarding the city, the field work was done in urban groups. The work was carried out in four days where theatrical and field work was interchanged. The first day certain ecological principles and the relationship between man and environment were discussed with the participation of the class who indicated their own knowledge of nature. Ecological and social concepts were integrated throughout the workshop. The children's written and oral descriptions were registered and enriched with the drawings that reflected their environment. Children were enthusiastic at being part of the team behind a book that was going to be shared with children throughout Mexico.

The second day was devoted to the concept of food chains illustrated with games where children were either the sun, or the plant, the earth, the bacteria, the fungus, the rabbit, the coyote, or man. The use of games was a frequent activity based on Piaget's idea: "Most of games tend to reproduce that which has amazed, to evoke that which has been enjoyed, or to participate closely in the natural environment, in other words, to build a wide range of resources that will allow the self to assimilate whole reality, that is, incorporate it in order to revive, dominate or compensate it."

On the third and fourth day interaction with the environment were recreated with games: children were fishermen, farmers, cattlemen, lumbermen, merchants, buyers. Debates were undertaken with astonishing results as to the balance with regard to use and care of the natural resources. Children, most of them directly involved with the use of nature out of the urban area, held an attitude towards it and were not indifferent to the diverse interests behind the exploitation of the ecosystem. All in all the project was thought of as promoting responsible and loving attitudes towards the natural environment. Field work was undertaken with long walks, collection or observation of specimens and observation of the structure of plants. Intermingled with the walks were talks and anecdotes which illustrated the sometimes magical, sometimes logical children's understanding of the processes of nature.

For us, the workshops were mostly listening experiences in which (according to a planned structure) we gave order to the expressions of children taking into account our objectives.

The experience itself, aside from its transformation into a book of stories, generated a methodology for ecological workshops that were reproduced with

children and teachers under the auspice of a scientific magazine for children *Chispa* during the following years. The idea of the workshop was reproduced in different parts of the country by a team of co-ordinators and by the rural teachers themselves under the CONAFE (National Council for Educational Enforcement) programme which provides education for those in the most marginalised areas of Mexico.

The Book: Where you live (nature and children)

The second part of the project was the transformation of the field work into stories that, once tied together in a book, would give the child reader in any part of Mexico the opportunity to know other natural systems, some of which she would not know in her lifetime, as well as to introduce her to certain notions of ecological relationships and the impact of man on the environment.

For the translation of the workshop experience into a literary discourse with didactic objectives, we chose a structure that combined the story, highlighted notions referring to ecological principles, characteristics of the specific bioma and some aspects of people's relationship with the environment.

The stories, written by the members of the team, had to express the specific features of the ecosystem with imagination, enjoyment and interest within a narrative structure. The specific information drawn from the direct contact with the children throughout the workshops was carefully integrated with the basic information about ecological relationships and human impact that the book purposefully intended to transmit to future readers. For example: Chapter 1, The

pine-oak forest bioma – widely spread in Mexico – is seen throughout the story “Rosalio doesn’t go to school”. The story is about a child that decides to change his path to school and visit the “abuelo” (grandfather), an old and wise man who knows wonderful stories. The story makes explicit notions about the natural environment; the relationship of the main character Rosalio with it, and some of the problems he experienced. At the end of the story an ecological concept; an anecdote; a map showing the location of this Mexican forest and information on its characteristics; and a question to promote reflection; gave didactic unity to the project. The objectives were to make children sensitive to nature in Mexico, to understand its principal mechanisms, and to have a critical view of the way society relates to nature. In a chapter on the arid lands, with a story like “One night after the rain”, the issues reinforced at the end were climate, latitudes and altitude, the arid and semi-arid land features and their location in Mexico and the guayule exploitation. The question addressed was: What do you think could be done with such an extension of desert lands in Mexico?

The following is the index of the book:

– Introducing “Kite”

1. The forest

“Rosalio doesn’t go to school”

2. The jungle

“The day the sun hid”

3. The desert

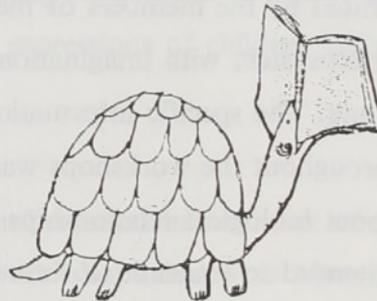
“One night after the rain”

4. The lake

“Elisa’s secret”

5. The sea

“The shark captain”



6. The marsh

“The monster of the marsh”

7. The city

“A translucid friend”

– Papalote’s farewell

– Appendix

The stories were then tied together by a red kite which travelled throughout Mexico and collected them. The text was submitted to a specialist in children’s journalism which gave unity to the field work and filled in the gaps in order to catch children’s interest. The illustrations of the book were done by an artist who used the drawings of the children generated in the workshops, cutting them out and making very attractive and coherent collages. So the environment was rebuilt using the children’s own perception of it. The work went through several revisions by specialists in the educational field and their suggestions were incorporated.

The book was designed to be used with a similar methodology to the one we used within the ecological workshops, for this reason there is an appendix to the book for teachers and parents as a helpful guide as well as an explanation of how the book was made.

The result of the experience was a book of short ecological stories, with a didactic component directed to the same age group that worked on it, nine to 12-year-olds, meant to be used with a certain adult intervention but also as a self-sufficient tool.

Published in 1982, the book was a pioneer experience. Mexico has had an important influence in the past decade, in the subsequent interest in ecology and environmental education. From that time environmental education and an institutional commitment to the care of our natural resources and the recognition of certain cultural patterns of use have been acknowledged, research for the future and sustainable alternatives of use of nature are being made. Still, there is insufficient effort being made for children around the world and for the improvement of the environment they live in. The promotion of sensible and responsible attitudes needs to be started in early childhood in order to motivate future action. Hopefully this lively experience will be repeated to create better and more effective didactic means. Books are a possible means to enhance our knowledge and perception of the world. Let the volume of books grow.



Paradigms of childhood in Kanafani's Palestine's children

nadia el kholy

It is noteworthy that prominent critics such as Terry Eagleton and Frederic Jameson emphasise the political relevance of cultural resistance. In Eagleton's study *Literary theory: an introduction* he distinguishes four areas where culture is significant: working class writing; the "culture industry"; the women's movement; and "those nations struggling for their independence from imperialism"¹ and goes on to explain that:

Culture in the lives of nations struggling for their independence from imperialism; has a meaning quite remote from the review pages of the Sunday newspapers. Imperialism is not only the exploitation of cheap labour-power, raw materials and easy markets but the uprooting of languages and customs – not just the imposition of foreign armies; but of alien ways of experience. It manifests itself not only in company balance-sheets and in airbases; but can be tracked to the most intimate roots of speech and signification. In such situations; which are not all a thousand miles from our own doorstep, culture is so vitally bound up with one's common identity that there is no need to argue for its relation to political struggle (1985:215).

Similarly Jameson, in his article "Postmodernism or the cultural logic of late capitalism", defines culture as an "aesthetic of cognitive mapping [...] which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system".² Hence, the writers of resistance literature who pay excessive

attention to the immediate exigencies and pressing demands of the “here and now” of their contemporary historical reality are not to be blamed. René Wellek and Austin Warren’s criticism of a literature that is created “with a narrow aim at the market” because it aspires to be a “document or case history; [...] a confession; a true story; a history of a life and its times” is not to be applied to resistance literature. They insist on literature being a “selection” and not a record but this demand against historical necessity should not aim at comprising resistance literature. Indeed, it is the careful rendering of the contemporary scene with all its intricate details of time and place and social and historical context that help arouse feelings of nationalism and patriotism. The incorporation of documentary materials into the political writings is important to establish the texture of the created society; to provide the data for the sociology.

Among the aims of Palestinian children’s literature is invoking the idea of the homeland so that young readers will grow up to love Palestine and will be familiarised with the geography of an absent country in order to retrieve its landscape in their memory and preserve its presence in their consciousness. For many Palestinian writers, including Ghassan Kanafani, describing the locale is not an imaginative luxury but a literal existential necessity. It turns from a novelistic device into a statement.

In Palestinian literature of resistance the “scenic method” is of supreme importance. After 1948, the emphasis on scenes is intensified and made more urgent since it translates the critical issues at stake in the Arab World.³ “The scene”, comments Said, “does not merely reflect the crisis, or historical duration, or the paradox of the present. Rather, the scene is contemporaneity in its most problematic and even ratified form. In no place can one see this more effectively than in prose directly concerned with the events in Palestine.”⁴

Resistance literature is primarily a struggle against the dominant power of the alien force. In the case of Palestinian resistance literature it is also trying to restore national identity and national culture. There are two senses of nationalism: the first is nationalism as doctrine of ideology and the second, as a collective emotional force. In this second sense – that in which it is most frequently and widely used – the word is invariably preceded by a national adjective: German nationalism, French nationalism, Arab nationalism and so on.

The growth of these nationalistic feelings within a group of people will eventually form their ideology which will relate to their culture. Perhaps there comes a certain time in the life of a nation when it wrestles with an alien other to gain its name. At this point in time a people feel they must establish who they are: it is the moment of beginnings, the moment of resistance, the revolutionary moment. A people then discovers or recovers their identity. The revolutionary moment is intensely political. For the Palestinian people who have been fighting Zionism ever since 1936 a body of resistance literature emerged as an authentic expression of that critical period. In these narratives of resistance, the culture, ideology and national identity of Palestine are strongly emphasised by Palestinian writers.

In Ghassan Kanafani's study entitled *Literature of resistance in occupied Palestine 1948–1966* the term “resistance” (muqawamah) was first mentioned.⁵ The distinguishing feature of that literature is that it is an outcome of a specific historical moment that is an arena for the struggle against Israel. The Palestinians who have been subjected to domination have created a national literature that is witness to their situation. Their publications are censored, they may not engage in political activities, their right to assemble is rigorously controlled. Their schools and universities are subjected to interference and may be closed down. Their lands are confiscated and may be handed over to Israeli settlers.

Kanafani has asserted the integral relationship between aimed [sic] resistance and resistance literature. For Kanafani, the “extreme importance of cultural resistance is no less valuable than aimed [sic] resistance itself.”⁶

This explains why the repression of a resistance movement like the PLO is simultaneously aimed at the historical and cultural heritage of the Palestinians. Ghassan Kanafani was assassinated in a car bomb explosion in July 1972.

Kanafani’s obituary in the *Daily Star*, a Beirut English language newspaper, described him as the “commando who never fired a gun” and went on to say that “his weapon was a ballpoint pen and his arena newspaper pages. And he hurt the enemy more than a column of commandos.”⁷

Kanafani’s aims in writing resistance narratives was to perpetuate the memory and the dream of the Palestinian nation and homeland and “... thus instill in the minds of the little ones an image of that nation that bears no resemblance to the camps. It is filled with symbols and details of countryside, mountains, cities, heroes and weddings, so that each Palestinian child has a (special Palestine) to dream about.”⁸

Allegorising the struggle

Kanafani’s own dream of a future Palestine was even more ambitious than its being only a wholesome and independent country. He wanted it to enjoy a democratic regime and this led him to write an allegorical story which he dedicated to his beloved niece on her birthday. In this short story entitled *The Little lantern* (Al-Qindil al-Saghir) Kanafani adopts a style of writing that is

highly allegorical and can be contrasted to his more realistic work *Palestine's children* where the scenic method is of prime importance in his endeavour to evoke a fictional setting that is purely a mimesis reality.

In this story he skillfully weaves the threads of a fairy tale conjuring up a world that has no specific characteristics: it could be anywhere, anytime; hence he is addressing humanity at large. The story conveniently starts with the standard "once upon a time" opening and concludes on a happy note having resolved all the problems it set out to do. Hence it follows the convenient structural pattern of folktales discovered by Propp in his *Morphology of the folktale* (1928) which is that a character is compelled to accomplish a certain obligatory function which once it is fulfilled, releases the character from all initial threats and curses. Hence in *The Little lantern* the back-bone of the plot relies on the following pattern:

Request → Dangerous threat → Endeavour to find a solution → Discovery → Success

Although *The Little lantern* (Al-Qindil al-Saghir) is within the genre of children's fiction it is written in the form of an allegory which "in the simplest terms", writes Angus Fletcher, "says one thing and means another."⁹ On reading *The Little lantern*, one is aware of these two levels of meaning: the first explicit and concrete, the second implicit and often abstract; the first is a fiction while the second is "real" or, in some way, more important.¹⁰ The greater importance of the second level or levels – once seen, is felt strongly to be the final intention behind the primary meaning¹¹ which is indeed Kanafani's prior intention. Therefore, the surface meaning of the story transcends the limits of the immediate text and delves into those inherent in the meta-text.

Before examining these various levels of meaning and the structure of the narrative a brief summary of the story is required. We are told in *The Little lantern* that the old king before his death left a will to his only daughter saying: “In order to become Queen, you have to bring the sun into the Palace and if you fail you will spend the rest of your life locked up in a wooden chest box as a form of punishment.”¹² The young Princess felt that she would never be able to fulfill her father’s request and so she summoned the wise old minister for help but to no avail for he only told her to depend solely on herself since this was a trial test that she had to undertake on her own. In the meantime, an old man carrying a lantern came to the Palace claiming he could help the Princess but the guards turned him away, so he said “tell her then that since an old man is not permitted to enter the Palace how will she expect the sun to do so?” and he went away. On hearing this, the Princess sent her guards to bring him back but he was nowhere to be found. Consequently, she ordered her guards to bring to her Palace any man carrying a lantern. By sunset hordes of people with lanterns gathered outside the Palace wall and they were so many that they could not get through the gates into the Palace and so the Princess had to order her guards to pull down all the walls and to open wide all the entrance gates. Finally when she gets down into the Palace grounds she cannot help blinking and turning her eyes away due to the glaring light coming from all these lighted lanterns and she finally understands her father’s message: All these lanterns gathered together are the sun that my father meant” (31).

The symbolism in this final stage of the story is explicit and the highly stylised quality of the created scene gives it the shape of an icon with the conventional connotations attached to the emblems of light. This highly charged thematic level of the story is fitted into a well balanced structural framework. Kanafani has carefully assembled all the components needed in a children’s story to be in

perfect accordance with the allegorical nature of his narrative. The characters fall into two categories: the young versus the old. The Princess is at the threshold of life and is therefore innocent, inexperienced and in need of the old men's knowledge and advice. Hence the old minister and the wise sage are both blessed by a streak of purity and wisdom since they are at the final stages of their lives, on the brink of death and so they are removed from the carnal and trivial pleasures of life and can therefore "see" and understand what the Princess is incapable of seeing. Along with this dichotomy of characters between those who know and can decipher ambiguities and others who cannot is the constant symbolism inherent in the counterparts of ignorance hence darkness on the one hand and knowledge signified as light on the other. These symbols are conjured up in the story in mentioning the dark wooden box, the locked room and the dark Palace versus the sun and the lanterns.

The story's moral, working as it does with the conventional archetypes and paradigms of wisdom and inexperience and the importance of freedom and communication, the icon of the lantern becomes obvious. But those paradigms as Barbara Harlow rightly acknowledges are "relocated as well within a specific ideological context of exploitation"¹³ and, I might add, suppression and rigid political regimes that dominate the Arab World and, naturally, the occupied territories. Kanafani, in using conventional features of storytelling, is calling for a cultural revolution and an awareness of the abuse of basic human rights.

Kanafani's narratives as stated by Harlow "elaborate a rigorous critique, on the basis of class and ethnicity, of distorted social and political relationships of power."¹⁴ And Kanafani himself alluded to the complex and obscure nature of democracy in the Arab World which he records "has seen various experiments that merit examination: in one case there is parliament without freedom of the

press and in another freedom of the press without a parliament; in still another case there is parliament but no parties, or else parties without a parliament; or there might be a parliament, parties and freedom of the press without any of this being able to create a real democracy. Despite all this experimentation, the regimes still call themselves 'democracies'. Where then is the solution?"¹⁵ Perhaps it is offered in the allegorical treatment of "light" in *The Little lantern* where the final message to the Queen to be is to share authority, judgement and opinion with her people.

Representing the struggle



Moving away from Kanafani's *Little lantern* with its idealistic fairy land setting, its transparent conjured up vision, its declamatory tone and utopianism, we come to the purely realistic stories in his collection entitled *Palestine's children*.¹⁶

In these stories, Kanafani deals with the political, social and human realities of Palestinians in their plight. He moves from the previously universal exploration of the violation of democratic rights to the quintessentially Palestinian experience. In these narratives Kanafani "purports to offer a verisimilar representation of reality".¹⁷ These stories then cannot be analysed in isolation of the time, place and special circumstances that led to their birth and gave them their *raison d'être*. My framework of analysis is based on documents, reports and data collected and published by human rights organisations in Israel and Palestine and assembled in Graff's documentary study *Palestinian children and Israeli state violence* (1991). The accuracy, authenticity and realistic tone evinced in the stories is parallel to Graff's reports of how the government of Israel continues to inflict physical and

psychological violence on Palestinian children on a massive scale".¹⁸ Thus his writings offer a historical repertoire punctuated by momentous events of modern Palestinian history. He deals with the crucial problems of how to come to grips with the traumatic experience of the loss of the Palestinian homeland in 1948, how to reunite the distant past with the everlasting oppressive present, how to experience exile and the dehumanising effect of life in refugee camps, and finally how to try to re-assert a semblance of continuity between the displaced Palestinians and the lost land.¹⁹ These have been Kanafani's basic thematic concerns in all his writings but in this collection that is primarily addressed to the children of Palestine, Kanafani follows a certain strategy that will help clarify his themes. First and foremost of these strategies is that the stories are either narrated by a child or revolve around one; secondly, Kanafani manipulates the interplay of fact and fiction and thus creates a complex state of meaning; and thirdly, he conjures the epitome of the homeland in juxtaposing and contrasting the past with the present.

In the following pages I will demonstrate how these strategies are formulated in the stories so that what we finally get is a regressive movement from the previously idyllic and almost utopian world of *The Little lantern* to the dystopia of the present. The opaqueness of the narratives in the children's collection suggests infinite layers of meaning that combine to form suggestive meta-texts.

With the child occupying the central viewing position in "Paper from Ramleh", Kanafani has excelled at presenting a picture where he projects the harsh, senseless and brutal Israeli violence in the occupied land. Kanafani's choice of a child as his witness and commentator on reality is a clever one because children's vulnerability, innocence and spontaneity heighten the dramatic quality of narrative and induces the reader's empathy. In projecting child vision with its

keenness and freshness of expression and interpretation Kanafani has underlined the suffering of the child and the penalties of being victimised in a totally uncongenial society ruled by the “enemy”.

In “Paper from Ramleh” a young boy of nine is witness to and narrator of the brutality of the Israeli military forces towards a group of Palestinian civilians. In this story we are shown how the Israeli police stops a group of villagers from Ramleh who are on their way to Jerusalem and lines them up under the scorching July sun and starts to abuse them. The child/narrator – a member of the unfortunate group – witnesses the shooting of Fatima, a little girl, the shooting of her mother and finally the father’s brave suicidal act of blowing himself up with the Israeli major’s office and demolishing the whole building.

He is directly subjected to the enemy’s merciless cruelty. “Paper from Ramleh” aims to present its reader with a “slice of life” product that is closer to fact than it is to fiction.

Small and brown, she looked with her wide black eyes at the female Jewish recruit.

“Is she your daughter?”

Abu Uthman shook his head nervously, but his eyes flashed a startling black prophecy. The female recruit simply raised her small gun and aimed it at Fatima’s head. The little brown girl with still wondering black eyes ...

Just at that instant one of the Jewish patrol moved in front of me. The situation had attracted his attention. He stood concealing the scene from me, but I heard the sound of three separate shots. Then he moved and I saw the face of Abu Uthman filled with grief. I looked at Fatima. Her head was hanging forward and blood dripped from her black hair to the warm brown earth(6).

The child/narrator in this story is directly subjected to the enemy’s cruelty. Having witnessed Fatima’s shooting what could become of this nine-year-old

psyche? Is he to be considered fortunate because he has not been killed? Will he ever be able to forget the gunshots, the dripping of the blood or the killing that he had to stare at while ordered to “stand on one leg with [his] arms crossed above his head”(5).

In “He was a child that day” (1969) Kanafani provides a topographical detailed tableau of the Palestinian countryside and how this “beauty” is violated by the Israeli soldiers. In this story, Kanafani’s second and third strategies are intertwined to show how the Israeli occupation defaces the beauty of the land of Palestine. The subtle juxtaposition between the once peaceful past and the present turbulent state serves as a recurrent reminder to the characters in the narrative (and the readers) of their tragedy and their loss invoking nostalgic feelings for the past. Ahmad the child/narrator of this story is the only survivor among the bus passengers in the district of Haifa who are all going to be shot in front of his eyes. In the course of the journey Kanafani is implicitly alluding to the beauty of the land and its suffering under Israeli destruction as apparent in this passage:

... On the horizon was Tel al-Fakhar, venerable with its flat summit and its peaceful verdant surface with the tombs of soldiers whose resistance had bequeathed them death and who now saw no further than the walls ... [A] corpulent woman who had made the pilgrimage the year before was now telling a story about how the Jews had blown up an orphanage in Yaffa and how the bodies of the children had been strewn about the crater of Iskandar Iwad Street mixed with the seeds of burst oranges (95).

Shortly after telling these stories, the bus is halted by an Israeli patrol and a Jewish officer commands all the men and women to line up at the side of the road and proceeds to say:

“This is war, you Arabs... you say you’re so brave, and you call us mice. You, come here.” A girl appeared from behind a small car. She was wearing shorts and had a machine gun slung over her shoulder. She stood with her bare legs spread apart on the other side of the road.

“This is your quota for today.”

They fell into the ditch, their hands and faces sunk in the mud, collapsed in a dense, confused and bloody heap. Blood ran underneath their bodies, combining with the water from the stream flowing towards the south(96).

The curt, brisk and quick impressionistic strokes identifiable in this description are in complete harmony with the focussed and sharp vision of a child and reaches its maximum intensity in the final sentence where the narrator acknowledges the fact of not comprehending all that he saw but of experiencing it all with the maximum of intensity. This moment of heightened awareness and distillation of emotion proves the child/narrator's complete identification with the plight of his fellowmen and he instinctively knows that his misfortune is that of all Palestinians. In this tragic story, Kanafani has not resorted to preaching to us about Israeli violence but through employing a child as his narrator the whole drama has been enacted for us.

The child in this story who “didn't understand what had happened or why” is spared but his mind will be scarred forever. Graff accuses the Israelis of creating

an entire generation who will not only continue to hate their oppressors, but who will be burdened with large numbers of the physically disabled and the psychologically scarred.²⁰

In Kanafani's story, “The Child goes to the camp”: we get an authentic picture of the life in refugee camps (mukhayamat) and hence Kanafani's third strategy where he uses fiction as a record of factual reality. The “new world order” dictated to these desperate refugees who have been subjected to intolerance, has had a myriad of effects on each of them and especially on the children. Due to the fact that the writer himself was an exile, he has been able to portray the

effects of this life on the family. He coined the phrase “time of hostilities” to describe both the temporal and spatial locale of his story. The narrator of the story who is once again a child of about 10, defines “hostility” by saying:

At that time – but first let me tell you that it wasn’t a time of hostilities in the sense that you might think. That is, there wasn’t really a war. In fact there was no war at all. The whole thing is that we were eighteen people from different generations living in one house, which would have been more than enough at any time. None of us had managed to find work, and hunger – which you may have heard of – was our daily worry. That is what I call the time of hostilities(62).

Trying to find a morsel of bread to prevent people from dying was the foremost concern of the refugees; hunger was yet another enemy that they had to deal with:

... in a time of hostilities, it was your job to safeguard the first and foremost virtue, which is to keep yourself alive. Everything else is secondary. But in a time of continuous hostilities, nothing is secondary. Everything comes first(63–64).

The responsibility of feeding 18 people who all live under one roof is thrust upon the narrator and his cousin who are both the same age. Their job is to go to the market and try to grab as many left-over vegetables and fruits and any other kind of food as they can:

Isam and I were ten years old. He was a little bigger than I was, and still is, and he considered himself the leader of his brothers, my cousins, just as I consider myself the leader of my brothers. After long efforts, my father and my aunt’s husband finally found a daily task for us. Together we were to carry a big basket and walk for about an hour and a quarter until we came to the vegetable market sometime in the afternoon. You don’t know what the vegetable market was like: the shops were beginning to close their doors and the last of the trucks loaded with what was left from the day were getting ready to leave the crowded street. Our job – mine and Isam’s – was easy and difficult at the same time. We had to find stuff to fill our basket. From in front of the shops or behind the cars. Even from the tops of tables if the owner happened to be taking a nap or was inside his store (63).

Children who emigrated with their families and were forced to work from an early age and to perform difficult tasks in order to help support their families who had lost a father or an older brother during one of the many battles that were constantly going on are skilfully portrayed by Kanafani and all the minute details of their desperate living conditions are powerfully conveyed in the stories. These destitute children had to sacrifice all the joys of childhood in their struggle for existence. In order to help their families, many of them had to either skip school altogether or work for long hours after the school day is over, as they are often the only breadwinners in their large families. Kanafani is able to paint a heartbreaking picture of that kind of life because he himself lived in refugee camps and later on worked as an art teacher in refugee schools. In his story "A Present for the holiday", Kanafani uses the first person method of narration and merges past and present in describing the desperate situation after the 1967 war. In this story, the voice of the adult changes into that of the child as he remembers what holiday present he had been given by the Red Cross 19 years earlier:

... I went racing to the Red Cross Center, and stood with the hundreds of children, all of us waiting for our turn ... After a million years, my turn came. A clean starched nurse gave me a red square box. I ran "home" without opening it. Now, nineteen years later, I have completely forgotten what was in that dream box. Except for just one thing: a can of lentil soup. ... Probably the box held splendid children's toys, too, but these weren't to eat so I didn't pay any attention to them and they got lost. I kept the can of soup for a week, and every day I gave my mother some of it in a water glass so she could cook it for us (11-12).

This is the narrator's recollections of his childhood in the camps which he describes as:

The camps. Those stains on the forehead of our weary morning, lacerations, brandished like flags of defeat, billowing by chance above the plains of mud and dust and compassion (10).

This portrait of a tragic childhood is cleverly encapsulated by Kanafani in this story which brings before our eyes the total absurdity of giving out toys to the children of the camps who are in dire need of food, clothes and shelter not “splendid children’s toys” that to them are totally irrelevant.

A third story set in refugee camps is “Guns in the camp” (1969) in which the character of Abu Saad epitomises the life of degradation that the refugees are forced to lead and where his only hope is to see his sons become “fedayeen” and die for Palestine. His wife describes him by saying:

Abu Saad had been crushed. Crushed by the poor, crushed by the victors, crushed by the ration card, crushed under a tin roof, crushed under the domination of the country ... (92).

Another group of stories are set after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. These are all related by the child Mansur, their common denominator. These are: “The Child borrows his uncle’s gun and goes east to Safad” (1956), “Doctor Qassim talks to Eva about Mansur who has arrived in Safad” (1965), “Abu Al-Hassan ambushes an English car” (1965), and “The Child, his father and the gun go to the citadel at Yaddin” (1965). Each story relates one of Mansur’s adventures in his participation in the newly emerging organised resistance movement. All the stereotyped symbols associated with the Palestinians such as UNRWA²¹ ration cards which arouse feelings of pity and sympathy and the Soviet-made Kalashnikov guns, which stand out as symbols of courage and bravery, are there in the stories. The four stories evolve around Mansur’s most cherished wish, that of possessing a gun in order to take part in fighting the Israelis with the rest of the men at his home village, Safad. “The gun, the bunduqiyya” states Barbara Harlow, “plays a prominently significant role ... Rather than being a symbolic presence, however, an icon of the Palestinian

armed struggle endowed with transcendental value, the gun participates in a complicated system of exchange and circulation.’’²² The Mansur stories are a vivid example of all the complex social and national feelings that were evolving at this critical time of building up an organised resistance movement that aimed at liberation and was willing to sacrifice men’s lives.

Although Mansur has to face his father’s anger for getting involved in the battle, his adamant attitude proves that the seeds of revolution will soon be in bloom.

His father shouted: “Turn around and talk to me face to face, you ingrate of a son.” Mansur turned around and looked at his father, directly into his angry eyes. His father came a step forward, and it was clear that he was going to have to use his hands. The next minute the blow which he had been expecting landed, but Mansur didn’t move. When his mother moved to block the way between him and his father, he gently pushed her away from in front of him. Abu Qassim shouted again: “Say something.” Mansur licked his lips and felt a sweet warm taste. Nonetheless he didn’t raise his hand to his mouth to see whether or not it had begun to bleed, but went on looking at his father straight in the eyes.

“If you’re here and Qassim is in Haifa, one of us three had to go to Safad.”

“Are you trying to sell me some kind of patriotism, you son of sin?”(40).

In these four stories the gun, like the stories themselves, is a weapon whose aim is to realise national liberation and social revolution.²³ This movement of collective solidarity so obvious in Mansur’s challenging of all his surrounding authorities – his father, his elders and the traditional leadership – in order to join the resistance movement, marks the beginning of growing feelings of “affiliation” rather than ties of “filiation” and authority.²⁴

After reading these stories, it becomes evident that Kanafani was primarily concerned, as Ihsan Abbas points out, with achieving a maximum degree of realism in his writings²⁵ and wanted his narrative to be “realistic a hundred

percent’’²⁶ in order to imbue the literary text with crucial political significance and use fiction as a handmaiden for politics.²⁷

However, we cannot consider Kanafani merely a documentary writer because he did not only reproduce a chronological record of historical and sociological events but he formulated a more sophisticated reality employing all the craftsmanship of a talented fiction writer in using images, symbols and paradigms. Consequently, his fiction adds to reality the extra dimensional quality inherent in the endless connotations evoked in a work of art. Reality for Kanafani is the seed that instigated his inspiration and creativity but it is then manipulated and distilled to produce a fictional work of infinite possibilities.

Notes

- 1 Terry Eagleton, *Literary theory: an introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), p. 215.
- 2 See *New left review*, 146 (1984) p. 92.
- 3 Edward Said, Introduction to Halim Barakah, *Days of dust* (Wilmette, Medina , University Press International, 1974) p. xxi.
- 4 Ibid, p. xxi.
- 5 See further discussion of this in Harlow’s *Resistance literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987) p. 2.
- 6 Ghassan Kanafani, *Palestinian resistance literature under occupation: 1948–1968* (Beirut: Institute for Arab Research, 1981), p. 13. In Arabic, my translation.
- 7 Quoted from Harlow’s *Resistance literature*, p. 12.
- 8 Said, “Introduction” to *Days of dust*, p. xxiv.
- 9 Angus Fletcher, *Allegory the theory of a symbolic mode* (Cornell University Press, 1964) p. 2.
- 10Carolynn Van Dyke, *The Fiction of truth structures of meaning in narrative and dramatic allegory* (Cornell University Press, 1985) p. 26.

- 11 Fletcher, p. 8.
- 12 Ghassan Kanafani, *The Little lantern* (Al-Qindil al-Saghir) (Beirut: Dar El Fatah El Araby, 1975) my translation.
- 13 "Twelve stories for Arab children" in *Arab studies quarterly*, Winter 1986, Vol. 8, no. 1, p. 21.
- 14 Introduction to Kanafani's "Thoughts on change and the blind language", *Alif 10* (1990) p. 131.
- 15 Introduction to Kanafani's "Thoughts on change and the blind language", *Alif 10* (1990) p. 151.
- 16 The edition I have used throughout is Ghassan Kanafani's *Palestine's children* translated by Barbara Harlow (London: Heineman, 1984).
- 17 Muhammad Siddiq, *Man is a cause: political consciousness and the fiction of Ghassan Kanafani* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984), p. xi.
- 18 James A. Graff, *Palestinian children and Israeli State violence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).
- 19 Siddiq, p. xiv.
- 20 Graff, p. ii.
- 21 UNRWA is the United Nations Relief and Works Agency established in 1950 to aid Palestinian refugees.
- 22 Harlow, p. 89.
- 23 Faiha' Abdel Hadi, *Wa'd al-Ghad* [Tomorrow's promise] (Amman: Dar-al-Karmel, 1987) pp. 40–42.
- 24 The terms "filiation" and "affiliation" are quoted from Edward Said's *The World, the text and the critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983) pp. 21–24.
- 25 See "Symbolic framework in the stories of Ghassan Kanafani", Introduction to *Al Athar Al Kamilah*, Vol. 1, p. 11 and 12. In Arabic, my translation.
- 26 Fadl El Nakib, "Alam Ghassan Kanafani, (Ghassan Kanafani's world) *Shu'un Falastiniyah* 13 (1972), pp. 192–204. In Arabic, my translation.
- 27 Siddiq, xii and 90 and Radwa Ashur, *Al-Tariq ila al-Khayma al-ukhra* [The Way to the other tent] (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1977) p. 7.