Children in Postmodern Literature: A Reconstruction of Childhood

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English 465, Fall 2011, UHH

Different ideas and forms of childhood have existed cross-culturally and across times, implemented differently in each society. The idea of childhood as we know it today, however, is one that has been argued to have developed from the rise of the European model of childhood, argued by Philippe Ariés to have begun in the 16th and 17th-century. Ariés, credited with “inventing” this beginning of childhood in his book Centuries of Childhood, has been noted as a groundbreaking source of study for the understanding of changing childhood ideas; he has been included in many books that attempt to criticize it today, such as John Beck’s Toward a Sociology of Education. In this book, Ariés emphasizes childhood as a social construct, rather than an idea developed out of simply biological differences, saying “the idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult…” (43). This socially constructed awareness reflects the differences in treatment that we see today in our society between children and adults.

We see this distinct separation between children and adults reinforced through societal institutions such as elementary schools, the juvenile justice system, pediatrics, and even in children’s literature and ratings for movies. Within his argument of childhood being a social construct, Ariés also goes on to note that our ideas of childhood are more of a reflection of the adults who construct this idea through different means, than it is of children. This corresponds to the criticism that it is even in literature that children lack a voice; it is also in this lack of representation from children that adults have been able to control, manipulate, and convey their own messages using children and literature.

In specific examples of postmodern text and stories, we can see this deconstruction of the standard idea of childhood as a happy age of bliss, in which the authors impose adult emotions and understandings of the world around them in their child characters. Many of these depictions are disturbing in their treatment of children and incorporate these children existing in adult worlds and dealing with adult issues. As a result, these depictions become an effective literary tool in the sense that they add an element of shock value to the stories that catch and hold the reader’s attention. Although themes such as violence, vulgarity, and sexuality often times are over-exaggerated and exploited in these stories featuring child characters, it begs the question of whether there is an element of truth in these stories through the ways children may have to deal more and more with the adult world today. Is the boundary and gap between children and adults in our society decreasing? And if so, then does postmodern literature exploit their child characters in their attempt to send adult messages through them? Or, are they reconstructing an idea of childhood that attempts to reflect the darker aspects of it – an aspect that may exist today, seemingly hidden behind the standard happy-go-lucky, ideals? By exploring these questions, the child’s symbolic power also becomes important through the way it changes to fit the needs of the adults of that time. Within postmodern literature, we can see this symbolic power of the child changing in their use as agents of messages and catalysts of adult emotions, often responsible for sending heavy, politicized messages. It is within this use of the child to convey the messages of an adult that we can see the child becoming more intertwined within the adult world in postmodern literature and the distinction between child and adult slowly dissolving.

Looking at the ways postmodern literature subverts the standard idea of childhood, changing the symbolic power of the child, we can see how often times the child character embodies adult emotions and understandings of his or her surroundings. In the story “Zami: A New Spelling of My Name,” found in the text Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology, Audre Lorde writes of her memory of herself as a four year-old child, and her longing for a companion in the form of another little girl. The beginning of the story is filled with seemingly innocent events that emphasize the childishness of her character, such as her hopes for a younger sister, her attempts at bartering in prayer for a little companion: “no matter what I promised God in return…” (147), and her superstitions that she believed would bring her a sister “I had decided that if I could step on all the horizontal lines for one day, my little person would appear like a dream…” (147). It is in these small, intimate beliefs of the child where we can see Lorde attempting to appeal to us as readers, as many of these innocent events are things that perhaps we too can relate to when we think back to our childhoods.

This initial innocence in her character, however, takes a different turn as the story continues. Lorde goes on to write about her phantom child’s reactions when her little companion (“Toni”) does happen to appear to her one day. Much of the description and actions of the child that follows has clear sexual innuendos and implications to them in the way that her child-self is physically interacting with her companion, going on to describe her child-self undressing and touching her companion. It is interesting to note the way that Lorde also seems to draw a parallel of the relationship between the child and her mother. She writes “...her eyes seemed to match both the particular nature of childhood, which distinguishes the child from the adult…” (147); “perhaps she did not care that I was about to usurp that secret prerogative belonging only to mothers about to spank, or to nurses with thermometers” (151), and then goes on to write of her self-child, “I unbuttoned the
first two of them at the top, just so I could button them back up again, pretending I was her mother” (149). This parent-child relationship seems to be emphasized with the child’s description of her mother’s stern and strict attitude. Although the child’s actions appear disturbing to us as readers, part of that disturbance is the way that Lorde interferes with our common idea of an absence of sexuality in childhood. Part of the story being alarming is the way in which Lorde actually transposes her adult self onto the phantom memory child, thereby giving the child’s actions a disturbing adult quality to them, which in turn changes the way we view the child and her actions. In this way we can see the toddler dealing with what we would consider as more of an adult (or at least adolescent) issue, which is that of her sexuality.

Examining childhood, it is unavoidable to include fairy tales, as they have played such an important role constructing and reconstructing our ideas of childhood, and the ways in which children are able to use them to learn to cope with their surroundings. By analyzing postmodern fairy tales, there almost seems to be a return to the darker stories told to children during and before the early 19th century, primary changes involving different agendas, messages, and social issues of today. This becomes clear when analyzing postmodern reinterpretations of fairy tales and folktales, such as the story “I Am Anjuhimeko” by Hiromi Ito in the text My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me, a collection of postmodern fairy tales edited by Kate Bernheimer. Within the story, a reinterpretation of a traditional Japanese folktale, Ito immediately begins with the destruction of the family realm through infanticide. The shocking beginning leads to the deceased, or once-deceased, infant crawling out of the sand she was buried in and beginning a search for her mother and father. This search, however, only brings the infant more graphic violence and pain, often times in the form of sexual abuse. In this strange and surreally graphic story, Ito’s use of the infant character as a victim of such horrible events and circumstances, primarily due to the corrupt adults that brought the nightmare life upon her, is a clear intrusion on the more upheld notion of the sacred, innocent realm that children are believed to exist in.

In “Childhood and Adolescence” from Europe Since 1914: Encyclopedia of the Age of War and Reconstruction, John Merriman and Jay Winter write that children represented an “innocence that was assumed to be lost in the course of maturation. Paradise had once been seen as a place; now it was a stage of life” (566). This is an interesting idea to take into consideration when looking at fairy tales, both postmodern interpretations as well as their predecessors. When comparing the original collection of stories from the Brothers Grimm to the same stories that we tell children today, it is often noted that the tales we have been told and retold actually have darker, sometimes gorier, and usually scarier origins. In the first chapter of her book The Hard Facts of the Grimm’s Fairy Tales entitled “Sex and Violence: The Hard Core of Fairy Tales,” Maria Tatar writes of the horrors depicted in many classic fairy tales, ranging from “graphic descriptions of murder, mutilation, cannibalism, infanticide, and incest that fill the pages of these bedtime stories for children” (3). Listing the varying stories that depict these crimes, Tatar also writes of the child characters involved, who are most often than not victims of the corrupt adults surrounding them, such as the child characters in the stories “Hansel and Gretel,” “Donkeyskin,” “Cinderella,” “The Juniper Tree,” and more. Similarly, in postmodern stories, we can also see children who must operate in what would be considered as more adult worlds, in which they must learn to gain a sense of their identities and surroundings despite having to endure neglect, adult corruptness, violence, horror, and sexual violence. Tatar says: “sex and violence: these are the major thematic concerns of tales in the Grimms’ collection...But more important, sex and violence in that body of stories frequently take the perverse form of incest and child abuse...” (10), and it is clear that her views on the earlier fairy tale versions are also true in postmodern stories involving children. The idea of childhood in these darker fairy tales (if there is one to begin with) seem to take on more of a “hellish” quality to them, rather than Merriman and Winter’s “paradise.”

In Infant Tongues: The Voice of the Child in Literature, Elizabeth Goodenough and Mark A. Heberle include a quote from Tatar in which she writes about “the child’s lack of voice” and observes that it is in children’s literature that adults are “recapturing their own experiences or creating stories about what it is like to see as a child does” (276). It is in poetry, however, that there seems to be a venue in which children’s voices can be heard, and in different ways. It is also interesting to compare some of the poetry by children to some of the poetry by adults writing a reflection on their childhood. Between them, we can see the differences between an adult’s nostalgia for childhood and a child’s actual experiences and feelings on being a child. In the book Dogs & Dragons, Trees & Dreams, a collection of poems written by Karla Kuskin, we see examples of this longing for the freedom oftentimes associated with childhood. In her poem “The Question,” Kuskin writes:

People always say to me
“What do you think you’d like to be
When you grow up?
And I say “Why,
I think I’d like to be the sky
Or be a plane or train or mouse
Or maybe be a haunted house
Or something furry, rough and wild
Or maybe I will stay a child.”

The adult nostalgia for the memories of childhood (or at least her ideas of it) are clear in the playfulness of the poem and in the longing for the past in her last sentence. In her depiction of a child wanting to remain a child,
we see how she reemphasizes the sugarcoated ideals that seem to define childhood to many adults: freedom, imagination, and innocence. It is interesting to compare poems such as these with poems written by children. In the book *Small Kid Time Hawaii*, a collection of poetry by elementary school students in O’ahu, edited by Eric Chock, a variety of voices appear in the pages. In one of the poems, Peter Greenman of Ka’elepulu Elementary wrote:

I will dig an opening  
in glass clouds in space  
and crawl through them.  
And I will find a hole in the deep  
and I will crawl down it  
and find myself here.

Another student, simply named “Jamie,” of Ka’a’awa Elementary writes:

I was mad and I got a knife  
But nobody was around  
So I put it back

Another student writes of whiskey and his father’s use of alcohol. Within these poems, we can see children understanding and dealing with very real issues that we often times associate as more adult issues: violence, uncontrolled anger, how alcohol can destroy their family, and even a deeper sense of self-awareness than they as children are given credit for. It may be argued, then, that perhaps these children operate in much more adult worlds, due to their surroundings being less that of the innocent ideals of childhood and more of the issues of the adults in their lives.

Tatar has actually supported the idea of children being more exposed to the adult worlds. In an article on her from *Harvard Magazine* written by Craig Lambert entitled “The Horror and the Beauty,” she states, “with exposure to media at early ages, children have access to what was once adult knowledge – they know what we didn’t know until we were teenagers” (40). But she also goes on to say (or perhaps warn), “yet they are still infantilized, and more dependent on their parents than ever” (40). Perhaps this last thought, that despite children being infused in more adult worlds, though still as dependent on adults as ever, is also shown in the child characters in postmodern literature. Both Anjuhimeko and Lorde’s child-self still seem to yearn for the acceptance of the adults around them, and their dependence on adults to take care of them in order to survive are clearly depicted as well.

Examining the way childhood is depicted through different forms of writing, such as fairy tales, fiction, historical texts, and postmodern reinterpretations, we can see an interesting paradox between the ways children are expected to experience their childhood and what they actually deal with. Taking into consideration the socioeconomic and rapid technological advancements being made today in our society, such as with issues of cyber-bullying, porn on the internet, violence and vulgarity in video games, and more, an interesting paradox arises in postmodern literature, as it seems to both exploit, while also reflect a sense of truth into the child character and his or her world. Although exaggerated and disturbing, perhaps postmodern literature can reflect a sense of the reality of children having to deal with more adult issues today, therefore of them having to live in more adult worlds.

**Works Cited**


