

# A Serious Genre



# A Serious Genre:

## *The Apology of Children's Literature*

Edited by

Dana Percec

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A Serious Genre: The Apology of Children's Literature

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## FOREWORD BY THE EDITOR

The volume *A Serious Genre: The Apology of Children's Literature* is a collection of essays by scholars and academics from Romania, the United States, and Turkey who investigate the value and impact of what, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has been called, using an umbrella term, children's literature. The volume will be the fourth in a series, edited by Dana Percec, which focuses on literary genres considered marginal or low-brow, but which have a long tradition and display remarkable versatility and popularity. Previous volumes in the collection presented the historical novel (Eurostampa 2010), romance (2012), and fantasy (2014, both at CSP). Fourteen essays approach children's literature from different angles, going from classical Victorian children's books to the latest film adaptation of *The Hobbit*, from adult narrators of children's stories to child narrators of adult stories.

The book addresses researchers, teachers, and students with an interest in literature, literary theory, and genre analysis, but is also appealing to the larger public, given the flexibility, accessibility, and friendly format of children's literature.

The introductory chapter by Dana Percec discusses possible taxonomies for children's literature, the criteria varying from chronology, content, or gender issues. It looks at how the perception and creation of children's literature have evolved in time, at how attitudes towards fantasy, on the one hand, and the educational, formative component of stories, on the other hand, have changed from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. It compares the golden age of children's literature with other, less golden, epochs and tries to offer an insight into the contemporary production of the literature for small readers and young adults.

Stephen Tapscott's chapter, "Picturing Alice Liddell," discusses Charles Dodson's—later Lewis Carroll's—interest in the physical representation of children in his early photographic work. Focusing on the pictures he took of Alice Liddell, the author offers a reading of these photographs under assumptions of the sublimated nature of the male/adult gaze directed towards the objectified body of the (usually female) child. The chapter discusses in moral terms and in terms of agency the controversy around these pictures, in comparison with more overtly erotic photographs of the Victorian period.

Little Red Riding Hood has long ceased to be just a character in a fairytale, becoming something of an icon. Nobody doubts that over time she has become one of the most popular as well as one of the most used (and abused) figures of our times. Whether she has come to epitomise a gullible little girl who loses her innocence to an unscrupulous beast on a journey of initiation, or something else, it is another story which is explored in two separate chapters which propose two readings of the tale. Codruța Goșa's "Wilful Red and Weak(ened) Wolf? A Story of Little Red Riding Hood in Diary Studies" approaches the story of how Red has fared in time from a reader-oriented perspective, adopting a less trodden methodological path in the study of literature: diary studies. To this end, seven Little Red Riding Hood-based texts, spanning four centuries, were selected to be read and then commented upon by students in diaries. These texts range from the classic Charles Perrault and the Grimm Brothers' fairytales to a 21<sup>st</sup> century North American, vernacular short story. The qualitative, subjective and open-ended nature of this endeavour is observed throughout the process of the research: from data collection to data analysis. The student diarists were selected on a voluntary basis with no prescriptive guidelines for diary keeping provided and, as far as the analysis goes, there was no pre-established analytical framework, the analysis being entirely data driven, drawing on Grounded Theory.

The other chapter dealing with Red, Loredana Pungă's "Rewritings of Fairytales. Parodies and Translations," demonstrates how tales meant for children have given birth to a rich intertextual network, focusing on the transformations that *Little Red Riding Hood* has undergone in two different contexts of deviation from the original: on the one hand, through its rewriting as a politically correct and, respectively, a legally correct tale meant for adults; on the other, through the translation from English into Romanian, by two MA students at the university where the author teaches.

C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* and J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* are classical examples of fantasy and children's literature. Daniela Rogobete's "Medieval Aesthetics in C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*" focuses on the first volume of the Narnia series, in the attempt to demonstrate that, in writing it, Lewis remains faithful to his lifelong love for medievalism (explicitly expressed in numerous writings, especially in his *Discarded Image*) and that the often-discussed combination of religious, mythological and folkloric elements can be inscribed within a general medieval aesthetic integralism. The contributor dwells on the strategies Lewis, as a theologian and medievalist, uses in order to depict a reality fallen from grace, marred by the effects of the Second World War that threaten to

annihilate all values and principles and to rob children of their innocence. The fantastic world he creates, through high fantasy elements, medieval distancing (a strategy embraced by many of his contemporaries), theological aesthetics and allegory, offers possible redeeming solutions meant to bring children closer to beauty, goodness, and truth.

Cristina Chevereșan's "What is a Hobbit? Bilbo Baggins' Adventures in Middle-Earth" presents the Hobbit's story, so popular today due to the recent film adaptations, as a book which shaped a fantastic universe that readers have never stopped appreciating. Initially written as a fairytale meant to entertain the author's own children, *The Hobbit* integrates his particular interest in Germanic mythology, as well as the literatures and languages of the Old North which, as a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, he was closely acquainted with. The chapter investigates the lasting appeal of the Middle-Earth universe via its revival of Norse mythology.

Another reading of children's literature, from a legal perspective, is offered by Andreea Verțeș-Olteanu's chapter, "Children's Literature as A Source of Jurisprudence." The chapter analyses the extent to which children's literature, with its interdisciplinary nature, may represent proper jurisprudence through a case-study on *Lord of the Flies*. William Golding's novel represents a lesson in constitutional law, approaching topics such as power and authority, Jean Jacques Rousseau's social contract, the importance of statutory rules, democracy vs. dictatorship, to name but a few. The contributor examines the double vision of children's literature: what the child gets from the text as opposed to the politically aware adult.

Along a similar line of thought, Luiza Caraivan's "'Every real story is a never ending story:' History and Politics in Children's Novels" takes into consideration fantasy novels published in various European countries in order to analyse how history and politics have influenced children's literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Starting from R. Gordon Kelly's statement that children's novels, more than any other form of literature, "reflect the minds of the generation that produced them", the chapter discusses historical and political facts that can be observed in novels such as: Gianni Rodari's *The Adventures of Little Onion*, Erich Kästner's *The 35<sup>th</sup> of May*, Nikolai Nosov's *The Adventures of Dunno and His Friends*, Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story*, Cornelia Funke's *Dragon Rider*, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The History of Middle-Earth* and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series.

In "Conceptual Blending in Children's Games as a Model for Double-Scope Creativity and New Learning Opportunities", Gabriela Tucan starts

from Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner's *The Way We Think*, which offers an overview of how young children are engaged in building complex blends in the very early stages of their life. This detailed analysis shows that only after children are able to master culturally recognized blends will they be effectively living in the blend and will prove capable of further achieving other blends with more flexibility. During early childhood, it appears that learning and mental development are intrinsically linked to our human ability of blending and de-blending. The chapter examines a set of children-designed games and activities that can all account for cases of fictive or potential reality. That is, the mental spaces created do not refer directly to entities in the outside world. The result of such an analysis of fantastic mental spaces can potentially shed new light on human creativity.

Although children's literature is not at the heart of the literary canon, many canonical authors have been adapted for the youngest readers or have been offered a reading in the key of children's books. "Adapting Shakespeare for Teens—Manga Shakespeare. An Exploratory Research on *Romeo and Juliet*" by Andreea Șerban explores the reasons behind the ever-growing popularity of manga transmediations of William Shakespeare's work by focusing on one of his most popular plays with teenagers—*Romeo and Juliet*—, as well as by analysing the reviews of the manga adaptation of the Bard's play written by two Romanian teenagers who have not had any contact with Shakespearean drama before, in an attempt to understand the appeal of this genre to the younger generations.

Adriana Răducanu's "Fathers and Sons in Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and Tim Burton's *Big Fish*: A Comparative Jungian Approach" offers a comparative Jungian analysis of Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and Tim Burton's *Big Fish*, by relating them to the public/private personas of the two *enfants terribles* of the contemporary world of literature and cinema. Although the inherent limitations of a biographical approach have frequently met with criticism, in this particular case, the writer and the director share a problematic identity built on a sense of spatial displacement and personal, familial alienation. These early markers of coming into consciousness as artists have profoundly influenced Rushdie and Burton whose creations transcend the category of "children's literature and film." Thus, the novel and the film display a dark quality and uncanny similarities in terms of their depiction of lonely sons, and equally alienated fictional and cinematic fathers.

Similarly, Gabriela Glăvan's "Reinventing the Marriage between Heaven and Hell: Children's Literature and the Avant-Garde" deals with the relationship between children's literature and the Avant-garde, long considered two divergent regimes of representation sharing a common ground. Authors such as Gellu Naum or Eugène Ionesco integrated children's books into their work without implying fractures or demarcations between this specific area of creation and the rest of their work. The chapter demonstrates the solid connection between the two domains and explores the themes and metaphors that strengthen this apparently exotic literary hybrid.

Eliza Filimon's "Composite Pictures in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* Novel and Movie" chooses a novel intended for an adult audience, which is narrated from the point of view of a small child. The analysis serves as magnifying glass on Jonathan Safran Foer's imaginative novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), and Stephen Daldry's 2012 homonymous movie adaptation. Both are prompting us to acutely experience the trauma of the 9/11 events from the perspective of a nine-year-old boy, displaying visual thinking and an alienated narrative voice. The narrator overcomes the difficulty of social interaction and effective communication using language aided by a blend of visual and textual imagery in the novel, supplemented by intricate sound layers in the movie.

The last chapter, by Raluca Bembe, offers an alternative to the Western perception of the theme of adolescence. Central Europe, especially at the beginning of the twentieth century, created a suitable background for immaturity to become a predilect theme. The periods of crisis, the search for identity, tension, and inferiority complexes are shared characteristics of Central Europe, as a cultural space, and of adolescence, perceived by psychologists as a separate age since the early twentieth century. Important Central European writers like Robert Musil and Witold Gombrowicz choose to start their literary careers with novels about teenagers. Musil's novel, *The Confusions of Young Törless*, foreshadows the ideal Musilian space, Kakania, while the military school reveals a tensed, decadent, and anxious evolution of the individual. On the other hand, Gombrowicz is a writer who strongly believes in the benefits of immaturity: it is an opportunity for being creative and, more importantly, an opportunity to go beyond the boundaries of Form.

**PART I:**

**CHILDHOOD—**  
**THE GOLDEN AGE?**

# CHAPTER ONE

## TALES OF FANTASY, NOSTALGIA, AND IMAGINATION

DANA PERCEC

In his book *Of This and Other Worlds* (1940, 1984, 25), C.S. Lewis writes about his surprise that so little has been written on the subject of the stories so far. If style, character description and structure were brought to the public's attention by critics ever since Aristotle or Boccaccio, the Story itself, the fantastic network of events, the pleasure it gives young and old readers has been, more often than not, looked down upon, treated with impatience or condescendence. But for Lewis, popular with children and seniors for his *Chronicles of Narnia*, stories which are labeled only as mere tales are just as fascinating, intriguing, and complex as any high-brow piece universally acknowledged as being well written and included in celebrated anthologies of literature.

Lewis (1984, 29) continues with these fine distinctions when he warns that no element of the Story has ever been so grossly misunderstood as the miraculous or supernatural component, considered indispensable in most children's literature. Against the assumption that children like fairytales because they are too inexperienced to realize such events cannot take place in real life, Lewis argues that children aren't necessarily fond of fantastic stories, nor are the children the only readers of fairytales. Or, simply, that enjoying reading about dragons and mermaids does not necessarily imply believing in the existence of these creatures. Starting from the conviction that a story which only the children can enjoy is a bad story, Lewis defines three ways in which to write children's literature:

1. Writing for children in general, giving the target public what they want, as it were, or what the author thinks the children want, even if the author himself or herself is not completely convinced by the story.



2. Writing a story, to be read by any children, but targeted at one or several children in particular, a composite dialogue between the writing adult, addressing a child and thus becoming different, and the reading child, becoming different when addressed by an adult.
3. Writing a story for children because this is the only genre or artistic form which suits the author's message, somewhat like a composer choosing to produce a funeral march, not for an interment, but in order to express a solemn state of mind or idea.

Choosing to write a book about writing for children and about children may seem just as curious an academic preoccupation as writing a book of literary theory on the genre of, say, romance, as it happened to the nucleus of this group of contributors a few years ago. However, two challenges have convinced the group to pursue this ambition. The first has just been exposed, in Lewis' words, expressing the very simple idea that children's literature is not to be dismissed as unserious; on the contrary. The second challenge has been revealed to the editor while preparing for this book and reading anthologies of children's literature, realizing, as a consequence of this, how eclectic, changing, versatile, atemporal, and paradoxical the genre (or genres incorporated in a larger, umbrella genre) is and how complicated it is to offer a definition and perform a selection.

An anthology of children's literature at Blackwell (Hunt 2001, 1) tries to accommodate a large amount of material which is hard to organize due to its lack of unity, very diverse nature, cross-boundary scope, or the period of time covered by earlier and later manifestations of the genre, to mention only a few of the criteria one would have to take into consideration in order to create a formal framework for children's literature and to attempt to contain it for taxonomic purposes. Then, as the editor notes in a preface (2001, xi), the selection of children's literature according to the reception criterion has to take into account the (generation) gap between the primary readership—theoretically, the children—and the secondary, critical readership—a group that, unlike in the case of other genres, would first define itself as “we, adults.” For, despite the fact that the study of this genre has moved away from prescription, as the same editor argues, it hasn't fully landed yet in the area of serious criticism, though the efforts in this direction are obvious (and the congress and journal on children's literature mentioned in the Foreword is just one example in this sense).

The simplest—and perhaps safest—way to devise categories, classes and groups within the vast area of the genre is the classical approach, in the terms proposed by literary history. The chronology of children's literature

in English indicates an early stage, which may include texts from John Bunyan's 1686's *A Book for Boys and Girls* or Mary Wollstonecraft's 1788 *Original Stories from Real Life*, to Maria Edgeworth's 1801 *Early Lessons*. However, these texts were never intended as what would be identified, since the mid 1880s, as children's literature. More often than not, 18<sup>th</sup> century writers had a religious, evangelical motivation behind producing tales with and/or for children. It is only during the later decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the taste for fairytales develops to such a degree that many stories are collected, translated into English or written to be published by English writers. Authors known for their novels and "adult" literature, like John Ruskin, Charles Dickens, W.M. Thackeray, or George MacDonald publish tales for children with more or less substantial success, while famous fairy-tale writers and collectors, like Countess D'Aulnoy, Charles Perrault, the Grimm Brothers, Carlo Collodi, or Hans Christian Andersen are translated, all this proliferation having to do with the increased leisure, education, and material means of the average families. This anticipates the installation of the first golden age of children's literature (making this genre more fortunate than others, which only enjoyed one such development), which most likely starts with Lewis Carroll's 1864 *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and, in 1871, *Through the Looking Glass*, includes Mark Twain's 1876 *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and in 1884 *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Anna Sewall's 1877 *Black Beauty*, R.L. Stevenson's 1883 *Treasure Island*, Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1886 *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and in 1911 *The Secret Garden*, Rudyard Kipling's 1894 *The Jungle Book*, Frank Baum's 1900 *The Wizard of Oz*, Beatrix Potter's 1902's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, Kenneth Grahame's 1908 *The Wind in the Willows*, Lucy M. Montgomery's 1908 *Anne of Green Gables*, and ends, just before the outbreak of the Great War, with Eleanor H. Porter's 1913 *Pollyanna*.

The interbellum and postbellum periods are the second golden age of children's literature, with a return to fantasy, probably in a desperate attempt to compensate for the tragedy and loss of the war. A.A. Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh (1926), P.L.Travers' Mary Poppins (1934), J.R.R. Tolkien's Hobbit (1937) are emblematic inter-war and universal children's favourite characters, while C.S. Lewis, Roald Dahl or Ursula K. Le Guin are influential post-war authors who devote their writing to fantasy and escapism or child heroes. When we move on towards the present, the genre grows even more eclectic and hard to pin down, as it crosses the boundaries towards a multimedia experience, with illustrated books, film, television, and cartoons and grows more and more international, with J.K.

Rowling's *Harry Potter* breaking all records of sales, popularity, and influence not only in children's literature but in all texts in print.

Another way in which to approach children's literature taxonomically is to look at it in terms of content. If we take a look at classical fairytales or folk tales and, for that matter, at many classical literary texts for children, we cannot disagree with Robert Darnton (2009, 11), who illustrates French 18<sup>th</sup> century mentalities with gruesome details in the original versions of the most popular stories for children, *Sleeping Beauty* or *Little Red Riding Hood*. Children's literature can easily be therefore divided into literature which is protective and soft, on the one hand, and literature which is harsh and shocking, on the other, the scales turning, more or less surprisingly, at the latter approach. The golden age, backed by iconic moving and unmoving pictures, covers the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and more than two thirds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and abounds in fluffy pets and benevolent maternal figures. But the examples are even more abundant in the opposite category. In the classical folk tales, it seems that no effort is made to keep the child away from the horrors of death, sexual assault, murder, torture, and abuse. Even the canonical religious writings for children, so popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and later, are full of brutal punishments against the children, their obvious function being that of more-than-explicit deterrents. For didactic or even cathartic purposes, 19<sup>th</sup> century writers bring into their stories the less favoured children, thus images of extreme poverty, destitution, starvation, and mortality gaining an exaggerated importance in the economy of the text. However, this appetite for atrocities is not exclusively characteristic of the Victorian writings. In the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the new realism in children's (and teenager's) literature, legitimized by the socially acknowledged need to make the stories compatible with their readers' every-day experience and environment, stories have grown more and more explicit about places, objects, and activities associated with contemporary young people's lives, including subjects that have to do with bullying, drugs, sex, war, homelessness, and many others. Censored first, controversial later, books for little boys and girls and for teenagers, as well as their big screen adaptations which demonstrate that innocence is long gone are gaining popularity and influence. It is true that this innocence may have been, in the golden age, only a projection or a fantasy the adults had about childhood, as Peter Hunt argues (2001:16). Under the pressure of pop culture, which enthusiastically and flamboyantly exposes the darkest sides of human behaviour in a routine, matter-of-fact style, the stories for the young have slowly but steadily moved away from Winnie, the White Rabbit, or Bambi, to the latest craze in dystopian projections.

Such an exercise of imagination for the young is Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010), adapted for the screen between 2012 and 2015, a set of books which was Amazon's bestselling product in 2012 and, since then, has ranked second after *Harry Potter*. The book title offers an oxymoron, in its combination of a ludic theme, the games, by definition joyful and positive, with the social or physiological reality of the body in the form of hunger. This initial contradiction or tension is consecrated by the plot, which describes a youthful competition for the entertainment of the more privileged citizens, which is reduced to a fierce, deadly fight for survival, with the hero and heroine being forced to kill their peers in order to preserve their heroic status (and stay alive).

The third way in which to look at children's literature is provided by the gender perspective. Just as we talk about the necessity to apply a gendered lens in the critical reception of canonical literature, just as we include in the general discourse on the history of literature 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century female authors who have been obscured, until quite recently, by the mainstream reception and criticism, so must we continue the argument about children's literature, too, bringing to the forefront those women who have produced substantial material in this area in the patriarchal shadow. The result of such an investigation is the finding that, just as storytelling as a domestic activity, naturally associated with child rearing, was primarily a female occupation, writing and publishing stories for children and about children was a prolific way in which women reached the general book market. Early examples may point to Sarah Fielding or Mary Cooper in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, while the argument I was making in the previous paragraph about contemporary authors mentioned J.K. Rowling and Suzanne Collins as bestselling women writers.

At the same time, the title of a book about children's literature by Alison Lurie (2003), *Boys and Girls Forever*, highlights yet another gender issue. The boys and girls are both the characters (Cinderella and Harry Potter, announced in the subtitle of the book) and the readers, showing how gender roles have traditionally been distributed in children's literature and what part this distribution has played in a more general perception of gendered education along the decades. This situation promises to change now, with more stories for the young challenging rather than supporting stereotypes, aiming at displaying a diversity of children's experiences, which are racial, ethnic, linguistic, social, cultural, and, of course, gendered.

Fictional worlds, like real-life education at home and in school, still tend to ignore the diversity which stems from gender, even if important steps have been taken when it comes to other issues, probably most

notably race. Boys are expected and trained to be dominant and tough, showing little emotion and much leadership potential. Girls, on the other hand, are commonly depicted as mild-natured, impressionable, and in bad need of rescue. However, efforts are already made in this area. A site addressing the general reading public (<http://www.whatdowedoallday.com/2014/06/childrens-books-that-challenge-gender-stereotypes.html>) has recently published a list of top 14 books for children which encourage readers to remember that not all children (in fact, fewer and fewer of them) match their parents', teachers', and neighbours' expectations about what boys and girls do, say, wear, play with, etc. Among such books with a more inclusive perspective on childhood and gender, the following rank high: Kimberly Brubaker Bradley (R.W. Alley, illustrator), *Ballerino Nate* (2006), Tomie de Paola, *Oliver Button is a Sissy* (1979), Sarah Hoffman, Ian Hoffman (Chris Case, illustrator), *Jacob's New Dress* (2014), Cornelia Funke (Kerstin Meyer, illustrator), *The Princess Knight* (2004), Lane Smith, *Madam President* (2008), Leslea Newman (Cyd Moore, illustrator), *A Fire Engine for Ruthie* (2004), Jane Yolen, Heidi E.Y. Stemple (Anne-Sophie Lanquetin, illustrator), *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink* (2010).

Instead of a concluding paragraph for this brief introduction to children's literature, let me quote a line from *Encyclopaedia Britannica's* entry on this topic: characterizing the genre and acknowledging its comprehensive nature, its diverse content, authorship and readership, its multi-media experience, Britannica sums it all up as "unblushingly commercial and harmlessly transient" ([www.britannica.com/art/childrens-literature](http://www.britannica.com/art/childrens-literature)). I hope the chapters of this book will succeed in convincing readers of all ages that children's literature is much more than harmless and unblushing.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### PICTURING ALICE LIDDELL

STEPHEN TAPSCOTT

#### Introduction

Alice's mother didn't care much for Mr. Dodson, the book I was reading explained. She kept him at arm's length, snubbed him. A governess accompanied him and the children on their excursions. *Well, of course*, I thought. What parent in her right mind wouldn't set limits to the relationship between a 5-year old girl and a socially-awkward unmarried man in his late '20's, who seems uninterested in grown women but devoted in his friendships with her daughters? *Of course*. I did not examine my response very closely. The book continued: what seemed to be at stake in Mrs. Liddell's resistance, apparently, was the maintenance of societal hierarchy. Alice's father was Dodson's professional supervisor, the Dean at Christ Church College, where Dodson was a young lecturer in mathematics; the social hierarchy of the university, and of the city of Oxford, wouldn't, on the face of it, permit regular social interaction. Mrs. Liddell was comfortable with Dodson's informally photographing the children but resistant to the idea of bridging the differences in their statuses. Their relationship over the years was marked by "tensions, snubs, and estrangements" over the question of his dealings with the family: welcome to visit in the nursery, less welcome in the drawing-room. Other critics point out that Dodson used the Liddells' garden when he wanted to photograph children out-of-doors.

It was too late, however, for me to unthink my first assumptions—that what was at stake was a "reasonable" parental attempt to enforce other boundaries (not those of class decorum but those of psychological propriety)—that there must be *ipso facto* something odd, something projective (if perhaps unexamined) in the intense interest and pleasure a stuttering unmarried academic in his mid-20s would find in an on-going intimate friendship with a prepubescent child. Other biographies of "Lewis

Carroll,” I found, eluded the question, or at best smoothed out the 21<sup>st</sup> century cognitive dissonance with an appeal to cultural relativism: contextualizing the story with allusions to the 19<sup>th</sup> century cult of the child (foregrounding William Wordsworth, even Charles Dickens, despite the occasional malice of Dickensian children), citing Dodson’s idealization of the figures of young girls (he tended to find boys messy and loud), acknowledging contemporary post-Freudian assumptions about undeclared motivations and sublimation. This tendency to speculate on Dodson’s intentions and conversions—often without evidence, or using the evidence of the Alice books to work backward to an etiology of the artist’s psyche—began literally with the emergence of Freudianism into Anglo-American popular culture, decades after Lewis Carroll’s death, (Goldschmidt 1933, Schuler 1938, Grotjahn 1947, 35ff., Skinner 1947, 10-31).

In effect, these critical accounts acknowledged my contemporary discomfort, whilst merging it with a problematic kind of tact, or with further, more complex repression. *Of course*, I thought, and then overwrote my first (modern) response with a vague gesture toward tolerant historicity. And yet I found, for a long time, that when I looked at Dodson’s photographs of children—especially at his photos of Alice Liddell—I would revisit (what I had first assumed was the cause of) her mother’s resistance, and somehow resist the photos, despite their visual rhetoric of purity, playfulness, and Julia-Margaret Cameron-like idealization. The force of the repression was all the more powerful because I was embarrassed by my residual—mostly unexamined—response. Like Judith Butler’s concept of “excitable speech,” and like Michel Foucault’s unpacking of medicalizing “discourses,” my move towards self-censorship had the paradoxical effect of reinforcing the discourse that it purported to control. Working through the origins of the first *Alice* manuscript, William Empson in 1933 concludes: “To make this dream-story from which *Wonderland* was elaborated seem Freudian one only has to tell it.” (Empson 1933, 264)

### **Charles Dodson the photographer**

Charles Dodson was an eager, talented amateur photographer, whose early work brought him into contact with children throughout Oxford, and led to aristocratic and artistic connections that would otherwise have been out of his reach due to his social position. His photo of Agnes Grace Weld as Little Red Riding Hood (1857), for instance, led to a friendship with the girl’s uncle-by-marriage—Alfred, Lord Tennyson, whom Dodson visited and photographed, both alone and with his sons Hallam and Lionel.



Tennyson publicly called the Agnes Weld photo “a gem;” such acquaintances, paradoxically, could be seen to have validated—naturalized and neutralized—Dodson’s interest in the children and the families he photographed. He seldom photographed children naked, and only a few such



Fig. 1-1 Charles Dodson/Lewis Carroll, Agnes Grace Weld as Little Red Riding Hood

plates survive, having been treated apparently as “high art” objects—hand-tinted, overprinted as watercolours or oil paintings-on-glass, and so on. Of course some of this archival respect could be retrospective, in response to the literary reputation of Lewis Carroll—although he had enjoyed a wide and respected reputation as a “private” photographer in wet-collodion-plate studio portraiture, years before *Alice’s Adventures under Ground* in 1864. By all accounts (especially in the later-adult memories of the children he posed), the photographic encounters were respectful, whimsical, chaste, behaviourally and psychologically “appropriate” (as we would say now).

It could be (and has been) argued that Charles Dodson’s interest in the physical representations of children was intended to resist or deflect the sexuality that would be a troubling subtext of a response to an adult or

adolescent nude body; the female child was assumed to be inspiring and pre-lapsarian (or at least “trailing clouds of glory”), figuratively chaste and literally pre-sexual. In his correspondence with adults, Dodson—devout Christian and protégé of Dr. E.B. Pusey, of the Oxford movement—is scrupulous about the purity of his own motives and methods. In a letter of 1879 proposing to Mrs. E. L. Mayhew, wife of an Oxford chaplain, to “pose” her three daughters, he writes at length of the daring of his aesthetic “theory”(despite potential “talk” by “Mrs. Grundy”) and the prim conservatism of his “practice”:

Here am I, an amateur-photographer with a deep sense of admiration for *form*, especially the human form, and one who believes it to be the most beautiful thing God has made on this earth—and who hardly ever gets a chance of photographing it! [...] Now your Ethyl is beautiful, both in face and form; and is also a perfectly simple-minded child of Nature, who would have no sort of objection to serving as model for a friend she knows as well as she knows me [...] I need hardly say that the pictures should be as you might if you liked frame and hang up in your drawing-room. On no account would I do a picture which I should be unwilling to show to all the world—or at least all the artistic world [...] If I did not believe I could take such pictures without any lower motive than the pure love of Art, I would not ask it: and if I thought there was any fear of its lessening *their* beautiful simplicity of character, I would not ask it. (emphasis in the original)

This is the most controversial recorded example of Dodson’s negotiations with parents. In fact, as Donald Gray and other critics point out, Mrs. Mayhew responded with a qualified approval—with the proviso that she should be present at the photo-shoots. Carroll was insulted by the qualification, and an estrangement developed (Carroll 1992, 272 and Gray cites from Carroll’s *Letters*, 1992, 379). Helmut Gernsheim carefully argues against the possibility of an “abusive” relationship in the process or the product of these sessions, literally, at least; according to Gernsheim, adults were usually actively present in the photo shoots. Gernsheim, a distinguished historian of photography whose interest in the photographs was heightened by the discovery, in an Oxford junkshop, of an album of formerly-unknown Carroll photographs, does not address in detail any psychological or cultural interpretations of the images.

One hears the earnestness of the declaration and the purity which the declaration promises—and at the same time an element of anxiety about the possibility of misunderstanding. Possible external causes for the apparent subtext, or the cause of his need to declare his good intentions, remain unclear (the only recorded occasion of public discomfort at Dodson’s behaviour towards his sitters is vague—an account later of an apparent

misunderstanding about the age of a young adult. He stopped portrait-photography abruptly, in 1880). Perhaps Dodson is simply acknowledging the delicate nature of child-photography, or nakedness/nudeness in art, of the odd duplicity of the representation of the naked child; he is, after all, asking the parents for permission to portray their child naked, albeit in a closed studio, in an “aesthetic” photograph of limited reproduction and for controlled private/family consumption.

### The Alice photographs

Gradually it occurred to me that these biographical accounts of the psycho-dynamics of Dodson’s photographs, especially during the early stages of his dealings with the Liddell girls and the composition of the first of the *Alice* books, implicitly privileged the adult photographer’s state of mind. Underlying the reading of the photographs, there seemed to lay unspoken or repressed assumptions about the sublimated nature of the male/adult directed to the objectified body of the (usually female) child. A cluster of assumptions about intentionality and representation seemed to be at work—assumptions about the nature of the child as merely a visual object, assuming an adult’s effect to be either “voyeuristic” or “fetishistic” in its spectacular power; I began to find Laura Mulvey’s famous formulation useful, substituting in some compensatory projection the “innocence” of the child as that which is “lacking” in the symbolically “castrated” or projective absence of the observer. (Mulvey, 14ff writing about the first *Alice* book, in Grotjahn, 1947, 35ff, makes a similar move much more crudely, viz., Girl=Phallus.) In the relationship between purported “innocence” and representation in relation to Dodson’s child-sitters, that is, I thought I heard an erotic displacement, which was simultaneously claimed and disavowed—as if the attempt to photograph the fetishized “innocence” of the Victorian child had the consequential effect of violating that idealization.

The question seemed to focus on intentionality on the part of the adult photographer; the association seemed analogous to Victorian photographs of the “peaceful” dead laid out in formal funeral attire. Just as we sense that the controlling power of the “gaze” on the dead violates the autonomy of the objectified dead person—that is, just as rendering the attempt to portray the dead “at peace” cannot reliably achieve its aim, so, similarly, the attempt to photograph the child, who, by this account, lacks agency, violates the very condition of (passive) innocence the photo purports to show. The dead cannot pose or choose—our sense of the voyeuristic “violation” is exaggerated in cases like photographing victims of violence,

as in American postcards of lynching (see Alexandre2012, chapters 1-2); I suspect we feel a residual discomfort in the presence of any such representations of persons who cannot choose to be thus represented, those who—like children—lack conscious agency or the power to resist the terms of the representation. Dodson himself seems to have been sympathetic to this argument of transference: in the 1850s his correspondence details his concern for the psychological welfare of the children he photographs. In a late letter to his artist-friend Gertrude Thomson, he declines further contact with one family because of a hesitation about the way the children were being raised, and because of a concomitant fear about the possible results of the child's experience of being thus represented:

I don't think I have yet told you that I wish no more drawings to be made, for me, of either Iris or Cynthia, naked. I find they are being brought up in a way which I consider injudicious and dangerous for their purity of mind, and I will do nothing which can add to the danger. It is a real sacrifice of inclination.... But if we are to follow the voice of conscience, we cannot always do what we should like. (Wakeling/Woolf2010, 258)

And yet.

The Alice photos are not overtly eroticized or indelicate. I had expected something like the outdoor/studio photos by Wilhelm Von Gloeden, in Taormina, from the turn of the century. Von Gloeden's reference-points are "Aesthetic," with a capital A—the photos pose peasant boys in "classic" attitudes and "Attic" costumes, self-consciously echoing high-cultural signposts of respectability, Caravaggio, Alma-Tadema, Eakins, Beaux-Arts semiotics of ornamentation. Yet they are redolent of visual desire, posing chasms of racial and class division in order to bridge such gaps with a fetishistic outlook. In fact, their affectations to high-culture respectability are so transparent as to seem cynically opportunistic, even camp, to us now.

Roland Barthes claims that Von Gloeden begins with the laws of Antiquity, overloads them, parades them ponderously (with ephebes, shepherds, ivy, palms, olive trees, tunics, columns, steles) but (as a first distortion from Antiquity) he mixes the signals, combining Greek flora, Roman statuary, and the "classical nude" of Beaux-Arts academies: with no irony, it appears, he accepts any worn-out legend as a genuine article. And that isn't all: Antiquity paraded thusly (with his love for boys clearly inferred) is then populated with dark bodies... [T]he result is a delicious contradiction of all the literary baggage from a Greek version of Antiquity people with little peasant gigolos' dark bodies who wear heavy expressions as dark as the luminous blue from corselets of burned insects.



Fig. 1-2 Wilhelm Von Gloeden, *The Boys of Taormina*

An element of sexual innuendo pervades the Von Gloeden images, staking a claim to “Greek” authenticity through the iconography of the Decadents. The figures are posed in attitudes of staged “play” and even of companionship, though those moments—boys with their arms around one another, glances over a poised flute—reinforce less a sense of spontaneity and more a staged enactment of sexual tension between the represented subjects, as allegories of deflected seduction or transference. Glances smoulder and the boys smirk; one sticks his finger into the open mouth of a fish. They are images of a “classical ideal” in a coyly appropriative paederastic code, using Sicilian peasant boys whose trust Von Gloeden cultivated: “I had to be intimate with them for a long time,” he writes, “in order to be able to observe them later in scanty garments, to select among them, and to stimulate them spiritually with stories from Homer’s sagas....” (Hieronymus1984, 37-8)

This was the dynamic that our evasiveness about the Dodson photos seems to assume—and to qualify or dismiss. Douglas Nickel quotes Nabokov’s characterization of the children’s attitudes in the Dodson photos thus: “His were sad, scrawny little nymphets, bedraggled and half-dressed [...] as if participating in some dusty and dreadful charade.” (Nickel2002, 11)Curiously, however, the Dodson photographs do not seem to me to carry that charge in the long run. In all of Dodson’s photographs of Alice Liddell, she is fully clothed, often in costume. Instead of exploring a dynamic of otherness and abjection, of compensation and desire in the gaze of the adult (fetishistic) viewer, the Dodson images seem to represent a different species of irony, even of

resistance. They foreground the “otherness” of the child, for sure, but in a dynamic of reciprocal containment. The child regards the camera, but in a different, ironic, dimension of theatricality—less aesthetically “classical” and more generically carnivalesque. She matters, but on her terms.

Dodson’s visual mode—the costumes, the implied narratives, the dramatic identification of the character of the sitter with an assumed “character” of a masquerade—indicate that Carroll’s model for photographic representation derived as much from the theatre as from static visual arts like painting. He did admire the Pre-Raphaelite artists, befriended and photographed William Holman Hunt, even wrote a poem based on Hunt’s picture “The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple.” In these estimations, however—as in his interest in the visualizations of Shakespeare’s characters by John Everett Millais and by Sir Joseph Noel Paton, and in the fairy-epic paintings of Richard Dadd, Carroll valued the theatricality of gesture, the almost-mathematical precision of realistic *mise-en-scene*, and the sense that the narrative painting captured in its moment the resolution of a longer dramatic arc. Carroll’s photographic paradigm was the theatre, even amateur let’s-raid-the-attic-for-costumes productions; his theatrical tastes were broad and sometimes naïvely eager. He revered Shakespeare (Ellen Terry, whom he had seen when she was 9 years old, appearing in London in a production of *The Winter’s Tale*, became one of his closest friends) but he also enjoyed melodramas, operas, comic farces, family skits. He was so affected by a production of *Faust* in Edinburgh that he speculated aloud about the ethical dimension of the theatrical “magical” narrative, its ability to enact abstract ideas.

Carroll’s commitment to the suspended belief of the theatrical illusion seems important, in his context, in part because of the ostentatiously theatrical performativity, the self-evidently belief-cancelling nature of the illusion, of his photos of children. He shot Agnes Grace Weld as Little Red Riding Hood. He dressed Alice’s sister Lorina as a Chinese girl, Xie and Kitchen as a Viking-like Dane in fur-trimmed cloak and fur hat. In 1858 he dressed three boys and a girl as St George, his knights, and a long-haired damsel in distress. Two years before Darwin’s *Origin of Species* he made studio photos of a young man shaking hands with a monkey. He apparently kept in his studio costumes for “Chinaman,” “Turk,” “Roman,” Dickens’ “Dolly Varden” and other “characters.”

Allegory is at work in some of the theatricalized settings (Alice at 8 years old is photographed beside a fern, a plant associated in the Victorian language-of-flowers with Sincerity), and a sense of sentimentality sometimes saturates the tonality of the image with a combination of primness and somewhat syrupy emotional propriety. And yet, at the same