

**REALISMO SOCIAL Y MUNDOS IMAGINARIOS:
UNA CONVIVENCIA PARA EL SIGLO XXI**

JOSÉ SANTIAGO FERNÁNDEZ VÁZQUEZ
ANA ISABEL LABRA CENITAGOYA
ESTHER LASO Y LEÓN
(EDS.)

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**“CHESHIRE PUSS, ...WOULD YOU TELL ME, PLEASE,
WHICH WAY I OUGHT TO GO FROM HERE?” RESEARCH
OF CHILDREN’S LITERATURE –
THE STATE OF THE ART. HOW DID WE GET THERE –
HOW SHOULD WE PROCEED.**

Zohar Shavit
Tel Aviv University (Israel)

Resumen

La investigación en el campo de la literatura infantil no está lo suficientemente valorada y se considera de menor importancia con respecto a la literatura para adultos. Si no se hace nada para remediarlo, la literatura infantil seguirá teniendo un estatus inferior.

La literatura infantil se rige por unas normas literarias distintas a las que rigen la literatura para adultos. Su estudio no puede situarse simplemente dentro de los estudios literarios tradicionales, es necesario encontrarle un marco teórico apropiado.

Por su flexibilidad, la teoría que resulta más válida para dicho estudio parece ser la semiótica de la cultura, que sostiene que la cultura implica un conjunto complicado de relaciones.

Dentro del marco de la semiótica de la cultura, la literatura infantil se concibe como un componente dentro de un polisistema de signos que se relaciona con otros sistemas y cuyos procesos de desarrollo están determinados por esas relaciones. La literatura infantil está relacionada con las normas sociales, las normas literarias y las normas educativas: los textos infantiles son el producto de este complicado conjunto de relaciones.

Se abren así nuevas vías para el estudio y la investigación en literatura infantil. (M. R. C.)

In one of the best known conversations in the world of children’s literature, taking place in one of the best known scenes of fantasy literature – that of Alice meeting with the Cheshire cat – Alice begins the conversation by asking:

“Cheshire Puss”, she began, rather timidly, as she did not at all know whether it would like the name; it only grinned a little wider. “Come, it’s pleased so far”, thought Alice, and she went on. “Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to”, said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where...” – said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go”, said the Cat.

“...so long as I get somewhere”, Alice added as an explanation.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that”, said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough”.

The issue I would like to deal with today pertains exactly to the question of which direction we should choose. Do we, like Alice, just want to “get somewhere”, or do we, like the Cheshire cat believe that it depends a “good deal on where we want to get to”? If indeed this is the case, and I believe it is, it implies that we must carefully reflect on where we are going, why we are going there, where we want to get, how we can get there and what we wish to achieve by getting there.

In the spirit of Carroll’s fantasy, let me begin with the bottom line, stating that I strongly believe in the potential of the study of children’s literature. In my opinion, children’s literature is one of the most fascinating fields for the study of the complexity of cultural relationships, and for the examination of their mechanisms and dynamics. This is the case because children’s literature, more than any other literary system, results from a conglomeration of relationships between several systems in culture, among which the most important are the social, the educational and the literary. Furthermore, children’s literature is the only system whose products have always purposefully addressed two antithetical audiences, catering to the needs and expectations of both.

No other field equals children’s literature in the immense scope of the cultural parameters involved. No other field is the result of such diverse cultural constraints to quite the same extent; consequently, no other field enables us to inquire into the mechanism of culture, cultural manipulations and cultural procedures the way children’s literature does. If one is interested in studying such complex

relationships in culture, children's literature is the most promising area of research.

In my view, the rationale for choosing children's literature as an object for research inheres in its status as a catalyst for the discussion of the aforementioned issues. I contend that the study of children's literature is worthwhile mainly if and when it enables us to face new questions, which can hardly be dealt with otherwise. Furthermore, I believe that only as such the study of children's literature can evolve into a rewarding subject of study having its own singularity. This will happen when scholars will realize its potential as a goldmine for the study of cultural historical issues in their broadest possible sense.

Some excellent studies of childhood, children's culture and children's literature published in recent years support, I believe, my conviction and indicate the huge potential of the field. However, alongside these studies there is a substantial amount of research in which we can hardly take pride. Being constantly confronted with this kind of research and playing the devil's advocate I am afraid I cannot but conclude that this field of research has not been fully utilized by its scholars.

The main outcome of this state of affairs has been that much of the research has suffered from an inferior image, as was so naively and marvelously suggested by Maurice Sendak's father who asked him, upon receiving a prize for his children's illustrations, whether he would now be allowed to work on "real books": "When I won a prize for Wild Things, my father spoke for a great many critics when he asked whether I would now be allowed to work on 'real' books".

The existing body of research of children's literature underlined the deflated image of the field, and strengthened the opposition between *serious* research on *serious* works of literature, and the less important type of research, i.e. that which dominates children's literature.

In the academic world of today research of children's literature is not really legitimized, it is not highly respected, and if it is at all tolerated it is perceived as a peripheral and insignificant field of research. In short, research of children's literature suffers nowadays from an inferior status. And if nothing is done about it, this will continue for years to come.

This so because scholars are not really interested in studying children's literature in terms of a literary-cultural phenomenon, but prefer to study it within the context of the traditional and rather worn-out questions of "Literary Criticism". What has determined the unfortunate development of the research of children's literature has been its penchant, like that of any other enterprise which is not yet completely self-confident, to adhere to what is already known and accepted, unable to release itself from the conceptual bonds of the past. Perhaps scholars felt more secure and self-assured sticking to issues that had already been raised and were familiar, because their choice of the field of study was problematic enough.

I would like to explain why, in my view, research into children's literature cannot find an appropriate niche among traditional "Literary Criticism" and the like.

In the Western academic world, especially in the United States, the field of literary studies is still often governed by traditional questions of "literary criticism". The point of departure of "literary criticism" has been, and still is, a normative one: i.e., texts are discussed in order to explore their merits and values; the main business of the scholar remains the establishment of a cultural paradigm, and the participation in its examination.

For historical reasons, which I analyze elsewhere, children's literature has maintained, since its inception, a different set of literary norms from those which govern adult literature. As a rule, societal literary norms regarding the child as different from the adult demanded that writing for children differ from writing for adults. Consequently, the norms governing adult literature never simultaneously govern children's literature as well.

I do not see much point in initiating an attempt to change this state of affairs. Culture, as society, is by its very nature stratified and hierarchical. As we cannot change the social stratification of rich and poor, we cannot change the cultural stratification which places children's literature lower than adult literature.

Trying to change the status of children's literature is bound to become a waste of time and will not lead us anywhere. Any attempt to attribute high literary value to a text for children can only end up in a farce. The "commodity", to borrow Bourdieu's term, offered by scholars of children's literature, has not successfully convinced the

academic world to accept children's literature as a legitimate field of research for literary studies.

Dare I elaborate the metaphor of Cinderella by slightly changing the fairy tale: I believe that in trying to place the study of children's literature among traditional literary studies, we are trying on the wrong shoe. Like Cinderella's sisters who cut off their toes and heels respectively, we would be cutting off our noses to spite our faces if we try to wear the shoe; we shall have achieved little, and be handicapped to boot.

If the traditional road cannot lead us very far, which road should we then take?

There is no need to repeat the question of the need for a theoretical framework. Most philosophers of science would agree that any research with academic aspirations is unworkable without the support of a theory, namely, without an explicit or implicit set of concepts which establish a distinct set of questions. This set of questions designates the scope of the research, its corpus, line of argument and course of development.

If we adopt this understanding of a scientific theory as our point of departure, the issue at stake is not whether the academic study of children's literature must take place within a theoretical framework. The issue at stake is which theory can provide the best framework for our academic needs.

I would like to emphasize right now that I strongly reject the juxtaposition between competing theories, which is so fashionable at present in the United States and, I am afraid, is beginning to creep into European academia. When structuralism, semiotics, feminism and post-colonialism etc. are put together in one pot, no more than lip service can be paid to the academic enterprise.

Competing theories, if they are indeed competing in terms of their conceptual understating of their field of study, exclude each other by definition – otherwise why are they competing? There is conceptually no way to reconcile them: they differ in their basic assumptions, in their interests – in fact in their subject matter. When carefully analyzed, it becomes obvious that quite often they do not even relate to the same field. The fashionable attempt to bring them together fails to take note of these differences and their lack of a common scientific language, and cannot carry research very far.

In order to allow for a scientific study of children's literature two drastic changes must take place:

1. Children's literature must be accepted as a legitimate field of academic research.
2. Children's literature must be regarded as an autonomic system, which maintains relations with other systems, that is to say, it must be regarded as a system set apart from the entire literary system which itself is a member of the largest conglomerate of cultural systems.

Only then, I believe, will it be possible for children's literature to be dealt with seriously within the framework of new and groundbreaking theories.

I contend that, in terms of the current theories in the field of humanities, it is the semiotics of culture (or culture research) which can ensure a vital reservoir of questions to be addressed by research into children's literature. I would like to emphasize that I refer here to the semiotics of culture as developed first within the Slavic tradition and latter on by Bourdieu and Even-Zohar and not to cultural studies as developed rather recently in the Western world.

This tradition of semiotics of culture has postulated from its inception that culture entails a highly complicated set of relations, and has developed a set of theoretical concepts as well as a methodology for dealing with such relations. Thus, it became possible to discuss issues involving complex oppositions, contradictory historical developments and ambivalent patterns, as well as their dynamics in terms of the systemic relations in culture and their functioning.

It is worth mentioning in this context that one of the advantages of a semiotic discipline lies in the options of its spectrum, its flexibility and its openness. A semiotic frame of reference may be very ambitious with regard to the almost unlimited perspectives it involves, but it is very modest, or if you wish, unambitious, with regard to the answers concerned.

This is so first of all because of the methodological possibility which makes it possible to deal with minor as well as major segments of culture, and secondly because semiotics does not seek to establish monopolies over answers. Quite the contrary, by its very nature it almost rules out the possibility of a simple, one-sided answer for any question.

With this postulate as its point of departure, the semiotics of culture enables us to handle the multi-systemic situation typical of children's literature and its various implications. Since the semiotics of culture postulates the hierarchical organization of culture, one of its main tasks is to ask how this hierarchy was created and is being created, rather than to try to participate in the process of shaping it.

It liberates us from the need to change the evaluation of texts for children, in order to legitimize their study. As I already claimed, evaluative questions, by their very nature, limit the scope of research, and in the case of children's literature they may even boomerang.

Yes, it makes sense to discuss *Alice in Wonderland*, *Watership Down*, *Harry Potter* and *The Little Prince* in the framework of the questions offered by traditional literary studies, but these works belong to a limited category of texts, which I describe elsewhere as "ambivalent texts" – texts which are designated officially for children but appeal in fact to adults or to adult readership as well. At any rate these works of literature are simply exceptions which prove my general argument: they do not represent the substance of children's literature, not even in terms of the official system of books for children; consequently, scholars who study them cannot but be pretending to address "children's literature".

Most important however is what such an approach allows us to do. Such an approach enables us to raise new questions with virtually unlimited potential. It is, after all, the very objective of a theory to generate as many questions as possible, which can guarantee its flexibility and its capacity to survive. When the same questions are repeated over and over again, the discipline in which they are asked tends to exhaust itself rather rapidly. It is the existence of a reservoir of new questions, or the very existence of its potential, which ensures the ongoing vitality of any discipline.

What can semiotics of culture offer us? In a semiotic conceptual framework children's literature is understood as one component in a polysystem of signs, which maintains a complicated network of relationships with other systems, and whose processes of development are determined by these relations. When children's literature is understood as such, one can inquire into children's literature in the broadest possible context – into its multi-relationship with social norms, literary norms and educational norms, and analyze how texts

for children are a product of this complicated net of relationships. Furthermore, one can examine how texts for children in turn shape societal ideals and ideas.

Issues of a very broad nature can be raised, e.g. who is culturally responsible for children's literature as a literary product of society; or how is it possible to understand the behavior of children's literature as a result of various cultural constraints; or what is the particular cultural context in which children's literature has developed.

In the framework of the semiotics of culture, the ambiguous features of children's literature become an object for our research, instead of a catalyst for attempting to change the status of children's literature.

Consequently, we can try to understand why children's literature was subordinated to adult literature from its very foundation, which cultural forces dictated this status; and the textual and other implications of the position of children's literature in culture.

Furthermore, we can ask why children's literature is today the only literary system, which is perceived by culture as belonging to both the educational, and the literary systems at one and the same time. What are the implications of this dual attribution? How does it affect the development, structure, textual options, readers and writers of children's literature? What about an adult as a co-reader (see Ewers) of children's literature? How and to what extent do notions of childhood determine the character of the texts for the child as far as poetic norms are concerned and with regard to the acceptance of such texts by the "people in the culture"?

What are the relationships between cultural concepts, images and societal consciousness and the texts produced for the child? How do writers for children react to such societal and poetic demands in producing their texts?

Or, we can ask why the governing literary norms of adult literature are transformed at a later stage of development into children's literature. Why does their transformation involve a process of simplification?

The answer to these questions lies partially in the systemic implications of the status of children's literature in culture. Analysis of the cultural position of children's literature reveals that the

processes and procedures involved in the production of the children's system are neither random nor static. Research shows that they can be described as having an accountable and recurring pattern, as dynamic processes, governing the history and the development of children's literature since its inception.

In fact, recent research into children's literature has reopened accepted questions to debate, through re-examining accepted tenets of previous research: the question of the emergence of children's literature and the creation of the boundaries between adult and children's literature; the process in which the system of books for children was established; the question of the link between societal concepts and children's literature. The textual implications of this link and the textual manipulations thereof were found to be highly complex issues, having a different status than first assumed.

In order to make our discussion less abstract and directly relevant to the theme of this conference, I would like to analyze sketchily the procedure of a research project I did some time ago in order to point out the benefits of placing research of children's literature in the frame work of culture research. I must emphasize that demand for a new set of questions does not imply the rejection of research done until now. This would be in the category of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. On the contrary, an urgent problem that we as scholars of children's literature face is how to utilize most fruitfully the results of existing studies, or in other words, how to make them relevant for further investigation.

The study to which I refer deals with the linkage between the creation of the notion of childhood, texts for the child and the emergence of fairy tales. In this case the prerequisite research had already been accomplished; semiotics simply made it possible to correlate two disciplines, making the results of the research of the history of culture, on the one hand, and folkloric studies, on the other, relevant for children's literature.

As we all know, it was in the early sixties that Ariès launched his thesis about the development of the notion of childhood in Western society and the changes it underwent throughout the centuries. Since then this thesis has become disputable, obviously requiring several modifications.

Despite that, I believe Ariès work to be mandatory for any scholar interested in cultural mechanisms, let alone scholars of children's literature. As is well known, Ariès maintains that modern understanding of the child is different from the one prevalent before the 17th century. That is to say, the child is understood as different from the adult both in terms of its capacities as well as its needs, which are under the responsibility of the adult.

Ariès thesis raises a cluster of questions, For instance, one can examine the relations between the notion of childhood in society and the image of children in literary texts. One can explore the representation of children in literary texts and ask whether different characterizations of children are the result of a different understanding of what children stand for in society; or one could investigate the notion of childhood in society and the nature of the texts this society produced for its children.

It is clear that all these questions must take into account socio-historical issues. As a matter of fact, they even postulate the socio-historical background of any cultural phenomenon.

In the case study I am referring to, Ariès thesis was used in order to deal with the connection between the emergence of the notion of childhood and the emergence of books for the child.

Creating an intersection between the two made it possible to look into one of the more decisive issues concerning books for children – the connection between the notion of the child and the texts produced for children. In order to make this connection feasible, we need a frame of reference, which will make it possible to link Ariès thesis with those of works on the history of children's literature.

Now, this sounds so self-evident that one is almost inclined to ask whether this whole semiotics affair is not Much Ado About Nothing.

My answer is that these questions may perhaps sound logical and relevant but they are not at all self-evident. In fact, as I have already said, they have hardly been dealt with due to the lack of an adequate framework which could make their presentation possible.

The issue of the linkage between the notions of childhood and texts for the child was further extended to the analysis of the various developments in the notions of childhood since the 18th century and the development of fairy-tales.

Apart from the interesting folklorist issues we are all acquainted with, we are aware of the changes that took place in fairy tales when they were transformed into children's literature. Very briefly, we can say that two major changes took place: one has to do with the status of fairy-tales in culture and the other with what sort of fairy-tales were considered appropriate for children.

The transformation of fairy-tales for the nursery usually meant textual changes as well. Certain elements were no longer considered appropriate for children, and hence had to be replaced or omitted. As has often been described, fairy-tales were adapted and readapted for children. These changes, both in status as well as in textual components, cannot be entirely accounted for on the basis of a changing societal view of childhood.

Some changes were the results of literary dynamics, of the change that took place in literary norms of adult literature, etc. But to a certain extent, some of the textual changes in fairy-tales indeed call for such an explanation. For instance, one can readily see the relations between the new attitude towards imagination in educational theories and the emergence of fantasy in children's literature. Also, textual omissions of various aspects such as "violence", "sex" and "cruelty" etc., as well as their inclusion in other decades, can be accounted for on the basis of the changing societal notions of childhood.

When society (or more accurately the educational establishment) believed that children's exposure to violence made them violent, children's literature, or at any rate, official children's literature, tended to bowdlerize the texts, omitting from them any element that hinted at violence. When, however, the opposite was maintained, i.e. that exposure to violence makes children less violent, such elements were once again included in the texts. As a result we have, for instance, hundreds of versions of "Little Red Riding Hood", each representing a different concept of the child and childhood.

In passing, I would like to emphasize, that the issue at stake is not whether it is "good" or "bad" to adapt texts for children, or which adaptation is better, nor even which adaptation better suits the child. The issues discussed have to do with the text's manipulation and the text's production.

As I already hinted, it was firstly the awareness of the child's needs and secondly the nature of this awareness that determined to a

large extent what would be acceptable as a text for children and what would not (hence the very inclusion and exclusion of fairy-tales from children's literature). Also, the question of what sort of fairy tales would be published, was not random. To a large extent, this was determined by the acceptance of certain elements as suitable for the child and the rejection of others as unsuitable.

With the help of the brief example of the history of children's literature and the question of the introduction of fairy tales into children's literature, I have tried to illustrate some of the possible directions the semiotics of children's literature may propose. They are just a few at the intricate crossroads of children's literature. It is semiotics of culture which will enable us to walk with ease in these complicated woods, without being threatened by the wolf.

The few questions which I have just indicated do not of course constitute a full program. One of the major tasks of a program for the field will be to outline a new set of questions, which would suggest further directions for study and new research options. The field's current state-of-the-art is characterized by the emergence of a range of new issues and directions to be addressed. How many of these will in fact be attained depends entirely on us as scholars of children's literature.