



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Adults and Children

Hugh T. Keenan

Children's Literature, Volume 17, 1989, pp. 151-155 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: [10.1353/chl.0.0180](https://doi.org/10.1353/chl.0.0180)



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/246189>

## *Adults and Children*

Hugh T. Keenan

*Poetics of Children's Literature*, by Zohar Shavit. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1986.

The title of this book seems straightforward enough, but, as Alice might say, its contents get curiously and curiously as one reads on. Shavit proposes a large scope and purpose: to account for the literary quality of children's literature—hence the “poetics” of the title—and to relate children's literature to the mainstream of adult literature. For a book of two hundred pages, that is indeed a large double charge. But, with the aid of recent theories of semiotics, largely the work of colleagues at Tel Aviv University, the author feels confident in explaining the various influences that adult society has had on children's literature. Her thesis is that the forms and content of children's literature are signs of the concerns and beliefs of adult society.

Unfortunately, Shavit does not clarify what she means by poetics and semiotics and their relation to children's books until the conclusion of her work. Because of this, the preceding seven chapters often seem merely to offer observations that readers either already agree with or recall as truisms of contemporary scholarship on children's literature. Among these are the propositions that children's literature begins in the eighteenth century, that children's authors have to appeal to both adults and children, that children's books fall into two categories—those accepted by the establishment and those rejected by it but enthusiastically read by children. But the reader cannot so easily accept some other broad assertions and blanket judgments that Shavit makes in her early chapters.

*Poetics of Children's Literature* is divided into three sections: “State of the System,” “Solutions,” and “System and History.” There is no apparent reason why the third section should not, as the reader expects, come first; furthermore, chapters within these sections are often as nonsequential as the sections themselves. “Translation of Children's Literature,” for example, comes between chapters

*Children's Literature* 17, ed. Francelia Butler, Margaret Higonnet, and Barbara Rosen (Yale University Press, © 1989 by The Children's Literature Foundation, Inc.).

discussing noncanonized and canonized children's literature. Each chapter is based on a few "test cases"; in many cases, the selection of cases is open to question.

In the main, Shavit believes that the educational slant on children's books has led to the perception that they are inferior to adult literature, although she feels that evaluation is changing: "During the last ten years or so, new interest has arisen in the field of children's literature, and important work has been done, notably, in the compilation of national histories of children's literature"(x). Yet this interest is not that new: Bettina Hurlimann's book on European children's literature appeared in 1967, and the first edition of Harvey Darton's history of British children's books came out even earlier. M. F. Thwaite's history was published in 1963, and Cornelia Meigs's *Critical History* came out in 1953. As to the purpose of her own study, Shavit asserts quixotically: "In this study I relate this newly developed field to the latest achievements of poetics and semiotics, areas that are quite new to the English-speaking world. I believe that the time has arrived to extricate children's literature from the narrow boundaries of the past and to place it in the foreground of literary scholarship, facing the future"(x). Like an early-twentieth-century anthropologist, such as Margaret Mead, Shavit believes that children's literature follows the same pattern of development in every society; that is, school texts and didactic works precede imaginative writing and adversely affect its development.

These biases cause Shavit to accept uncritically Phillipe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood* (1965) as the basis for her first chapter, "The Notion of Childhood and Texts for the Child." At the same time the study ignores the demographic corrections of Ariès made by Lawrence Stone's *Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (1977). In this chapter Shavit's test case is a comparison of five versions of "Little Red Riding Hood"—Perrault's, the Grimms', and three modern, mass-market American editions. But, curiously, in a study based on semiotic theory, Shavit fails to provide an explanation for the vogue for fairy tales among adults in seventeenth-century aristocratic French society. In short, she fails to ask how this literature is significant for its adult audience. The sophistication and satire of the Perrault version is obvious in contrast to the naïveté and didacticism of the Grimms', but no one would accuse the Grimms of being unsophisticated. Shavit also notes that the American versions are highly censored. Yet Jack Zipes's *Trials and*

*Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood* (1983) has made most of this information redundant.

Shavit's second chapter, "The Self-Image of Children's Literature," really concerns the poor self-image of children's writers and their methods of compensating for it. It is easy to demonstrate the inferior cultural status of children's literature: its awards are minor, its scholarly studies relatively few, and it is usually taught in departments of education. Few would dispute the fact that awards are often based more on societal agendas or educational value than on the literary merits of the books themselves. All would agree that, if they are to be successful, writers have to appeal to a dual audience of adults and children. But is it a sense of inferiority that leads children's writers to direct their works primarily to one group rather than the other? According to Shavit, the writers who appeal mainly to adults find their material accepted into the canon, while those who appeal mainly to children remain uncanonized.

The test case for this chapter is provided by the two versions of Roald Dahl's *Danny the Champion of the World*, written first as a story for adults and later turned into a book for children. Shavit's comparison of the two versions shows how constraints on language, subject, narrator, character relationships, and narrative structure result from rewriting for children. But these points hardly need demonstration; any one familiar with both types of literature recognizes the differences. Furthermore, Shavit's choice of this example betrays an ignorance of many children's writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who have written "unconstrained" works for children—that is, works that could be read equally by children and adults. Shavit says such a test case was hard to find because "not many writers write for both children and adults" (44). Yet one need only reflect briefly on the statement to come up with numerous examples she could have examined in the works of such writers as Rudyard Kipling, Mark Twain, and, in our own time, E. B. White, Randall Jarrell, and Judy Blume.

Shavit's consideration of "The Ambivalent Status of Texts" draws on a favorite tenet of current reader-response critics—that children prefer uncomplicated, single-vision texts. But, one might add, so do many adults. Shavit's test case here comprises three versions of Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Unfortunately, this comparison ignores the fact that *The Nursery Alice* was planned and marketed for a much younger child than Carroll's original draft or its published revision.

Shavit notes that the story is simplified in three modern American versions intended for the mass market—the kinds of books often found in grocery store display racks; it is hardly surprising that these have been simplified. But Shavit does not explain this phenomenon of simplification within the context of reader-response theory. Instead, she asserts that “almost any reliable information is lacking on how children do indeed realize texts and in what way it is different from that of adults” (70). Such information is readily come by in scholarly journals, though, and there are recent books by Arthur W. Applebee (1978) and Suzanne Romaine (1984) on the subject. Shavit dismisses such studies as “too speculative” and as having “no sound scientific basis.” Evidently, this chapter was heavily cut, because the bibliography lists Hebrew translations of *Alice* as well, but the text makes no comparison between them and the English versions.

There are similar problems in other chapters. In “Translation of Children’s Literature,” for example, she employs the mainly Hebrew translations of *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe* to show that, on the one hand, the translations of children’s books are generally freer and less literal than those of adult books and, on the other, that adult matters, such as political satire, sex, and scatology, are often omitted from such works as *Gulliver’s Travels* when they are translated for children. Since adults translate these books for a market of adults buying books for children, the surprise would be if these adult elements were left in. Shavit’s observation about this form of censorship is mixed with pseudo-scientific jargon, as in this assertion about translation: “Hence, the final product of the act of translation is the result of the relationship between a source system and a target system, a relationship that is itself determined by a hierarchy of semiotic constraints . . .” (111).

In “The Model of Development of Canonized Children’s Literature,” Shavit provides the reader with a survey of English children’s literature from the seventeenth through the nineteenth century. She insists, though, that “the very same stages of development reappear in all children’s literatures”—that is, that didactic children’s literature gives way to imaginative writing. It would be difficult to accept this point without a great deal of proof. None is given. According to Shavit, canonized children’s literature grew out of the books promoted by the educational/religious establishment. But such books as *Alice in Wonderland*, the Robin Hood stories, and the Grimms’ fairy tales prove the opposite.

In her final chapter, "Stratification of a System," Shavit advances some interesting hypotheses, chief among them that the chapbooks of the eighteenth century led to the development of today's non-canonized and commercial literature. The popularity of the chapbooks did not go unnoticed by the educational/religious establishment; and to meet this competition, writers of canonized works began to imitate the format and subject matter of the chapbooks. Thus, Shavit argues, children's literature, whether canonized or not, grows either directly or indirectly out of the chapbook tradition, and this origin accounts, in large part, for the inferior status that still is accorded to children's literature. These intriguing observations are hurried in at the end of her study, but they lead one to wonder whether, if *Poetics of Children's Literature* had attempted less and limited itself to the rigorous examination of one facet of children's literature, such as the chapbooks, it might not have accomplished more.