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# Looking Glasses and Neverlands

Lacan, Desire, and Subjectivity  
in Children's Literature

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University of Iowa Press, Iowa City 5 2 2 4 2  
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Printed in the United States of America

Design by April Leidig-Higgins

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Printed on acid-free paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Coats, Karen, 1963–.

Looking glasses and neverlands: Lacan, desire, and subjectivity in children's literature / by Karen Coats.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-87745-882-0 (cloth)

1. Children's literature—Psychological aspects.
2. Children's literature—Social aspects. I. Title.

PN1009.5.P78C63 2004

809'.89282'019—dc22 2003066270

04 05 06 07 08 C 5 4 3 2 1

## INTRODUCTION

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# The Subject of Children's Literature



Stories, it has been said, are as old as bread. I like that image, because it links stories to something as indispensable to our survival as food. It also reminds us that, as each culture takes a few simple ingredients and produces its own favorite forms of this “staff of life,” usually simple for everyday use, more complex and textured for special times, so too our stories are created from simple ingredients readily available but transformed according to the occasion, the teller, the listener. Recipes for stories are passed across cultures and generations. In industrialized countries, they can become standardized and bland in their mass production or even fortified with things that we have been told are good for us.

It's an apt connection, surely, with rich metaphorical implications, but we must beware, I think, of a false binary embedded in its image, namely, that bread feeds the body and stories feed the mind. Instead, we need to remember that just as good bread can often nourish and fortify the soul even more than it does the body, so stories have a profound effect on the growth, the image, and the perceived needs and desires of the body, indeed, of the whole person. From our very first beginnings, we are fed stories, embraced by stories, nourished by stories. The only way we come to make sense of the world is through the stories we are told. They pattern the world we have fallen into, effectively replacing its terrors and inconsistencies with structured images that assure us of its manageability. And in the process of structuring the world, stories structure us as beings in that world. We begin to tell our own stories, fashioning a self out of the stories and narrative patterns we have received from our culture. As one nineteenth-century com-

mentator put it, “There is a drop of ink in the blood of the most natural of us; we are all hybrids, crossed with literature, and Shakespeare is as much the author of our being as either of our parents” (Zangwill, qtd. in Dusinberre, 106). By offering substantive representations for words and things to the child, stories, especially those found in children’s literature, provide signifiers—conventional words and images—that attach themselves to unconscious processes and have material effects on the child’s developing subjectivity. Thus we could say that the stories we read or are told as children have as much to do with shaping our subjectivity as do our primary existential relationships.

### Lacan and the Subject of Children’s Literature

Why this should be so is most convincingly formulated by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in his theories of desire and subjectivity. According to Lacan, the subject is an effect of language, suggesting that there can be no subjectivity without language. And while language is the system of symbolic representation that Lacan most privileges, I think it is important to remember from the outset that visual or graphic representation is also an integral part of structuring who we are, as is evidenced in Lacan’s most famous concept, the mirror stage, the importance of which we will explore in great detail throughout this book. Although we are born with what is called a proprioceptive self—a self that is perceptually aware of its place in space and can judge, to a very minimal extent, the physical properties of the things around it—we have no cognitive centering principle to organize that perception. It is not until we begin to use the processes of representation, both visual and verbal, that we are able to make those sensory perceptions have meaning and consistency. That part of us which is distinctly human does not preexist linguistic and visual representation. Our project is not to find words or images that will express more or less precisely who we are or even what we desire in some essential way. Instead, representation is what causes the subject to come into being. But insofar as a representation is not the thing itself, we sense that something has been lost, and we desire to get it back.

We might think of a baby surrounded by a swirl of language and image—his parents’ voices, the radio, the TV, brothers and sisters, reading voices, talking voices, disembodied voices, bits of color, pictures, patterns on clothes and walls, and so on. This undifferentiated continuum *means* little to him but is nonetheless actively structuring him with its rhythms, its music,

its play of light and shape. He begins to get a sense of cause and effect, of how noises seem to make things happen, his own noises as well as those of other people. He becomes adept at imitation, taking on first the cadences of language, but soon the words. Finally, he begins to generate more or less meaningful utterances. Likewise, he adjusts his facial expressions to the images he sees, first in a pattern of imitation, then in spontaneous and meaningful play and communication. He studies visual images and begins their assignation of value and meaning by clearly indicating preferences and by recognizing pictorial representations of real objects in his world. Sometime before he turns eighteen months, he even recognizes himself as an image in a mirror.

Hence the infant-child becomes a subject, according to Lacan, with his entry into language or, more specifically, culturally encoded representational systems. But despite the fact that he can now recognize and express himself as a subject in a system of representation, it is still the Other's system, something external to him that he has taken on. So the word "subject" has resonances of both agency and subservience. When I introduce the concept of subjectivity to my students, I have them brainstorm definitions of the word "subject." We generally begin with the definition of the subject as some discrete entity under study. Under this definition, a subject is complex enough, and definite enough, to stand alone as an object of investigation. We then come up with other definitions—the grammatical definition of the subject as the actor in a sentence, the thing or person performing the action of the verb; the political definition of a subject as someone under the rule of law; and a more naturalistic definition that implicates all bodies as subject to laws of gravity, thermodynamics, the limits of physical space and properties, and so on. There are contradictions in these pictures of the subject, and I encourage my students to hold those contradictions in unresolved ambiguity. The subject is both active and passive; it has agency and responsibility, but at the same time it is bound by rules and laws outside itself and constrained by its own unconscious processes. It is also, I emphasize, beholden to the forces of its environment and in many ways limited by the possibilities of its time and culture, though it has some power to change and expand those possibilities. Hence the psychoanalytic subject of Lacan is different from the psychological notion of the ego or the individual, with its emphasis on choice and individual autonomy and its universal and ahistorical nature. Lacan's subject is differentiated by his emphasis on the linguistic, and hence transindividual and historically and culturally situated,

nature of the unconscious. It is therefore within the language and images of a specific culture that the subject must both *find* and *create* himself. Lacan's theory of the subject examines the way that dual process is negotiated. His primary focus is the way the subject situates itself with respect to the Other in language and the Other as language.

Much of that "Other" language comes to the subject in the form of stories. Children are especially vulnerable to being structured by stories because they are still in the process of collecting the experiences that will shape and define their relation to the Other. According to Lacan, a person's relation to the Other determines her psychic or clinical structure, be it neurotic, psychotic, or perverse. This structure develops in the early years of a child's life and remains fixed thereafter, regardless of any obvious symptoms. Hence it would seem important for a Lacanian poetics to focus attention on the stories of childhood as formative of that relation. I would hesitate to say that texts such as *Heart of Darkness* or *Bleak House*, important as they are to our literary and cultural heritage and to the vibrancy and dynamic nature of language itself, constitute formative encounters for the average person. Books like *Charlotte's Web*, on the other hand, or *Green Eggs and Ham* are more likely to generate such encounters, not only because more people are likely to actually read them, but also because they will probably be read at a time in the life of a person when she is less structured, or, if you like, when her boundaries are more porous, her mental architecture less crowded or filled in with images that define and stabilize her sense of reality and the self. In *Seminar I*, Lacan asks: "This child, we see that he is prodigiously open to everything concerning the way of the world that the adult brings to him. Doesn't anyone ever reflect on what this prodigious porosity to everything in myth, legend, fairy tales, history, the ease with which he lets himself be invaded by these stories, signifies, as to his sense of the other?" (SI 49). The child is easily "invaded," suggesting an as yet unformed or unfixed relation to the Other that will not in the future remain so open, but that indicates that the child is formed in large part by the representations provided by and of that Other. What we get from children's literature are the very patterns and signifiers that define our understanding of and our positions with respect to the Other and, in so doing, structure our sense of self.

The literature we encounter as children, then, should be seen as central to the formation of subjectivity. Most studies of children's literature that explore this connection focus on the formation of identity, which is only

part of subjectivity, which in turn is only part of what I would call the self. Identity in psychoanalytic parlance refers to the more public, social presentation of the self—the part over which we have the most control. Our identity is the outcome of a series of identifications; in large measure it is performative, meaning that we take on the gestures and language of those whom we identify as desirable and ideal in order to craft our own self-presentation. By an ideal representation, I don't necessarily mean one that is conventionally positive, but rather one that offers the perfect picture of a certain characteristic, as in the ideal expression of sadness, or the ideal figure of teen rebellion. These ideals are formed, culturally speaking, through repetition. Hence racial and gender stereotypes become a kind of ideal, and a child's identifications with these images thus become problematic and worthy of critical attention. But such attention does not go far enough, for what drives these identifications, what makes us view a representation as ideal or desirable, is very complicated and is in large part unconscious to us even as it is embedded in the aesthetic productions of a culture. Remember, for instance, in *Little House on the Prairie* when a young Laura Ingalls desires to possess a Native American baby. Her attraction to the baby is so strong that it makes her ache, and the only explanation she can offer is: "Its eyes are so black" (Wilder, 309). It's an enigmatic moment in an otherwise straightforward text, and it points out the fact that identifications and desires are often driven by forces that we can neither understand nor articulate.

Subjectivity, then, is more than identity—it is a movement between that which we control and that which controls us. To locate specifically the importance of the literature we encounter as children to the construction of a social identity, as well as to the constitution and patterning of the unconscious, both of which are implicated in the notion of subjectivity, I have undertaken to read certain canonical children's texts and genres in light of Lacan's theory of the subject. Connections between narrative and subjective structure have been fruitfully and productively explored in many studies over the years, but these studies have focused on adult readers and texts.<sup>1</sup> The implications of these connections seem even more urgent to the child subject. While some important children's literature critics, including Roderick McGillis, Perry Nodelman, and Hamida Bosmajian have undertaken Lacanian explanations and interpretations of children's texts, most psychoanalytic criticism in children's literature focuses on the more familiar models of Freud and Jung, which offer categories that are less implicated in historical and cultural variations that form the mirror images to which children

are subject.<sup>2</sup> But unlike the traditional view of mirror images as passively accurate reflections of what *is*, Lacan's understanding of the mirror image is that it is an anticipation that structures a subject.<sup>3</sup> The child looking into a mirror sees an idealized image of his potential. This image, in its specular completeness, is at odds with how he *experiences* his body. His trajectory of becoming is toward the image; he takes its completeness, fantasized as it is, as his goal. Though he may experience himself as fragmented and incomplete, he can imagine himself as whole, and it is toward this imaginary ideal that he moves. But he does not experience this imaginary ideal only in an actual mirror. Other people provide ideal images for him to mirror, but more significantly for this study, novels and picture books also present images and worlds that the child reader takes as Lacanian mirror images.

### Modernist Subjectivity

The paradigm of subjectivity that I have been explaining is, historically speaking, a modernist one. Unlike a traditional or premodern model which posits an essential, knowable individual who develops her inborn potentials more or less organically, the modernist model figures the subject as split, a construction of both natural and cultural influences, of conscious and unconscious processes. Part of her operates consciously, negotiating roles and positions with respect to others in the world, as well as with respect to her own idealized images of herself. But another part of her operates outside of her conscious control. Her unconscious is just as active, if not more so, as the conscious part of her in shaping the movements and decisions of her everyday life, but she has no idea how it does so. It is unknowable, beyond her conscious understanding. Under Lacan's reading, it is not even intrinsic to herself, not something she is born with, even as a potentiality. As we shall see, the unconscious is deeply implicated in the Other; its verbal and visual representations come from culture, from outside the subject, so that what is most uniquely "ours" is in fact not native to us at all. Modernist novels by writers such as Dostoevsky, Woolf, and Lawrence take up the task of representing that split between consciousness and the unconscious to the subject. For the children's book, however, I think the task goes far beyond representation of the split. "Prodigiously open," the child (unconsciously) uses his books to precipitate or activate his split, to fill his unconscious with representations and images, shape his reality, and define the parameters of his possibilities. As I indicated earlier, this process depends



on repetition—both the repetition of the same book, and the repetition of structures, images, and values across books. Hence, as her books have a definable structure, so structure becomes a psychic necessity for the child. As her books depict a whole world, the child seeks nothing less than a whole world. As her books operate under an oedipal configuration, the child will become structured under an oedipal configuration. As her books value closure, the child comes to desire closure. The child takes an adult fantasy, manifested in a story, as his ideal image, and undertakes to enact it as his own subjective structure.

In the first chapter of this book, I use Lacan's theory of subjectivity to explore exactly how the book and the child interact on this level—how the book articulates the child's development into a subject in such a way as to help actually structure that subjectivity. It offers an overview of the key aspects of Lacan's theory of how the subject comes to be through the characters of Fern and Wilbur in E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*.

In addition to structure, modernist subjectivity, especially in children's literature, has content. It is avowedly patriarchal and understands Whiteness and heterosexuality as sites of privilege and desire. Wordsworth's famous maxim "The child is father to the man" is instructive here. In one sentence he predicts some of the key insights of psychoanalysis. Most obviously, he indicates that our childhood experience is vital to our adult personality. But more subtly, we see in his words that the child, an ungendered signifier, grows into the masculinized subject of adulthood. And interestingly, he passes through the "father" to get there. In Lacanian terminology, the child must come under the "Law of the Father" in order to take up a position in the Symbolic; he must, paradoxically, become his own cause. I will explore both these processes, explaining what they mean and how they are distinctly modernist in their conception, throughout the book. We will see how, in a modernist context, growth *means* separation from the mother and the taking up of a position with respect to the Law of the Father. Closure *means* heterosexual marriage, secure gender roles, and father-led families. These define happy endings and thus create desire that runs along specific channels. Even in literature that attempts to celebrate diversity on a conscious level, there is often the unconscious acknowledgment that deviance from white, masculine heteronormativity is a problem to be solved, to be lived on top of, so to speak, rather than to be rethought or challenged at the level of unconscious fantasy. To maintain the hegemony of its conceits, the modernist subject operates under a sacrificial logic of abjection.

The subject must abject, that is, define and exclude, those things which threaten it and must build strong defenses against their return. She must take up a position with respect to difference and must learn what her culture values as ideal in terms of bodies and behaviors. This education often begins through picture books and early readers, which are the subjects of chapters 2 and 3. Using Lacan's model of developmental time, I explore precisely how picture books participate in our growing sense of subjective awareness. For most characters in children's books, growth begins with a separation of some kind from the mother, which is metaphoric for our awareness of the other as Other, as different from ourselves. Since our encounters with difference are always linked to the grief of separation from the mother, our imaginary constructions of race and gender are fraught with sadness and fear, as is evidenced in works such as *The Story of Babar*, *Curious George*, and *Stellaluna*. An understanding of the structural time and specular logic of the Lacanian Imaginary allows us to grasp how Whiteness and heterosexuality become normative master signifiers in some texts, and how that view is challenged in others. I then link these responses to difference to the three psychic structures of psychosis, perversion, and neurosis, which, in Lacan's schema, are positions taken up with respect to the Other.

But how, then, might we imagine a departure from, or at least the potential of a challenge to, the hegemonic discourse of modernity? Chapter 3 turns from the specular logic of the Imaginary to the more verbal logic and elastic play of the Symbolic. Because our subjectivity depends on a fantasy structure based on tenuous exclusions, and because the subject does have an active but unknowable unconscious, the child is able to imagine other structures, to take on other representations, to move through narrative's totalizing images to a creative beyond. His encounters with poetry and nonsense fiction, by taking language's limits and its arbitrary connection to its referent as their object, point to this beyond without filling it with the contingent contents of his culture. In other words, modernism has always contained within itself the seeds of its own challenges, which we have come to call postmodernity. A specular image, especially a mirrored one, seems a pretty reliable, stable indicator of its referent. But linguistic representation is less organically connected to its referent, and thus it has the ability to destabilize the child's trust in representation itself, opening the door to all sorts of possible writings and rewritings of the self. What surrealism did for art, nonsense and nonrealistic fiction has done for literature, and the combination of the two, especially in the genres of early reading experi-

ence provided by the likes of Dr. Seuss and *Sesame Street*, has rendered it almost impossible for the contemporary American child to undertake a subject position that does not hint at some sort of postmodern irony or at least fluidity of representation within the Symbolic.

Chapter 4 helps us understand the persistent residue left over when the child enters the Symbolic by focusing on the nature of desire itself. By exploring Lacan's notions of the *objet a*, the cause of desire, and *jouissance*, that toward which desire always tends, we can begin to understand the persistence and infinite cultural variations and repetitions of two iconic figures of Western childhood—Alice and Peter Pan. A close reading of *Through the Looking Glass* situates Alice as that impossible nonspecular object that causes us to desire but also ensures the perpetuation of that desire precisely because it is impossible to attain, and not merely prohibited. Likewise, woven throughout the text of *Peter Pan* are metaphoric representations of the four different kinds of *jouissance* that alternately drive each of us in our quest to recover the lost pleasures of an unmediated embodiment.

The modernist Symbolic order has some fairly strict rules about gender, especially for children. Children's literature critics have been exhaustively critical about the portrayal of restrictive gender roles at least since the landmark Weitzman study in 1972 of the depiction of gender in North American picture books. We all know the problems—boys are depicted as active, girls as passive; boys are valued, girls devalued.<sup>4</sup> But a psychoanalytic understanding of gender must go beyond the roles we play or are expected to play in the Symbolic, and account for gender in the Imaginary and the Real as well. Thus I turn to gender in chapter 5, looking at its structural formation rather than at the cultural contents with which we fill that structure. For the most part, constructionist theories, such as those developed by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, can account for gender only in Imaginary ways, or even in a dialectic relationship between Imaginary ideals and Symbolic mandates. But a psychoanalytically inflected queer theory, which situates the subject in relation to the heterogeneous realm of the Real and is illustrated most eloquently in characters such as Mary Poppins and Pippi Longstocking, allows us to move beyond gender in productive ways.

Just as the modernist Symbolic order requires the subject to be gendered, it also requires the subject to be racialized. As with gender, I attempt in chapter 6 to look at race psychoanalytically, focusing on Whiteness as a master signifier that functions to ground a racist system. By looking at how secondary signifiers attach themselves to this master signifier, we can begin

to get at ways to destabilize Whiteness as a master signifier and bring it into the chain of signification as one signifier among many.

Chapter 7 takes us back to the Symbolic and the Imaginary, but with a difference—the exploration of the Real. In chapter 7, I look at adolescence as a time when the oedipal work accomplished in early childhood is revisited. That which had been coded as abject in the initial configuring of the body, both individual and social, returns and has to be dealt with all over again. The body itself has to be remapped; many things that were considered gross and unacceptable have to be reconsidered for their erotic potential. The process of situating the self with respect to the Other is continued, but with the difference that the self is now a much less permeable space; the invasion by the Other is much more violent, both actually and figuratively. Hence it becomes imperative to explore the possibilities of a positive ethics in light of modernist subjectivity, comparing and contrasting an ethics located in the Imaginary with an ethics of the Real.

### **Becoming Postmodern?**

These pages tell a developmental story in which children's literature is vitally important in the construction of the subject both in its structure and content. They also offer what I hope will be a lucid but nonreductive introduction to Lacan's theories of desire and subjectivity. I pursue close readings of texts as manifestations of psychoanalytic structures and show how the child subject is interpellated into the position of modernist subject through them. Though I focus on specific examples, children's texts seem to have family resemblances that make my assertions more broadly generalizable. So, one may ask, isn't this project dated? Aren't we all postmodern subjects now? I suppose the answers to those questions depend on how one conceives the project of postmodernism. If one defines postmodernism as a necessary critique of the conceits of modernism, as I do, then this project provides one such critique even as it identifies its specific sites of complaint. But in that sense, there can as yet be no such thing as a postmodern subject, since he or she would exist only as a critique, a negativity, or a subversion of something definably modern. If my theories about the way children are constructed by the texts they encounter are correct, we can identify trends in contemporary literature for children that may have the effect of redefining unconscious fantasies, both in terms of what we fantasize about and the ways in which we fantasize at all. It is important to

keep in mind that Lacan's theories are structural in nature, and that individual subjects as well as cultures fill in those structures with the sum of their unique experiences in time and space. My intent is to outline the general structural features of subjectivity within which we currently operate. But since they are structural features, their content may indeed change through the intervention of postmodern ideological critiques found in some contemporary children's texts. I conclude, then, by identifying some of those trends and providing some speculations on how they may alter subjectivity as we know it.