

Book Reviews

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The Literary Child and National Identity

Book review of:

Zofia Kolbuszewska: *The Purloined Child: American Identity and Representations of Childhood in American Literature 1851 – 2000*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2007.

The body of scholarly works in the newly developing field of childhood studies is growing at a fascinating speed. Many are works of historians who offer us detailed accounts of how childhood was experienced at certain periods of time. It was not until recently that historical and cultural studies ceased to “discount childhood as a significant site of analysis because children [were] primarily seen as passive receptors of culture” (Sánchez-Eppler, xv) and now more works focus on the cultural dimension of childhood, its constructedness, its complex power relationships with the world of adults, its literary representations and, as in the case of Zofia Kolbuszewska’s book, its connection to the idea of national identity. Thus the book confirms what Levander and Singley claim: “Inextricably linked to understanding of the self, the family, and the nation, the concept of

childhood offers a unique lens through which to glimpse assumed, neglected, or hidden processes of cultural signification.” (11)

Because childhood has often been linked with innocence, purity and even equality, the child figure can effectively be used in the literary texts of American nation-making and national identity. However, Kolbuszewska claims, it not only used to confirm but, at the same time, to call into question these narratives. Since very early on in the history of America, the new (or newly independent) country was seen as a child, an offspring of the English parent¹, inexperienced and innocent, but with all the potential open to it.

In order to explore how the literary figure of a child is used as a metaphor for the American nation and the national identity and how it can, at the same time, be used as a tool providing a critique of it, Kolbuszewska employs Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical theories. *The Purloined Child* is thus no easy read unless you are well familiar with literary applications of these theories. But if you hold on, you will be rewarded with interesting and thought provoking analysis of not only well-known and canonical novels (such as Hawthorne’s *The Scarlett Letter*, James’ *The Turn of the Screw* or Morrison’s *Beloved*) but of other texts as well (for example works by the “mob of scribbling women” as Hawthorne once called his female literary contemporaries and by authors of horror fiction, to name just a few). Complex, rich in illustrative examples and well researched, the book discusses a variety of concepts and forms of childhood as well as child figures and their literary usages, ranging from the Romantic idea of innocent and vulnerable child to the child as a symbol of domestic life, the figure of a dying child as a redeemer and a (pathetic) reminder of the true virtues of Christian life, to a range of demonic, ghostly and uncanny child figures populating not only the pages of popular literary works. Particularly to these unsettling images of the child figure, the wonderfully spooky book cover refers.

If the author has effectively proved so many meanings and implications for the figure of a child in American literature, why then does she call it *purloined* in the title of the book? The purloining does not refer here to the possibility that a society can rob a child of its childhood (as obviously Wilma King’s book on slave children and youth titled *Stolen Childhood* suggests) but it alludes to a more literary (rather than historical) interpretations of childhood – i.e. its connection with textuality and writing, identity and signification. The child thus often does not stand for itself but “heralds, as a signifier of signification” any “cultural crisis” (22). In this light Kolbuszewska discusses the conflating of the letter A with the child Pearl in Hawthorne’s text and the connection of literacy to the

citizenship-making process. Contrary to the well-known Tompkins' reading of the nineteenth-century female domestic fiction depicting dying children as a way to empowerment giving salvific power, Kolbuszewska sees them as mirroring a basic flaw in the American myth of domesticity, its patriarchal oppression of children and mothers and calls attention to the "clash between idealized affective ties binding family members in the child-centered domesticity and individual's independence inherent in liberal individualism" (37). The author finds many interesting connections between the literary child figure and cultural crisis, as when she links the unsettling images of monstrous children to the crisis in the structure of American family and the exploration of the consumerist mass culture and its pitfalls. In this way, *The Purloined Child* inspires into yet a deeper reading of selected literary texts and calls our attention to the complexity of literary child characters because the changing representation of childhood reflect the "shifts and transformations in American culture" (232).

For those new to the field of childhood studies, the opening chapter provides a detailed overview of relevant literature (of course selective so one can successfully argue for more or different inclusions). More attention could have been given to the reasons for particular choices of literary texts (as they range from the classic to the "mere" popular) and historical period (the book covers one and a half century of American literary production).

Despite its rather demanding theoretical framework, *The Purloined Child* will be a rewarding reading not only to academics and students in the childhood studies field but to anyone appreciating fresh attitude with cultural implications to American literature.

Notes

1. See for example Katharine Lee Bates who, in 1897, calls American national literature "the offspring of the noble English parent." As quoted in Messmer, Marietta. "Reading National American Historiography Internationally". *Comparative Literature* 3, vol. 52 (2000): 193-213.

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Zofia Kolbuszewska, a graduate of John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland, is holding a position of Associate Professor in the Department of English there. She teaches courses in literary theory and American Literature. In 2003/2004 she was a Senior Fulbright Scholar at Columbia University, New York. The author of *The Poetics of Chronotope in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (Lublin, 2000), *The Purloined Child: American Identity and Representations of Childhood in American Literature 1851-2000* (Lublin, 2007), and of several articles on American postmodernism and American Gothic, she also contributed to the collection of essays *Literary Childhoods: Growing Up in British and American Literature* (Bubíková, Š. et al, Pardubice, 2008) and is currently working on a project concerning the sublime and the apocryphal mode in the novels by Thomas Pynchon and writing a book on ekphrasis in contemporary American fiction.

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