

HIDDEN PERSUADERS: POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES IN LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN

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Like other types of literature, works written especially for children are informed and shaped by the authors' respective value systems, their notions of how the world *is* or *ought to be*. These values—reflecting a set of views and assumptions regarding such things as “human nature,” social organization and norms of behavior, moral principles, questions of good and evil, right and wrong, and what is important in life—constitute authors' ideologies. They may be idiosyncratic to the individual author, or may reflect and express the values of the culture at large, or of subgroups within the culture.

Like other writers, authors of children's books are inescapably influenced by their views and assumptions when selecting what goes into the work (and what does not), when developing plot and character, determining the nature of conflicts and their resolutions, casting and depicting heroes and villains, evoking readers' emotional responses, eliciting readers' judgments, finding ways to illustrate their themes, and pointing morals. The books thus express their authors' personal ideologies (whether consciously or unconsciously, openly or indirectly). To publish books which express one's ideology is in essence to promulgate one's values. To promulgate one's values by sending a potentially influential book into public arenas already bristling with divergent, competing, and sometimes violently opposed ideologies is a political act. Seen in this light, the author's views are the author's politics; and the books expressing these views, when made accessible to the public, become purveyors of these politics, and potentially persuasive.

My purpose in this essay is to help lay a groundwork for future exploration of political ideologies in literature for children. Comprehensive critical appreciation of a literary work would include an understanding of the ideologies it expresses, since frequently it is these that shape and color it. Since the ideologies may not be readily apparent, but implicit only (masked or submerged beneath a distracting surface), discerning them may sometimes be difficult. A methodology whereby inherent ideologies may be recognized and identified would be useful not only to students at all levels, but also to teachers, parents, librarians, and historians of children's literature; it would make possible a deeper esthetic appreciation of the complexity of literary works and the precise nature of the authors' achievements. In order to limn the outlines of such a methodology, I have presented a somewhat broader definition of “politics” than is commonly employed, conceiving a person's politics as any informing ideology (whether explicit or implicit) which has the potential of persuasion, of influencing another person's belief and value systems. Such breadth is necessary; for as I survey the various genres or types of literature for children (and in this term I include adolescent readers), I am struck by the diversity of persuasive modes which they exhibit.

It's true that a few types seem to be relatively value-free: scientific writing and

how-to-do-it books; certain kinds of nonsense (a variety of word and sound games, some of Edward Lear's limericks, and a sizable group of traditional nursery rhymes); purely whimsical verse (some of Mildred Plew Meigs, De la Mare, Laura E. Richards, etc.); pure flights of prose fancy (sometimes serving merely as vehicles for lavish illustrations); and plot-centered adventure and mystery stories, where suspense and excitement are the primary aims. But these types are few. Most genres seem to be conveyors of ideological freight: fables, for instance, which frequently have morals attached stressing canons of behavior.

Most folk and fairy tales, which deal with questions of power, good and evil, cleverness or trickery or common sense (though the ideologies of some of these are ambiguous), are ideological. So are biographies of famous people, which tend to simplify, or adulate, or indoctrinate. So is realistic fiction dealing with current social settings and the problems of growing up. Sentimental love romances, racially and ethnically focused books, and even horse and dog stories may be ideological. And what about the ecology of Smokey the Bear and *Ranger Rick*? Most science fiction is ideological, as is most fantasy—for example, Tolkien's work, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Wizard of Oz*, the *Pooh* books, *The Wind in the Willows*, Roald Dahl's *Charley* books, *The Little Prince*, Carroll's *Alice*; even Beatrix Potter. Does not a grim view of what the world is emerge from *Jemima Puddleduck* and *Squirrel Nutkin*?

Well, not to belabor the point. For all of their diversity, it seems to me that the persuasive modes boil down to three basic types. Perhaps those interested in pursuing the topic can find others or further refine these. I would suggest the following classification for the ways in which inherent ideologies are expressed: (1) the politics of advocacy, (2) the politics of attack, and (3) the politics of assent.

The Politics of Advocacy

Advocacy is pleading for and promoting a specific cause, or upholding a particular point of view or course of action as being valid and right. It goes beyond passive acceptance or agreement to an active lending of support. When ideologies are advocated in literature for children, authors are usually conscious of the values they are promoting. The overt didacticism of much Victorian children's literature—the moral "object lessons," the molding of character intended by McGuffey's readers, exhortations to religious piety, right conduct, and good manners (sometimes promulgated indirectly through negative examples)—is a case in point. Patriotic values are frequently advocated in biographies of famous people through gross oversimplifications of the historical record and omission of aspects of the subjects' lives and careers which would diminish the luster of their achievements and call into question their suitability as role models. This is akin to myth-making; and examples would be a biography of Thomas Jefferson which focused on his egalitarianism but neglected to mention that he was an aristocratic slave owner, or a biography of Andrew Jackson that omitted his views on the American Indians and his treatment of the Seminoles. Conversely, a "debunking" biography that focused on Jefferson's inconsistencies or Jackson's treatment of the Indians might go beyond demythologizing and constitute advocacy of a negative vision, expressing the

politics of attack.

The values of hard work, honesty, and thrift were advocated by Horatio Alger's popular and influential books, with social status and material prosperity being held out as the rewards. Implicit in these books is a belief in, and advocacy of, a "bound to rise" philosophy, upholding America as a land of opportunity, wealth as a measure of success, and capitalism as an economic system. Religious values (ethical conduct, the need for faith in resisting temptation) and doctrinal principles are often promulgated in young people's books which espouse a specifically Christian perspective (these are frequently "realistic" in presentation, dealing with adolescent stress and peer and family problems). Less blatant in their ideology than the Christian romances and problem novels are the fantasy works of C. S. Lewis; but the message is there for those who have eyes to see.

The *politics of advocacy* may also be seen in the large number of books in recent years which seek to enhance the self-concepts of minority readers (and to educate the majority population) through promotion of ethnic pride and awareness of cultural achievement. And, in the wake of the new feminist movement, advocacy may be seen in the large number of works which are recovering the historical achievements of women and presenting young readers with new models of behavior that reject or modify traditional gender roles. Going a bit farther afield, and into areas perhaps not so easily given thematic labels, we find in a host of works advocacy of such abstract values as loyalty, courage, fortitude, sharing, tolerance of eccentricity, friendship, optimism, love of hearth and home, and being content with one's lot.

There are undoubtedly many more categories which could be mentioned; but these are sufficient, I think, to explain what I mean by the politics of advocacy. When advocacy is present, the authors tend to be aware of it. They generally know what they're about and frame their characters and dramatize their themes to present their ideological concerns in the best and most persuasive light (sometimes, of course, through negative illustration, employing compelling contraries to "prove their case"). Frequently the politics of advocacy serves the aims of indoctrination, *urging* a particular value system or course of action, or attempting to enforce conformity to a set of behavioral norms; frequently it sets up attractive role models for the young, inducing admiration, and extolling certain values as virtues.

Sometimes the values being advocated are complex and diffuse, reflecting in a general way what the author believes to be positive and worthwhile: "people are inherently good and will prove it if given the chance"; "one should have pride in one's self and in one's country"; "even a difficult thing can be achieved if a person wants to achieve it strongly enough and keeps trying"; "hard work is good for you and will lead to success" ("idle hands are the devil's workshop"); "it is every citizen's duty to fight for Truth, Justice, and the American Way"; "one should respect Authority" (or, alternatively, "question" it); "we must preserve the natural environment for future generations." Sometimes advocacy simply invites readers to share the author's assertion, "This is the way the world is"; and we get books ranging from the inspirational uplift of *Pollyanna* and contemporary sentimental

romances to rather gritty works fictionalizing current “real-life” problems such as young people’s having to come to terms with divorce, alcoholism, unloving parents, menstruation, peer pressure, unwanted pregnancy, and death. In essence, advocacy seeks to persuade readers of its ideology; to promote the authors’ world views and notions of what is or ought to be; to influence readers’ thinking, feeling, and behavior.

The Politics of Attack

Standing in contrast to advocacy is the *politics of attack*. (It is closely allied to advocacy, being essentially the reverse side of the coin: for implicit in the choice of target and the act of the assault is the converse ideological principle that the author would advocate.) The politics of attack is generated by the authors’ sense of amusement, outrage, or contempt when they encounter something that runs counter to their concepts of right and wrong, good and evil, justice, fair play, decency, or truth. Depending on the nature of the target, and the particular author’s response to its affront to his or her sensibilities, the attack may range from the gentlest ironic satire to the bitterest invective. In literature for children, it seems to me that the most common forms of attack are negative object lessons (frequently with some form of punishment or “come-uppance” attendant upon “wrong” attitudes and behaviors), or satire of various types.

The attack may be against anything that runs counter to the author’s ideology: miserliness, pomposity, dishonesty, “heresy” (whether religious or political), greed, selfishness, prudery, specific social institutions (banks, schools, courts, the military), the attitudes and behaviors of self-important people (condescending adults, politicians, preachers, bureaucrats), opposing world views and value systems. Here we find the debunking biographies of famous people; stereotyped racial and ethnic slurs; the hostile treatment of spies and foreign agents in patriotic and propagandistic wartime adventure stories; the all-out assault on evil-in-the-abstract personified in the destructive, power-hungry forces of darkness in heroic fantasy (Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*; Smaug in *The Hobbit*). (It should be noted that sometimes the villain personified as evil-in-the-abstract is a thinly veiled allegorization of a perceived real-life enemy, the current political bogeyman—“the yellow peril,” “big business,” “godless communism”.)

Since the politics of attack is so highly personalized to individual authors, it is harder to discuss in generic terms than is the politics of advocacy. The attacks tend to be against highly specific targets, and one must go to individual works for illustrations. From these specific examples as represented in particular works, investigators may abstract the general principle, and, through extrapolation, apply it to other works, recognizing similar types of attack when they occur.

Huckleberry Finn is a good book to demonstrate this point. It is filled with instances of Mark Twain’s ideologies expressing themselves through attack (and this being the case, *Huckleberry Finn* is a highly political book). The novel is permeated by Twain’s views regarding slavery as a social institution; and the story is, among other things, a prolonged and concerted attack against slavery and the

accompanying and consequent racist attitudes that regard black people as inferior to white. Twain presents Jim as perhaps the most admirable character in the book, a man possessed of true dignity and nobility of spirit; the indignity, fear, and physical danger he suffers as a runaway slave trying to reach free territory constitute a blistering indictment of the practices of a slaveholding society. By having Huck, a young poor-white "redneck" steeped in the views of that society, serve as spokesman for the prevailing attitudes of the dominant white culture, Twain is able to satirize his target with a perfectly straight face; as, for example, in this exchange near the end of the book when Huck tells Aunt Sally of a fictitious steamboat explosion: "Good gracious! anybody hurt?" "N'm. Killed a nigger." "Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt." Given the tone and the context established by the whole book, it's hard to see how hostile critics could take this as a racist statement on Twain's part, as has been alleged.

The point of the exchange is satire, Twain's target the societal mindset that can cause even people as basically decent as Huck and Aunt Sally to see black people as less than human. But things other than racism and the institution of slavery are attacked in *Huckleberry Finn*: hypocrisy and greed, in the characters and exploits of the Duke and the King; the horror, futility, waste, and tragic insanity of war (allegorized in the feud between the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons); sentimental romanticism, in the wreck of the *Walter Scott*, Emmeline Grangerford's grotesque "art" work, and Tom Sawyer's baroque scheme to liberate Jim from captivity on Phelps' farm.

Three final examples will serve to show the particularized diversity of the politics of attack. In *The Marvelous Land of Oz* (1904), L. Frank Baum satirizes militant feminism through the agency of General Jinjur and her Army of Revolt—depicting them as essentially trivial-minded women who, desiring to "dethrone the Scarecrow King—to acquire thousands of gorgeous gems . . . and to obtain power over our former oppressors," conquer the Emerald City with knitting needles. Once in power, they dig the emeralds out of the city walls, force the men to do cooking and housework, and spend their time reading novels, eating candy, and making fudge in the palace kitchen. The Scarecrow is able to rout Jinjur and her Army from the palace by releasing mice into the throne room. When Jinjur is finally deposed, the women residents of the Emerald City "hail" her downfall "with joy"; so tired were they of their husbands' cooking, Baum tells us, that "rushing one and all to the kitchens of their houses, the good wives prepared so delicious a feast for the weary men that harmony was immediately restored in every family." (In balance, though, it should be remembered that at the end of the book a female character, Princess Ozma, becomes the legitimate ruler of Oz; no militant feminist she, but a lovely girl restored to her rightful throne—and for her to *be* restored, Baum requires that she be made to undergo a magical transformation from being a boy.)

In his fine juvenile novel *Thunderbolt House* (1944), Howard Pease illustrates the corrupting influence of an inheritance on a close-knit family; and he has the young protagonist clearly perceive the damaging effect the legacy of tainted wealth has brought upon them. Pease's attacks are on the value system that places acquisition of money above all else (exemplified by the deceased uncle's willingness to bring

the financial ruin of others in his unscrupulous pursuit of wealth, and his having collected a huge unread library of rare first editions for their investment value alone), and on the destructive superficiality of abandoning an honest, unpretentiously simple life style and adopting the excesses of the “newly rich” in striving to achieve high social status. The family’s salvation is symbolically achieved when the 1906 San Francisco earthquake destroys the Nob Hill mansion that has trapped and imprisoned them. In *The Jungle Book*, Rudyard Kipling attacks human pettiness, inconsistency, pretension, shallowness, and self-importance in his scathing depiction of the *Bandar-log*: “the Monkey-People—the gray apes—the people without a Law—the eaters of everything.” (The Law will be served, however; the Bandar-log are themselves eaten by Kaa.)

In general, it may be that the politics of attack tends to be expressed less openly and viciously in children’s literature than it is in literature written for adults. Attacks as direct and bitterly edged as those of Sinclair Lewis, Jonathan Swift, Mary McCarthy, Ralph Ellison, Shirley Jackson, and Doris Lessing are not commonly encountered in literature for children. Also, in children’s literature there seems to be relatively little attack of a topical sort. Unlike political cartoonists, whose attacks on a day-to-day and week-to-week basis are usually of a topical, specific, and “ephemeral” nature addressing current events, issues, and real-life personalities (such as Thomas Nast’s attacks on Boss Tweed, or the attacks of Mauldin, Herblock, and Oliphant on the policies and statements of any sitting U.S. President), writers of children’s literature tend to express their ideological assaults against targets of a more generalized or “universal” nature.

To be sure, the attacks of children’s writers have as their *immediate* focus the attitudes and behaviors of specific characters and social institutions which are components of the fictions; but their *ultimate* targets are to be found in the underlying ideological principles (perhaps resolvable to high-level abstractions such as Intolerance or Selfishness) which the author finds offensive and which the depicted attitudes and behaviors “stand for” and symbolically exemplify. Thus, it is only in an *immediate* sense that Twain is attacking the practices of the Duke and the King, or Emmeline Grangerford’s artwork, or Aunt Sally’s tacit assumption of black inferiority; his *ultimate* concern is not with the Duke, the King, Emmeline, or Aunt Sally at all—but with attacking those generalized ideological targets (greed, hypocrisy, sentimental romanticism, racism) which they represent as exemplars. Similarly, for Kipling the *Bandar-log* are not simply the jungle’s gray apes whose actions he despises; they are “the Monkey-People”: “the people without a Law—the eaters of everything.” Investigators concerned with studying the politics of attack as it is expressed in children’s literature might wish to keep in mind this distinction between authors’ *immediate* and *ultimate* targets, attempting to “look through and beyond” the immediate targets to discern what underlying (perhaps abstract) principles they exemplify which constitute the ultimate objectives of the author’s assault.

In the work of skillful and sophisticated twentieth-century authors, the politics of attack tends not to be expressed in sermon, diatribe, or denunciation, but rather through a contextual unfolding in which the targeted attitudes, behaviors, and

institutions are illustrated through demonstration and dramatization in such manner that readers can draw their own conclusions. When well delivered, these attacks can be devastating. To the extent the attacks are understood by readers (irony and satire are effective only when they are *recognized* as such), the author's underlying ideologies may be inferred. As with the politics of advocacy, readers whose ideologies agree with the author's will be comfortably reinforced in their views; those who have opposing ideologies may well be angered or threatened by what they perceive. Those who are threatened—and who fear the work's persuasive power—may try to limit the work's accessibility to young minds; and thus we have ideological rejection of manuscripts by publishers, the writing of negative book reviews to discourage sales, official silence (nonmention) on the part of librarians and teachers, and moves to censorship and banning.

The Politics of Assent

The politics of assent is even more difficult to discuss than the politics of attack. Fully as persuasive, in its own way, as advocacy, it does not advocate in any direct sense, but simply *affirms* ideologies generally prevalent in the society. As I am defining it, "assent" is an author's passive, unquestioning acceptance and internalization of an established ideology, which is then transmitted in the author's writing in an unconscious manner. The ideology subscribed to is a set of values and beliefs widely held in the society at large which reflects the society's assumptions about what the world is. When this received ideology informs and shapes a literary work, that work becomes a vehicle expressing it. Most readers (sharing this ideology with the author) will not recognize its presence in the work, for the work will reflect back their own assumptions about what the world is and simply reinforce them in their beliefs. Nor is the author consciously aware of the ideology informing the work. Since neither author nor readers can conceive the world as being otherwise than what the ideology claims, the ideology—when expressed in a published literary work—is persuasive because it tends to support and reinforce the status quo. As such, its expression is political: the book promulgates and promotes a particular ideology (to the exclusion of others); and, by its reinforcement of widely held views, inhibits change.

To illustrate the politics of assent, I will cite three roughly contemporaneous works which reflect their period's societal assumptions regarding black people. In *Mary Poppins* (1934), P. L. Travers has Mary spin the compass and take the children "South" to visit an African Negro family who are nearly naked but wearing crowns of feathers and a great many beads. The Negro mother, speaking, is depicted as follows: "'Ah bin 'specting you a long time, Mar' Poppins. . . . You bring dem chillun dere into ma li'l house for a slice of watermelon right now. You'se mighty welcome.' And she laughed, loud happy laughter . . . as though the whole of life were one huge joke . . ." (as reprinted by Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962, pp. 90-93: N.B. the date of the reprint).

Second, in a children's play, "The Pied Piper," developed by children in Early Childhood Education Activities Classes at State College, Santa Barbara, Calif.,¹ the Pied Piper has taken a group of children into a magic garden; one of them is a black

child named Topsy. The stage directions call for the Rose Princess (who is white) to do a waltzing dance; when she is finished, Topsy "awkwardly mimics" the dance, and the other children "laugh and exclaim during this burlesque." Topsy stumbles and says, "Ah feels just like a great big pink rose." When swinging, Topsy falls out of her swing; then she does "an imitation 'Swing Dance,' tapping and stumbling." One of the white children, Beau, suggests that Topsy should teach a snail to hop like a bunny. Topsy answers, "Not me, Mist' Beau, a lot o' animals isn't supposed to hop!" Her manner of addressing him shows that she knows her place. Later Topsy announces, "Ah sho' am yearnin' fo' some watermelon." And a little later yet she gets it: "Dah's mah watermelon, sho' as you's alive. . . . Watermelon sho' am good. . . ."

My final illustrations are two samples from the numerous Little Brown Koko stories by Blanche Seale Hunt (charmingly illustrated by Dorothy Wagstaff), which appeared in *The Household Magazine* for a number of years beginning in 1935.² Hunt describes Koko as "the shortest, fattest little Negro you could ever imagine" with "the blackest, little woolly head and great, big, round eyes." He is "the prettiest brown color, just like a bar of chocolate candy," and of course he's the pride and joy of his "nice, good, ole, big, fat, black Mammy." Koko is greedy for food, though: "Why, compared with Little Brown Koko, a pig should be called a well-mannered gentleman" (pp. 5-6). In the story "Little Brown Koko and the Preacher's Watermelon," Koko samples a watermelon which his Mammy was planning to serve the Preacher for Sunday dinner. As the juice begins to run out of the cut melon, "Little Brown Koko's big, round eyes just bugged 'way out! He licked the juice off the watermelon, and rolled his big, round eyes, and said, 'Yum, yum!'" His eating of the melon is depicted with Hunt's typical precision: "He . . . dived right in with both little, fat, brown hands, opened his little, red mouth up from ear to ear, and began to gobble watermelon for dear life. . ." (p. 25). Facing his Mammy and her willow switch after finishing the melon, Koko says, "Aw, I don't think the preacher wanted this ole watermelon, nohow! I'spects he'd lots ruther have a nice, long, skinny one, doesn't you, Mammy?" (p. 26).

The stereotypes of Negroes presented in these writings for children are not there, I think, to advocate this view of black people. They are merely a reflection of the authors' unquestioning acceptance of a prevailing societal ideology: these stereotypes were a stock way of conceiving black people to which both authors and readers subscribed, and to which they were accustomed. The 1930s were not far distant from the heyday of the black-face minstrel shows and were imbued with the popular image of black people promulgated there. The assumptions regarding black people which the white majority found appropriate and comfortable (reassuring?) were continually reinforced by depictions of black people in the mass media: in radio, by Rochester, Jack Benny's servant, and Amos 'n' Andy; in films, by Hattie McDaniel in servant roles (complete with handkerchief-cap) and other good menials and benign "slaves" (e.g., *Gone With the Wind*), by Buckwheat in "The Little Rascals," by Stepin Fetchit and Birmingham Brown, Charlie Chan's black chauffeur, who bugged and rolled *his* great, big, round eyes when frightened.

The three illustrations of children's writing I've just cited are not saying "This is how

black people *ought* to be conceived" (advocacy); they are simply presenting (and perpetuating) a familiar consensus view of what black people were *thought* to be. The uniformity of the stereotypical depictions in the three illustrations is instructive in this regard.

Nor are black people in these illustrations (or black people generally) being attacked. In *Mary Poppins*, the quoted scene is a small part of a "set-piece" (itself a minor part of the book), one stop of four on a round-the-world tour Mary provides for the children: they also go North, East, and West, meeting other ethnic stereotypes (Eskimos, a Chinese Mandarin, American Indians). Mary Poppins' blacks are friendly and outgoing (it's *Mary* who is crisp and discourteous in her hurry to get on with the journey). (It should be noted that for the 1981 edition, P. L. Travers saw fit to rewrite the "Bad Tuesday" chapter, replacing these ethnic stereotypes with, respectively, a Polar Bear (N), a Hyacinth Macaw (S), a Panda (E), and a Dolphin (W)—and softening the angular Mary as well.) In "The Pied Piper," Topsy is just one of several children whose antics provide comic interest; and she is a major character in the play, frequently on stage, with many lines and much to do.

Though her awkwardness and stumbling provide amusement for the other characters, the white children nonetheless accept her (a little condescendingly) as one of themselves and are friendly toward her. The Little Brown Koko we see in these excerpts is consistent with his depiction in many other of Hunt's stories, which kept appearing for a lengthy span of years; and, in many ways, Koko is only an exaggeration of *any* energetic, greedy, self-indulgent child. In many stories he exhibits admirable traits. Little Brown Koko and his Mammy are vital characterizations which Blanche Seale Hunt clearly regards with great affection.

If we today find these depictions of black people from the 1930s embarrassing and grotesque, it's only because much history has intervened, our consciousness has been changed, and a new societal ideology has replaced the one that would have found such stereotypes acceptable.

Another long-standing ideology that is breaking down is the set of assumptions regarding gender roles which, until recent years, authors of children's literature assented to without question. This ideology (which I call "the Dick & Jane consensus") did not express itself through the politics of advocacy; it didn't *have* to: authors had so far internalized societal beliefs about "maleness" and "femininity" and the kind of behaviors appropriate to each that the stereotypes came unbidden. The politics of assent presented boys in fiction as movers, doers, explorers, adventurers, creatures of action, guile, mischief, intellect, and leadership. It presented girls as tag-alongs, subordinate to boys in initiative and daring, relatively docile, passive, emotional, and unimaginative; as restraining influences on male daring and excess; as objects of an ambivalent (if not schizophrenic) male adulation and contempt (mirroring that which was prevalent in adult society); as domestic souls in training to be housewives and mothers.

There have always been male and female child characters in fiction who did not conform to these stereotypes. But these books and characters are out of the

mainstream and do not express the politics of assent. In the “Dick & Jane” tradition, which, I submit, *was* the mainstream, the girl who did not fit the mold of society’s gender-role ideology was a maverick, a “tomboy”—deviant and not altogether “healthy.” Boys in this tradition who did not conform to the ideology’s assumptions regarding masculinity were either intellectuals or “sissies”—both categories being seen as deviant and providing poor role models, the first being subject to ridicule, the second serving as an object of scorn.

Since the rise of the new feminist movement in the late 1960s, large segments of American society have been made aware of, and have come to question, the received gender-role ideology; and, increasingly, authors of children’s works are reflecting the new consciousness by purposely avoiding stereotypes in gender roles, by “equalizing” the sexes in narrative importance, and by giving both girls and boys more complexity and depth than had previously been possible. In the current transitional period, authors who are breaking away from the established ideology are, of necessity, doing so self-consciously; and their active promotion of the new ideology causes their works to express the politics of advocacy.

The politics of assent not only affirms the status quo but continually reinforces it. Since its underlying ideology is rendered invisible to authors and readers alike, of the three types of political expression, its influence is especially potent, for its persuasive force is hidden. Yet its consequences in shaping attitude and behavior are profound. By inhibiting change and supporting tradition, it has great potential impact on the shape of society—for good or ill. To illustrate the politics of assent I have chosen societal ideologies which, through changed circumstances and the passing of time, we have come to have an awareness of, and on which we have gained a perspective. What we are less aware of, and have less perspective on, are the received values and assumptions which are being expressed in current children’s literature—the societal ideologies that authors are “assenting to” *today*.

I hope that I’ve been able to provide some useful insights into the topic of political ideologies in literature for children; that I’ve been able to suggest the importance of studying the topic and to stimulate interest in those who would wish to pursue it farther. My purpose here is exploratory, attempting to formulate general definitional categories and to propose a methodology for discerning ideologies that may be present in literary works. I suggested at the outset that my categories of ideological expression—the politics of advocacy, attack, and assent—are tentative and in all likelihood capable of refinement.

Avenues of inquiry immediately suggest themselves. Clearly, for the historian of children’s literature as well as for critics of older works, it will be necessary in studying specific topics to understand the historical context in which the books appeared; and it might be useful to survey the background in popular *adult* literature for the period to see what values, attitudes, and assumptions those authors are promulgating for mature audiences: might there be correlations and similarities between what is expressed in adult and in children’s writing? Are there subtle differences between American books, British books, French books, those written in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and various parts of Asia and Africa?

What roles might large scale social agendas and overt propaganda play in young people's books in emerging nations? In unstable as opposed to settled societies? In doctrinaire cultures? Or those in which improving literacy is a prime social concern?

In studying the promulgation of ideologies in children's literature through the politics of advocacy, attack, and assent, investigators also should not overlook the role that graphic illustrations might play in reinforcing (or perhaps undercutting) the ideologies inherent in the written texts. Illustrations may be studied in several ways: in themselves, for the potential ideological freight they may be carrying; as they serve to supplement and counterpoint the written text; or as they reflect vogues or fashions in esthetic principles or taste at the time they were created. And here it might be useful to distinguish between those illustrations done by the authors themselves (Sendak, Lawson) and those done by artists who had no hand in writing the text (Howard Pyle, Rackham). In this regard I have found it interesting to compare the various styles (and the changing taste) revealed in the work of the many different illustrators of Carroll's *Alice*: we have Carroll's own illustrations in *Alice's Adventures Underground*, Tenniel's (done under Carroll's supervision, but still embodying the sensibility and style of the *Punch* cartoonist), and those of a host of twentieth-century illustrators.

The values which shape a book are the author's politics. The promulgation of these values through publication is a political act. Except for a few types of children's literature which seem to be value-free, most of what children read is filled with ideology, whatever the source, purpose, and mode of expression, whether consciously promulgated by the authors or not. In well-written books, the authors' narrative skill, imaginative brilliance, and ability to create engaging characters and plot lines tend to mask the ideologies being expressed. But if ideologies have potential powers of persuasion, they are no less persuasive because they're hidden.

Acknowledgment. A version of this essay was presented to the Children's Literature session at the Midwest Modern Language Association convention in Minneapolis, November, 1983.

Notes

1. Under the supervision of Edith M. Leonard and Lillian E. Miles, as found in Volume 11 of *Childcraft* (Chicago: The Quarrie Corp., 1939), pp. 195-229.
2. My quotations are drawn from the book *Stories of Little Brown Koko* (American Colortype Co., 1940).

[Further Notes: The name of Birmingham Brown, Charlie Chan's chauffeur, was erroneously given as 'Chattanooga' Brown in the original publication in *Children's Literature in Education*.

The pagination above is that found on the PDF version contained on the <http://www.robertdsutherland.com> website; the pagination of the original version as published in *Children's Literature in Education* is different. —RDS]