

## The 'Mooreeffoc effect': Inversion and Subversion in Charles Dickens' *Holiday Romance*

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### 1. Introduction: The 'Mooreeffoc effect'

In an essay on fairy stories [*Tree and Leaf* 1964/72: 52] Tolkien refers to the 'Mooreeffoc effect', as used by GK Chesterton to 'denote the queerness of things that have become trite, when they are seen suddenly from a new angle'- what stylisticians would presumably term 'defamiliarization'. Chesterton added that Dickens' writing (and the term comes from his work on Dickens) shows 'this elvish kind of realism...everywhere'- no wonder Tolkien picked it up!

But the word *Mooreeffoc* is actually found first in John Forster's *Life of Dickens* (1872) , where Dickens himself tells Forster how, as a boy sent to work at the age of 10 he would go to a coffee-shop in St Martin's Lane:

'...in the door there was an oval glass plate, with COFFEE-ROOM painted on it, addressed towards the street. If I ever find myself in a very different kind of coffee-room now, but where there is such an inscription on glass, and read it backward on the wrong side MOOREEFFOC (as I often used to do then...) a shock goes through my blood' [1936: 333]

I am here using the term combining a Dickensian meaning close to the original meaning *and* a Chestertonian meaning so

(I) something 'read backwards', viewed 'the other way round', as in a mirror/ looking glass- hence an *inversion* of *normal* values and schemas

(ii) the world seen 'from a new angle of vision, of perspective'

leading from *inversion* to *subversion*

and I am applying it to Dickens' own strategy for creating text-worlds where 'normality' or expected conventions are up-turned.

## 2. 'Holiday Romance': Structure

In late middle age, in 1868, Dickens published *Holiday Romance*, 4 comic tales or 'parts' for children, in an influential American children's magazine, *Our Young Folks*, during his tour of America (November 1867-April 1868); and also at home in his own periodical for families, *All the Year Round*, in the first 4 issues of 1868. Dickens' writings for children have generally been ignored by his critics- and by critics of children's literature- these tales especially. He's better known perhaps for his *Child's History of England* (1851-3) (see further Wales 2022). These comic tales have actually been published separately or altogether since 1874, 4 years after his death; and were re-edited in 1995 by Gillian Avery. In 1981 the writer Adrian Mitchell took a multi-modal approach for television in *Theatre Box: You Must Believe All This*. They do not deserve to be ignored! Not only are they delightfully amusing even to modern readers; *but*, most significantly, they are unusual in the field of children's fiction even today in that they purport to be actually 'written' by 2 boys and 2 girls, and hence are narrated by them: 'aged eight'; 'seven'; 'nine'; and 'half-past six'. The children are the 'internal authors' then (Wydrzynska 2021: 232, citing Currie 2010) and hence their *voices* and *focalizations* are those of children: taking the concept of 'childness' (Hollindale 1997) to an extreme. The world is seen from the Chestertonian 'new angle'; and, structurally speaking, the unusual use of the child internal author// narrator presents an 'inversion', if you like, of the expected 'norm' of narration in fiction.

Part I is an 'Introductory Romance from the Pen of William Tinkling Esquire' (aged 8), 'married' to Nettie Ashford. In an opening sentence which to me anticipates the style of *Catcher in the Rye*, the young narrator stresses

' This beginning- part is not made out of anybody's head you know. It's real. You must believe this beginning-part more than what comes after, else you won't understand how what comes after came to be written'[p.733]

The children have decided that, during the holidays, they will

“ ... throw our thoughts into something educational for the grown-up people, hinting to them how things ought to be. Let us veil our meaning under a mask of romance”[Alice Rainbird] (p.727)

Part II is a ‘Romance’ then ‘From the Pen of Miss Alice Rainbird [aged seven]’: a fairy story about Princess Alicia’s magic fishbone;

Part III is a ‘Romance from the Pen of Lieutenant-Colonel Robin Redforth [aged 9]’ about a pirate called ‘Captain Boldheart’

and Part IV is a ‘Romance from the Pen of Miss Nettie Ashford [aged half-past six]’- which begins:

‘There is a country, which I will show to you when I get into maps, where the children have everything their own way. It is a most delightful country to live in ‘ [p.753]

This opening sentence gives a flavour of the narratorial style; and also, significantly for my argument, illustrates the important ‘inversion’ in this story and the others, namely children behaving as adults, precisely in order to teach them ‘how things ought to be’. In this story particularly

‘ The grown-up people are obliged to obey the children, and are never allowed to sit up to supper, except on their birthdays’ (p.753); indeed, by the end of the story,

‘the children (that would be in other countries) kept [the grown-up people (that would be in other countries)] at school as long as they ever lived, and made them do whatever they were told’ (p. 759)

The characters reverse the ‘normal’ adult/child roles; power relations are reversed.

### *3. Inversion and Subversion*

1. It is this romance, and part II, Alice Rainbird’s [aged 7], about a magic fishbone, that I focus on here, but in passing I will say that in Part I William Tinkling tries to free his bride from oppressive school-mistresses; and in part 3 Captain Boldheart captures his treacherous Latin grammar -master, and hangs him from the yard- arm of his ship. (See further Wales 2023.) In the last romance, part IV, Mrs Orange is ‘sadly plagued by her numerous family’ : ‘Two parents, two intimate friends of theirs, one godfather, two godmothers, and an aunt’. She decides they should all go to school at Mrs Lemon’s. In the classroom surreally stands a ‘pale, bald child, with red whiskers, in disgrace’:

“Come here, White”, said Mrs . Lemon, “and tell the lady what you have been doing”.

“Betting on horses”, said White sulkily’ (p.755)

Mr Orange comes home from the city.

“James love”, said Mrs. Orange., “you look tired. What has been doing [sic] in the city to-day?”

“Trap, bat, and ball, my dear”, said Mr. Orange; “and it knocks a man up” (p.756)

The style of the conversations mirrors that of ‘real-world’ adults; and I am reminded of the common phenomenon of ‘real-world’ children role-playing, playing at being grown-ups, of being doctors and nurses, teachers or shop-keepers, etc.

But children ‘playing’ at being grown-ups has a more serious side in Dickens’ adult fiction: children forced to become care-givers, or growing up before their time as a result of being orphaned, for example: think of Little Nell or ‘The Marchioness’ in *The Old Curiosity Shop*; or Little Dorrit.

In Part 2, the story told by Alice Rainbird, Princess Alicia takes the leading role, looking after her 17 brothers and sisters and the baby, because the Queen is ill and her father impoverished. The narrative style, heavily co-ordinated, is appropriate to a child-narrator; but it also mirrors the continual activities that Princess Alicia must engage in, to look after the family:

‘The Princess Alicia kept the seventeen young princes and princesses quiet, *and* dressed *and* undressed *and* danced the baby, *and* made the kettle boil, *and* heated the soup, *and* swept the hearth, *and* poured out his medicine, *and* nursed the queen, *and* did all that ever she could, *and* was as busy, busy, busy as busy could be ‘ [my italics] ( p.741)

There is a wonderful surreal stream-of-consciousness moment, reflecting a child’s mind-style, as the little children

‘... stared with their twice seventeen are thirty-four, put down four, and carry three, eyes’ (p.742)

Clearly there is an echo of fairy tales like *Cinderella* and indeed Alicia has a ‘Fairy Grandmarina’; who, however, is very dismissive of the King, who asks *why* the magic fishbone found in their salmon for supper can only be used *once* for a wish. She replies:

“Don’t catch people short, before they have done speaking. Just the way with you grown-up persons. You are always doing it.” [And stamping her foot:] “The reason for this, and the reason for

that, indeed! You are always wanting the reason. No reason. There! Hoity Toity me! I am sick of your grown-up reasons”” (p. 741)

One can imagine Dickens' child readers enjoying this very much, especially reading it aloud: the fairy tale conventions subverted, along with turning the tables on the restrictions of everyday life. And it is this subversion, along with the use of the internal author and child-centred focalization, that distinguishes this 'romance' from Thackeray's modern fairytale, *The Rose and the Ring*, published in 1855, which has sometimes been published with Dickens' fairytale. Whimsical, yes, and there is a magic rose and a magic ring, 'favours' of the Fairy Blackstick, but it is a straightforward conventional third person narration, stretching 150 pages longer than *Holiday Romance*.

As a 'Holiday Romance' the stories have that kind of freedom from adult-given rules and conventions that are associated with school holidays. Adults in these stories, apart from the Fairy Grandmarina, only have subservient rather than dominant roles. There is a kind of wish-fulfillment too: children getting revenge on grown-ups, even punishing them; their unconscious rebellious desires played out in the stories and reflecting or mirroring the desires of their readers.

#### 4. Bakhtin and the Carnavalesque

Bakhtin would argue, I think, that at various moments in history, various cultural events in time, such unconscious desires have in fact been acted upon and celebrated in carnivalesque ceremonies involving 'mis-rule', like 'The Festival of Fools' in mid-winter, or the 'Lord of Mis-rule' - where children play as adults and are crowned kings or bishops and kings are portrayed as Fools. Such 'social inversions' or 'role reversals' can be traced back to Roman times, when Masters waited on Slaves. In Bakhtin's own words we find the equivalent of the 'Mooreffoc effect': he describes the 'peculiar logic of the inside out', of the 'turnabout' (1984:11). 'Carnival', says LeCercle, 'is the embodiment of the negative prefix in "non-sense"; it says no, locally and temporarily, to order and hierarchy' (1994:194). The nineteenth-century equivalent might be pantomime, with its role

reversals of adults playing children, women playing men, men playing women- associated with mid-winter, and where anarchy and irreverence reign ( Eigner 1989:41; see also Wales 2023).

##### 5. *Dickens, Carroll and Lear*

But by the 1860s, when *Holiday Romance* first appeared, something else is happening. Lewis Carroll had published *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in 1865; his own 'Looking Glass' world would not appear until 1871. Yet there are clear parallels between Carroll's work, and Dickens' *Holiday Romance*. I haven't found Carroll's name mentioned in Dickens' letters, however; and it may only be a coincidence that Dickens has a heroine called 'Alice', who is the same age as Carroll's 'Alice' (they are both 7) ; and Dickens' Alice has a doll called 'The Duchess'. Carroll's Alice in falling down a rabbit-hole discovers a world turned 'upside down'; values are turned 'the other way round'. As in Dickens the assumptions of 'normal' everyday life are questioned or undercut. The petty rules of institutions like education are subverted in mockery: so 'Laughing and Grief' replace Latin and Greek; 'Reeling and Writhing' replace 'Reading and Writing'.

All too often *Alice's Adventures* is seen as a unique work by critics; but we can also note here Edward Lear's enlarged edition (1861) of his *Book of Nonsense* of 1846. In his limericks we also find the subversion of roles and norms of social behaviour. Old People in particular freely engage in childish activities with joyful abandon.: like boiling eggs in shoes and walking on stilts wreathed with lilies. For Lytton Strachey, who wrote an article on Lear in 1888, 'Nonsense' is a humorous way of 'setting things upside down' (see further Wales, in preparation). All three writers illustrate Gillian Beer's view of the Alice Books as presenting "the world sideways on"(2016:4): it's an 'egalitarian zone ', she says, 'in which everything becomes possible and nothing is unlikely'.

I think myself that there is something going on here with all three writers that reflects the mood of the times; and various critics have indeed noted a literary change mid-century, but for different reasons hypothesised. Children were no longer by this time seen as adults in miniature, and they were regarded as a reading public in their own right. And it's interesting that the 1860s saw the first

publication of magazines specifically for children, especially in the US. And it's even more interesting, I think, that *Our Young Folks*, in which *Holiday Romance* appeared, encouraged real work by young authors, some of whom grew up to be famous writers, like Edith Wharton and Louise Alcott: perhaps this gave Dickens the idea of 'young authors' for his stories. (*Our Young Folks* also published Lear's *The Owl and the Pussy-cat* and other poems in 1870: Uglow 2017: 395.) Mid-century also there was increased resistance to the institution of the school [LeCercle 1994: 4, 113], with its stress on good manners. Girls in particular were taught the values of 'humility, resignation, filial piety' (Bratton 1981: 179) self-control and refinement. Nonsense literature was perhaps seen as a 'means to escape...from... [petty rules] of Victorian domesticism' (Tigges 1987:42); or a rebellion against moralistic or evangelical literature for children. LeCercle (1994:181) believes also that the nineteenth century also saw a greater appreciation of popular culture and the comic. J.O.Halliwell, a Shakespearean scholar, produced his famous edition of nursery rhymes and tales in 1842; and I have mentioned the huge popularity of pantomime in this century.

One or more of these suppositions may well be true; but it may also be true that there has always been a strong tradition of nonsense writing in English; flourishing 'under-ground', so to speak, and then coming to the surface (Lurie 1991). So Lear's limericks *do* have a precedent of sorts; and there were popular verses and tales on the subject of *The World Turned Upside Down* or *Topsy-Turviness* in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and German *Lugengeschichten*. I am wondering too about a possible relation to the Gothic impulse: an expression of resistance against Enlightenment rationality; almost an alternative counter-cultural movement; a tradition of literary insubordination. Mullen would argue (2019: 6-7) that it has never really disappeared. Her study is of mid-20th century culture, not mid-19th. However, Dickens' *Holiday Romance* lacks the darkness of the 'uncanny', which is a feature of Carroll and Lear.

## 6. Conclusion

What distinguishes Dickens primarily from Carroll and Lear is undoubtedly the unusual narrative device of having not only a supposed child's point of view/ focalization; but having supposed children 'take over' as 'internal authors', and so determine the style. So the stories are, as it were, 'owned' by the characters; we are forced to think what they like as well as think; and to value the proposed ideas of childish behaviour, however fantastic or subversive. The 'freedom' from a controlling adult or third person narrator is reflected in the freedom from adult control in the stories themselves. Of course at a higher level this freedom from adult control is an illusion: it is Dickens who is the *real* author. But he is looking back, I think, as an older man at his own childhood, when he himself, as he also told his biographer John Forster, loved to write fantasies; and he has published *Holiday Romance* in a journal where writing by *real* children authors was encouraged.

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