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**CHARACTERIZATION IN THE
CHILDREN'S BOOKS OF A. A. MILNE**

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Savannah State College
February 10, 1971**

CHARACTERIZATION IN THE CHILDREN'S BOOKS OF A. A. MILNE

In a critical study of the works of an author like A. A. Milne there is much one could attempt to treat. Within the already delimited scope of his works for children, many aspects of theme and style, purpose and effectiveness clamor for attention. In my opinion one of the most valuable attributes of Milne's work is his characterization, especially his insights into the behavior of children, and it is in this field that Milne achieved his greatest success. *Time Magazine*, on the occasion of his death, remarked that Milne "tried in vain to make the playwright and the novelist keep up with the author of *Winnie-the-Pooh*."¹ Even his autobiography, which certainly rises above the bulk of his writings for adults, is concerned primarily with his childhood and school days, spilling over only into the early years of adulthood.

If asked why Milne was more successful with his children's books, I should venture this theory: for some reason Milne was more at home when dealing with the world of the child. In fairness, of course, it may be to the reader that the cause for this must be attributed. Perhaps, by the time we reach maturity we as readers have lost something of the light-heartedness and flexibility which allows us to indulge the writer of light prose. He, after all, couldn't be doing much work. Making use of his superior talent and education, maybe, but working? This, of course, is exactly what Milne intended us to think. Of the praise of a respected friend he said, "E. V.'s praise helped me to give the air of doing it all easily—which is the only air to give writing of that sort."²

Is it then, only when we return to the world of childhood that we allow ourselves to be wholeheartedly gay without some sense of guilt? . . . and without imposing our own sense of guilt on the shoulders of any author who would dare write for the sole purpose of receiving pleasure and being funny? Is he right to tempt us from the more serious and practical concerns of living? Or could it be that Milne, too, was trapped in the same way as the reader by cultural inhibitions to the extent that his genius was most free when writing for children? In the introduction to his autobiography Milne remarked that it was the childhood of a great man that he loved to read about, not his life as a great man.³

There is one major aspect of style in which both the poems (*When We Were Very Young* and *Now We Are Six*) and the Pooh stories (*Winnie-the-Pooh* and *The House at Pooh Corner*) are similar. All four depend on an impressionistic technique for the portrayal of character, and it is in the characterization that the dominant thematic content is found. In the Pooh stories a type of stereotyping is used to point out, on a one-dimensional level, many of the kinds of people we all know and recognize. One can

almost see the ghost of Stephen Crane looking over Milne's shoulder as he introduces and tags each of the animals. Kanga is Motherly, Roo is "Baby Roo," Tigger is a Bouncy adolescent, Piglet is anxious, Rabbit feels Important, and Eeyore is gloomy. As the episodes unfold, Milne refines and elaborates each of these traits; he does not refine or elaborate the characterization. In the end, Tigger is still Bouncy, Kanga still Motherly, and Eeyore still gloomy though we are now fully aware that his gloom is both pessimistic and paranoiac in nature. Even in Milne's choice of the animals to be Christopher Robin's friends we find further evidence of this one-dimensional characterization. What animal more appropriately represents motherhood than the kangaroo who bears and protects her young for months after birth within the shelter of her own body? Which deserves to feel more gloomy and paranoid than the jackass?

In the poems, too, Milne utilizes this technique of characterization, but he does so in a different manner. The poetry neither attempts to display a wide range of character types nor to contrast the differences among them. It concentrates on that which people everywhere have in common, but it limits its scope to the child, to the immature personality, rather than including the total range of possibilities as do the stories. The character of "the child" is two-dimensional. The child of the poems is not individualized, but neither does he represent only one character type. He is a stereotype of a composite nature, including all those traits which set apart childhood from mere personhood. The child of the poem is, in short, that lowest common denominator of childishness.

Only one personality, not many, emerges from these poems despite the fact that many children walk through the pages; and it is not only Christopher Robin, with his pets and his contemporaries, who contributes to the final product. The adults in the poems serve one of two purposes. When they are incidentally mentioned or occur in some interaction with the children, they serve to illustrate the contrast—and sometimes the conflict—between "the child" and "the adult." When the adult is the center of the poem, however, the role is consistently different. James James Morrison Morrison's mother who disobeys her son, bad King John who wants nothing more than an india rubber ball for Christmas, the sulky king who slides down the banisters, and the Emperor of Peru who boosts his ego in the face of uncertainty by repeating a little rhyme are included by virtue of the fact that they are supremely *childish*, not that they are adult. It is not Billy Moon whom we meet in the pages of *When We Were Very Young*. Neither is it Mary Jane or Emmeline or Anne. It is the composite spirit of childhood.

There are several other ways in which the poetry and the prose works can be contrasted. In the poems, for example, it is Christopher Robin who is central and necessary to the presen-

tation of theme. Some of his toys and acquaintances, such as Pooh, the "Lords of the Nursery," and Alexander Beetle provide situations in which he can "interact." In the stories, by contrast, it is most definitely Pooh, Piglet, and their friends and adventures which hold the interest of the reader and engage his indulgent sympathy. Christopher Robin enters only to provide a focal point to which the members of this group, with their varied interests and occasional conflicts, are drawn, a fact well-illustrated by the expedition to the North Pole and the party given for Pooh after he rescued Piglet. Throughout, Christopher Robin remains the champion-adviser-arbitrator to all members of the group. But, though they regard him fondly, he is seldom brought into any activity—other than those he instigates himself—until a Profound Problem arises. The difference, then, is that in the Pooh stories, except for Tigger and Roo (who, by the way are among the more successful of the characters) the characters are adult. Rabbit, Kanga, Eeyore, and Owl are not only adult, they are rather staid. Of Pooh and Piglet, one is less certain. They exist somewhere between the realm of Baby Roo and that overgrown and awkward adolescent Tigger (who, having no home and needing a mother's firm hand, quite appropriately goes off to live with Kanga and Roo) and the realm of the four adults.

Still, they are not children. They are simply adults of "Very Little Brain" and of "Very Little Bravery." Even Christopher Robin, in the stories, assumes the role of an adult in his relationship to the animals. It is he on whom they call when afraid, he to whom they go for advice, and he who has the final say in matters of taste, judgment, and fact. In my opinion, and I do not think I am alone, the stories are less successful than the poems; and this is the very reason: Milne's unique skill lies in bringing alive the world of childhood and that world is more consistently the concern of the poems than it is of the prose.

Milne himself sensed that his poetry was superior to the prose stories; the following passage from his autobiography tells something of his feeling for these works and also indicates why he feels the above statement to be true:

Whether I have added to technique that "wonderful insight into a child's mind" of which publishers' advertisements talk so airily, I wouldn't know. I am not inordinately fond of or interested in children; their appeal to me is a physical appeal such as the young of other animals make. I have never felt in the least sentimental about them, or no more sentimental than one becomes for a moment over a puppy or a kitten. In as far as I understand their minds the understanding is based on the observation, casual enough and mostly unconscious, which I give to people generally: on memories of my own childhood: and on the imagination which every writer

must bring to memory and observation. . . A pen picture of a child which showed it as loving, grateful, and full of thought for others would be false to the truth; but equally false would be a picture which insisted on the brutal egotism of the child, and ignored the physical beauty which softens it. . . But it is possible to give what one might call "an air of Charm," particularly when writing in verse, to any account of a child's activities."⁴

I think one cannot help but sense, from reading this passage, that Milne attempted to divorce himself from sentimentality, which he defines as "merely an appeal to emotions not warranted by the facts."⁵ According to *Time*, Milne considered " 'whimsical' the most 'loathsome adjective,' but it was one which he could never escape. . . 'If I write anything less realistic, less straightforward than "the cat sat on the mat," I am called whimsical.' "⁶ Perhaps it is just this devotion to proportion in the effort to paint a realistic picture that maintains a balance so realistic in his works that we read our own sentimentality into them.

Perhaps the most significant way in which the poems differ thematically from the stories is as much a matter of style as of content. It has been mentioned before that the "child" of the poems is more highly developed than is any one of the animal figures in the stories. As the child is central, whether in the form of Christopher Robin, one of his friends, or some immature adult, Milne has had sufficient opportunity to develop fully many facets of that state we denote as "childishness." These motifs recur throughout the two volumes: egotism, the escape from mundane reality through the imagination, contempt for patronizing adults, and a value system as yet unshaped by society.

What is it, if not egotism, that causes the young child to inquire, on being taken to see Buckingham Palace, "Do you think the king knows all about me?"⁷ And what is it that prompts "James James Morrison Morrison / (Commonly known as *Jim*)" to tell "his / Other relations / Not to go blaming *him*," when his mother disappears. Of course, King John sent his condolences, and so did the Queen and Prince.⁸ What makes it possible for Emmeline, when told to go wash up for dinner, to call on the Queen herself to make the final decision as to whether her hands are clean or not? Milne himself, in his autobiography, states that "in real life very young children have an artless beauty, an innocent grace. . . But with this outstanding physical quality there is a natural lack of moral quality, which expresses itself, as Nature always insists on expressing herself, in an egotism entirely ruthless."⁹

A second motif running throughout the poems and also occurring in the Pooh books is the escape into the imagination to avoid the common-place realities of the nursery, the drab rainy day, or the monotonous concrete of the streets. In "Nursery Chairs," the child becomes first a sea-captain going to South

America, and then a lion in a cage. So real does his game seem that he confuses it with reality and, sitting in his high chair, has to "try to pretend that it's *my* chair, / And that I am a baby of three."¹⁰ There are toys, too (Pooh), and imaginary friends (Binker) who offer quite adequate rationalizations for wanting an extra chocolate ("Oh, Binker wants a chocolate, so could you give me two?" / And then I eat it for him, 'cos his teeth are rather new."¹¹) as well as—how silly one would feel otherwise—for not knowing the obvious answers to the obvious questions asked by adults ("And then it doesn't matter what the answer ought to be, / 'Cos if he's right, I'm Right, and if he's wrong, it isn't Me."¹²)

Not only Christopher Robin but also his friends are plagued by patronizing adults, but they usually try to be tolerant of the older generation: "I always answer, / I always tell them, / If they ask me / Politely. . . / BUT SOMETIMES / I wish / That they wouldn't."¹³ Mary Jane ("*And it's lovely rice pudding for dinner again!*"¹⁴), the dormouse (" 'How very effective,' he said as he shook / The thermometer, 'all these chrysanthemums look!' "¹⁵), Jane the "Good Little Girl" ("Well! / Have you been a *good* girl, Jane?"¹⁶), and Elizabeth Ann ("Now then, darling, it's time for bed"¹⁷) all rebel at not being treated like "people."

Another recurring motif which has already been noted is that of the recognition by the child of childishness in adults. James James Morrison Morrison's mother who disregarded the admonition of her three-year-old son, the king in "The King's Breakfast" who slid down the banisters, bad King John who hopes only for a little recognition and an indian rubber ball for Christmas, and the Emperor of Peru who has to bolster his ego by repeating a formula even the first grader recognizes as nonsense, represent aspects of childishness, not mature, well-rounded individuals.

Milne sketches for the adult reader the value system of the child, ambiguous and self-contradictory at points but piercingly honest at others. Indecisiveness is neither a source of guilt nor a threat to the child's safety. He has his parents' protection from all consequences and therefore revels in his lack of responsibility like the old sailor who "did nothing but basking until he was saved!"¹⁸ "Where am I going?" sings Christopher Robin. "I don't quite know. / What does it matter where people go? / Down to the wood where the blue-bells grow— / Anywhere, anywhere. I don't know."¹⁹

Security is high on the list of values for the child too, and its main component seems to be the assurance of togetherness. ("Little Boy Blue, My dear, / Keep near, keep very near." / "I shall / Be always here, / Little Bo-Peep."²⁰ This is one of the advantages of having friends:

Wherever I am, there's always Pooh,
There's always Pooh and Me.
Whatever I do, he wants to do,
"Where are you going today?" says Pooh:
"Well, that's very odd 'cos I was too.
Let's go together," says Pooh, says he.
"Let's go together," says Pooh.²¹

Even the animals reiterate the theme: "And little black Pinkle grew and grew / Till he got as big as the big Tattoo. / And all that he did he did with her. / 'Two friends together,' says Pinkle Purr."²²

But if togetherness is essential, solitude too is desirable as the child learns to assert his independence. The imagination is the source of most of the young child's aloneness. If he could he'd sail to a deserted tropical island, thinks Christopher Robin. "And I'd say to myself as I looked so lazily down at the sea: / 'There's nobody else in the world, and the world was made for me.'²³ The first poem of *Now We Are Six* also expresses the child's desire to be away from people, especially those telling what *not* to do:

I have a house where I go
 When there's too many people,
I have a house where I go
 Where no one can be;
I have a house where I go,
Where nobody ever says "No";
Where no one says anything—so
 There is no one but me.²⁴

Sometimes the child's value judgements serve to call the adult reader up short and make him re-evaluate a bit. In "The Wrong House" a little boy wonders, when he realized that though the blackbird sings from the may-tree "Nobody listened To it, / Nobody / Liked it, / Nobody wanted it at all." He decides of the house that "it isn't like a house at all."²⁵ The best thing about Jonathan Jo is that he recognizes and accepts as sufficient the values of the child, for, "If you give him a smile, / Only once in a while, / Then he never expects any money!"²⁶ Perhaps the most important thing about A. A. Milne, too, is that he recognizes and accepts the child for what he is and is therefore able to interpret him to others in verse and in prose.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ "A Man Who Hated Whimsey" (Anon.), *Time*, LXVII (Feb. 13, 1956), p. 56.
- ² Alan Alexander Milne, *Autobiography* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1939), p. 240.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 282-284.
- ⁵ Milne, *Autobiography*, p. 283.
- ⁶ *Time*, *loc. cit.*
- ⁷ Milne, *When We Were Very Young*, p. 5.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34-35.
- ⁹ Milne, *Autobiography*, p. 283.
- ¹⁰ Milne, *When We Were Very Young*, p. 21.
- ¹¹ Milne, *Now We Are Six*, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1927), p. 19.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- ¹³ Milne, *When We Were Very Young*, p. 43.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- ¹⁶ Milne, *Now We Are Six*, p. 68.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- ¹⁹ Milne, *When We Were Very Young*, p. 37.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- ²¹ Milne, *Now We Are Six*, p. 35.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- ²³ Milne, *When We Were Very Young*, p. 39.
- ²⁴ Milne, *Now We Are Six*, p. 3.
- ²⁵ Milne, *When We Were Very Young*, p. 66.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

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