

# Myth and Irony in Children ' s Literature : from Harry Potter to The Happiness of Kati

著者	McGrath Paul D
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## Myth and Irony in Children's Literature: from Harry Potter to The Happiness of Kati

Paul D. McGrath

There is an interesting scene near the beginning of the first Harry Potter, when Harry is still in the clutches of the Dursleys. It's Dudley's birthday, and since no one can be found to take care of Harry, the unwilling Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia are forced to bring him along to the zoo with their pampered son and his friend.

Dudley has no success in getting the giant boa constrictor to stir from its sleep behind the glass in the reptile house despite Uncle Vernon's insistent rapping at the glass. But when Harry approaches the caged reptile, his empathetic recognition of the creature's boredom elicits an unexpected response in the reptile: it winks.

It seems that the snake has an ironic understanding of the perilous boredom of life as measured out in Dursleyish portions of modernity:

The snake jerked its head towards Uncle Vernon and Dudley, then raised its eyes to the ceiling. It gave Harry a look that said quite plainly: 'I get that all the time.' (25)

Thanks to the magic of this empathetic encounter, the glass front of the cage vanishes and the snake is soon on its way to Brazil. Harry, too, is not long for his cupboard-caged world as his own eleventh birthday will bring him a flood of letters from the world beyond modernity he knows nothing of yet.<sup>1</sup>

I use the word "modernity" here advisedly, because it seems to me that Rowling goes to great pains in the first chapter of the book to describe the tedium of the Dursleys' world, a "perfectly normal" world in which "anything strange or mysterious" has been banned (8). The book is an obviously successful attempt to reinstate the possibility of wonder, to break out of a cage which Max Weber was the first to see as a symbol of modernity.<sup>2</sup>

My intention in this paper is to examine several works of children's literature for the presence or absence of irony as well as for the type of irony should any be apparent; I will postulate that the presence of irony in a work is directly related to the extent to which modernity has eroded the world of spirits and eaten away at belief in myth.

In previous work I have examined the opposition between myth and irony in the fiction of Bharatee Mukherjee and the drama of David Henry Hwang, suggesting that both writers demonstrate a keen awareness of the contrast between the mythic consciousness of the US immigrant and the ironic

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mind set of the assimilated US citizen. I asserted that Hwang, in particular, problematizes modernity for its eradication of the gods and attempts in his own work to reinstate an awareness of myth and to valorize the possibility of an inter-subjectivity on the border of the world of spirits as opposed to the autonomous subjectivity represented as ideal in the West since the arrival of modernity with the Enlightenment. In this paper I would like to extend my examination of myth and irony to children's literature, using the geiger counter of irony to determine the extent to which an awareness of modernity has invaded the imaginative world created for younger readers. By comparing some works of British children's literature with some corresponding works from Thailand I hope to establish that a bias towards irony exists in the culture which has had the longer experience of modernity.

There is an obvious need here to define the much misunderstood and loosely used term *modernity*. In my previous work on Hwang's resistance to forces of modernity I defined the term by invoking writers preoccupied with the topic:

Jardine . . . identifies the French meaning of modernity as “the threatened collapse of the dialectic and its representations” (561). Harry Harootunian's work identifies modernity — in Marxist thought — as the early stage of capitalism. “Few thickets,” Peter Osborne (1992) assures us, “are more tangled than that in which the idea of modernity has become enmeshed” (23). His attempt to clear that thicket aims at both academic and popular meanings of the word as he suggests a classification of meanings into three groups: “the idea of modernity as a *category of historical periodisation*, a *quality of social experience*, and an (incomplete) *project*” (23: emphasis in the original). (McGrath, 2004)

The “collapse of the dialectic” involves the failure of the grand narratives of the West — most notably the theologically justified metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas. The triumph of reason in the Enlightenment is the very core of modernity, which banishes the gods as its most characteristic gesture. The arrival of modernity in Japan in the Meiji period provides an example of how the rationalization of the West could affect a culture free of the grand narratives just fallen in the West; the Meiji government's determination to create a new theatre modeled on the psychological drama of Ibsen and Strindberg came, in large part, from its embarrassment over the spirit-populated, sexually charged Kabuki theatre.<sup>3</sup>

It is my thesis in this paper that, at one end of a cultural spectrum, writers like J.K. Rowling and C.S. Lewis re-establish the possibility of a mythic world by turning irony — traditionally the tool of the de-mythologizer — against the rational understanding of what is “normal” under modernity. Osborne's second definition of modernity, “a quality of social experience,” is the very subject taken on by Rowling and by Susan Townsend, author of the best-selling British teenage diary, The Diary of Adrian Mole. In the lived experience of life under late modernity, social institutions no longer function as they once did; Townsend uses this irony to portray a child who, far from being raised by parents propping up the banners of a secure world, is forced to be responsible for the hapless grown-ups around him.

Irony has always appeared when a gap became apparent between the ideal and the real, between the way things should be and the way they are. Irony became the dominant discourse of a West struggling to free itself from centuries of domination by what was perceived as false ideals. No less a writer than Soren Kierkegaard, whose dissertation was written on the concept of irony, postulated that "irony is a qualification of subjectivity." (1965, 262).

The subjectivity of the child is a topic on which more needs to be written; the secure world of the child that is the background of much classical children's literature has given way, in large part, to a set of conditions which require more autonomy on the part of the child. This is true not only in the case of young adult fiction like Townsend's *The Diary of Adrian Mole*, in which the nearly fourteen year old protagonist must care for adults who should be able to care for themselves but somehow fail to manage; it is true of illustrated books for younger readers as well.

To give a recent example, *Eat Your Peas* by Kes Gray and Nick Sharratt (2006) presents the familiar situation evoked by the title. The resolution of the story, however, involves the mother's having to admit to her pea-detesting daughter that she herself cannot eat broccoli. The irony of this resolution tempers the subjectivity of the child and blurs the boundary between parent and child. This irony is the familiar demythologizing agent of modernity.

No such irony could be found in a random sampling of Thai picture books for children;<sup>4</sup> most stories are clearly meant to teach a lesson, whether the lesson be a serious one with punishment for its infringement specified, or a cheerful one celebrating the special gifts of each child. *Ruabin malangpore* (Seesuwana and Chumpare, 2004) [Dragon Flies] tells the story of boys torturing insects and how they are punished for their lack of compassion. Adult relatives in the story are the agents who bring the boys round to an understanding of the immorality of distorting weaker forms of life.

In *Nong o gab loogpad* (Nimmanakiat and Suksamang, 2006) [Baby O and the Glass Beads] a young boy is envious of his grandmother's skill in making handbags with glass beads. He tries to imitate her, only to find that he lacks the talent for it. His grandmother points out to him that he has talent as an illustrator, and encourages him to make designs for her bags. The story emphasizes cooperative creativity as well as the idea that each person's talent is unique.

Much the same lesson is taught in *Nangfa jed see* (Nimnuar and Boonphung, 2003) [Seven Angels]. A special event is announced for the anniversary of a nursery school. Seven angels will attend the event and give their individual blessing to each child. The pageant starts, and each angel comes forth with gifts such as health, beauty, wisdom, or thoughtfulness. But the last angel, the Purple Angel, has no such gift to give—or so she believes, in a crisis of self-confidence. One of the other angels has to remind her that she possesses the gift of happiness. When she claims she has no knowledge of how to bestow it, she is told that standing in front of the children will be enough to draw the gift out of her and upon them. Once again the emphasis is upon the gift that each person possesses and upon the creativity that can emerge from cooperation and listening to others.

In these works the subjectivity of the child is clearly defined and sharply delimited by the Thai community. None of the books sampled had a child as first-person narrator, as in Rodman and Spiegel's First Grade Stinks (2006), in which the resolution comes from the experience of the child as opposed to coming from the benevolent authority of the community of adults. In a sense, the subjectivity of the child evident in these picture books as well as in longer pieces of Thai children's literature such as Kampon Boontawee's A Child of the Northeast (1988) or Jane Vejjajiva's The Happiness of Kati (2006), is represented as one part of the larger subjectivity of the community, somewhat like the pre-modern subjectivity of medieval Europe.

In the remainder of this paper I would like to compare these longer works of Thai children's literature with Rowling's first Harry Potter and Townsend's Adrian Mole. I will use the definition of irony and the ironist developed by Richard Rorty in his Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (1989), and propose that the British works invite readers to become ironists, in Rorty's sense, while the Thai works celebrate the interdependency of individual members in working for the continuation of the community.

Rorty describes the "ironist" as a person who doubts the ultimate validity of the "final vocabulary" which he/she has acquired by growing up in a certain locality where values are quite fixed. The ironist suspects that there are other vocabularies equally as valid as the one he/she acquired in the process of growing up. Rorty helps us to understand the ironist by describing the opposite number:

The opposite of irony is common sense. For that is the watchword of those who unselfconsciously describe everything important in terms of the final vocabulary to which they and those around them are habituated. To be commonsensical is to take for granted the statements formulated in that final vocabulary suffice to describe and judge the beliefs, actions, and lives of those who employ alternative final vocabularies. (74)

The Dursleys, Rowling's quintessential possessors of common sense, are unwavering in their faith in their "final vocabulary." The very first sentence of Rowling's first Harry Potter establishes this fact: "Mr and Mrs Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say they were perfectly normal, thank you very much (8)." They spurn the Potters because the Potters possess quite a different vocabulary, and the Dursleys cannot accept any challenge to the validity of their own. This is an attitude prevalent among the sheep-like creatures living under the constraints of modernity, the people Rowling dubs "Muggles." The Muggles cannot be ironists, for under the conditions Rorty lays down for ironists, two points are crucial: the ironist should have "radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses," nor does she "think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others" (73).

This brings us back to the Reptile House in the zoo, where Harry and the boa constrictor are gazing at each other, both conscious of the cage in which they have been raised, both about to break out of that cage and acquire a different vocabulary. Harry thinks he hears, "Brazil, here I come . . .

thanksss amigo" (26) as the snake slithers past. Harry and the snake are ironists in the sense that they already doubt the final vocabulary of those around them; like Rorty's ironist they worry

That the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind of human being.

But she cannot give a criterion of wrongness. (75)

Harry will soon have a new vocabulary as well as the old one. Wizards possess at least two vocabularies, while Muggles restrict themselves to one.

Townsend's *Adrian Mole* also possesses a double vocabulary. The entries in his diary are often marked not only by the date, but also by a religious holiday which Adrian himself hardly understands. These "mythic markers" from a more stable age serve as a kind of ironic punctuation for the daily failure of his parents to focus upon him or put together their own lives. Adrian uses his own robust sense of humor to distance himself from the stereotypical sentimentality that is sometimes directed his way, thus displaying his ability, as an ironist, to doubt the vocabulary of sentimentality.

The day after an entry marked "FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT. MOTHERING SUNDAY" Adrian's mother declares she is leaving Adrian and his father to go and live with her boyfriend, Mr. Lucas. A fight breaks out in the garden between the two men. Adrian's report of it and the neighbors watching in the street confirm his identity as an ironist:

When my mother disclosed that she was leaving for Sheffield with Mr. Lucas my father became uncivilized and started fighting. Mr. Lucas ran into the garden but my father rugby-tackled him by the laurel book and the fight broke out again. It was quite exciting really. I had a good view from my bedroom window. Mrs. O'Leary said, "'Tis the child I feel sorry for," and all the people looked up and saw me, so I looked especially sad. (67)

There is a movement, both in *Harry* and *Adrian*, away from autonomous subjectivity and towards inter-subjectivity within the community. Mr. Dursley is presented as the failure of the autonomous self under the constraints of modernity; he is in charge of a company that produces drills, and he sits in his office "with his back to the window" so that he doesn't notice what is going on outside. His main activity at work seems to consist of shouting and yelling at people (8-9). The world of wizards, as represented by Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall, is a more interdependent organization.

Adrian's subjectivity is characterized more by inter-relation than by a quest for autonomy. Adrian moves in a world studded with failed institutions and failing adults, but his own life amidst this rubble is very social. The only model of autonomous adulthood around Adrian is the father of his best friend, Nigel; Adrian's description of his success has a mocking tone somewhat less stringent than the one directed at Mr. Dursley in Rowling's work:

Nigel's father has always worked like a slave to create a modern environment for his family. Perhaps if my father had built a formica cocktail bar in the corner of our lounge my mother would still be living with us. But oh no. My father actually boasts about our hundred-year-old furniture.

(77)

In reflecting upon how any given society might provide an “ironist education,” Rorty muses, “I cannot imagine a culture which socialized its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization. Irony seems inherently a private matter” (87). And yet these books for young people make precisely such an educational gesture; in the case of *Harry Potter* by showing that the final vocabulary of modernity is not the only, and certainly not the most interesting vocabulary, and in the case of *Adrian Mole* by beginning with the premise that social institutions have failed and by pointing the way to the importance of intersubjectivity. Both books take the road not travelled in Western philosophy — according to Rorty’s reading of Habermas — as philosophers stuck “to a philosophy of ‘subjectivity’ — of self-reflection — rather than attempting to develop a philosophy of intersubjective communication” (83).

Kampon Boontawee’s *A Child of the Northeast* (1986) was published twenty years before Jane Vejajiva’s *The Happiness of Kati* (2006). The earlier novel is an autobiographical sketch of Boontawee’s childhood in Esan, the poorest area of Thailand, while the more recent work has as its protagonist a girl from a rather wealthy urban family. Despite these differences, the works share a freedom from irony. The subjectivity of the two children whose lives are described is not qualified by irony, not changed by a knowledge that things are not as they should be.

In fact, things are hardly as they should be in either work. Esan’s enduring poverty is due in great part to the aridity of the land. Much of Boontawee’s story of the boy Koon’s growing up is spent waiting for rain that never comes. In a pre-school interview with the monk Luang Paw, Koon is taken aback by the monk’s questions, “Who do you love?” and “Who do you hate?” Koon looks out the window at the eternally blue sky and declares, “I hate the sky sir . . . The sky. It never gives us any rain. It only gives dryness” (106).

Koon is punished for his answer, but this incident serves as a symbol of Koon’s gradual understanding of and acceptance of life in Esan. The story ends with family and villagers gathered round to celebrate the birth of twins to Koon’s cousin. Two songs are sung: one boy sings a song praising the Constitution, and then Koon sings a song he has just learned, “Knowledge is a fine possession, valued far and valued wide . . .” (476).

This knowledge is not the knowledge that the vocabulary of one’s community is not the only vocabulary; this is not the knowledge that propels the ironist to seek ever-changing vocabularies. This is a pre-modern knowledge of participation in the cyclical processes of nature, a spurning of one’s own subjectivity for the larger subjectivity of the community that has survived and will go on surviving; with tears in his eyes Koon remembers the monk’s words: “Koon, the sky never punished anyone . . . You must never blame the sky . . .” (476).

The conclusion of the story follows this memory. Koon discovers an intersubjectivity with those who have gone before him on this arid land:

He knew, then, that there would be other years when the sun would blaze in a cloudless sky, and when the rain would not fall; other years when the earth would crack, and rice grow low in the silos.

He knew, too that he would meet those years, and he would survive, because he was a child of the Northeast. He had descended from a thousand ancestors who had met such years, and survived, and who had never blamed the sky. (476-477)

Vejjajiva's The Happiness of Kati contains the same celebration of a cycle of life which is unchanging. The story opens with Kati listening to the sound of her grandmother's spatula hitting the pan as she cooks, a noise that wakes Kati every morning. Kati lives with her grandparents in a house that is described as being by the water. Her grandparents dote on Kati; her life would be perfectly happy except for a note of sadness, a note that is gradually introduced into the book: Kati's mother is not with her, and Kati would like to see her.

Part One finishes with the question, "Kati, my dear, do you want to go see your mummy?" (30), and Part Two focuses on Kati's reunion with her mother. Kati's mother suffers from an incurable disease which is slowly wasting her body. Much earlier, when the disease had just begun its wasting process, Kati's mother had discovered how dangerous it was for her to try to take care of Kati by herself. Once, caught in a storm, the mother had tried to get herself and Kati back into the boat she had rowed them in, but her body would not cooperate and the boat moved out onto the water with only the precious cargo of Kati.

Kati was rescued by the appearance of a friend, but since that time Kati's mother had lived apart from her daughter, believing herself to be a liability for the child. In Part Two it is the brevity of her remaining time that brings Kati and her mother together again. The community of adults around Kati fret over how to present the illness and the upcoming meeting to Kati. They let her decide for herself whether she will see her mother or not.

While Kati's brief reunion with her mother is ecstatic, it is not primarily to this period that The Happiness of Kati refers. The book ends with Kati back in her grandparents' familiar home, and in the last chapter the reader discovers something about another choice of Kati's: she has not mailed a letter penned by her mother to Kati's estranged father, a letter which might have led to Kati's meeting her father for the first time. Kati chooses the life she has always known, the cycle of mornings and evenings in the house by the water:

Kati bowed to the Buddha before she went to bed. Tomorrow morning she would have to wake early for school. Everything was the way it had always been. Nothing had changed. And tomorrow the clatter of Grandmother's spatula would wake Kati from her slumber to greet the world again. (113)

Despite the distance of two decades and a vastly different social class experience, A Child of the Northeast and The Happiness of Kati both share a subjugation of individual will, of subjectivity itself,



to a cycle of life which is perceived to be both good and inevitable. Unlike the Thai picture books discussed above, there is no overtly didactic morality in these works, but their theme has much in common with those short works: the good of the community and what is best for the self are one and the same.

Modernity, as discussed above, eliminates the gods and the sense of wonder as its most characteristic gesture. Is irony its child? Kierkegaard, that great student of irony, gives us these stimulating ideas on the subject:

Irony is the birth pangs of the objective mind (based on the misrelationship, discovered by the I, between existence and the idea of existence). Humor is the birthpangs of the absolute mind (based on the misrelationship, discovered by the I, between the I and the idea of the I. (1959: B, 19)

In the two longer Thai works just discussed, there *is* no misrelationship between existence and the idea of existence. The description given to us of Kati's thoughts as she looks at the stars might well be from the Book of Job: "The universe was so vast; what kind of power over it could puny little humans possibly have?" (104–105). Koon's resolve, quoted above, never to curse the sky for its lack of rain, also suggests a Job-like posture before the universe.

Harry and Adrian, on the other hand, are in the process of "the birth pangs of the objective mind." It is tempting to see Harry in terms of Rorty's "ironist," the person who is between vocabularies, rejecting the Dursleys' idea of existence and moving closer to an existence (and a vocabulary) which will not have the humiliation of others as one of its permanent features. Adrian, on the other hand, seems closer to Kierkegaard's definition of humor, as he demonstrates his knowledge of how distant he is from the stereotype those around him possess of the child.

## Note

- 1 I would like to thank two graduate students, Ryo Uchida and Sachiyo Oka, for their inspired discussion of this scene in Harry Potter.
- 2 See Marshall Berman's discussion of Weber's representation of modernity as an iron cage in Berman's All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity.
- 3 See David Goodman's The Return of the Gods: Japanese Drama and Culture in the 1960s.
- 4 chosen randomly from a large selection available at the Chulalongkorn University Bookstore. Translations provided by Chanavee Chaonong.

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