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History and Criticism of Children's Literature

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### Humanizing the Dragon

“A hideous roaring...filled the air with terror and seemed to shake the ground...a cloud of smothering smoke and burning sulfur poured from his throat...eyes flaming with rage... he leaped to greet his newest victim.” (Hodges 15) This frightful dragon from *Saint George and the Dragon* retold by Margaret Hodges, is a stark contrast to Toothless, a dragon from *How to Twist a Dragon's Tale*, book 5, from the *How to Train Your Dragon* series by Cressida Cowell. Early on we meet Hiccup the Viking's personal dragon who “scurries up his shirt, his little claws tickling Hiccup's tummy, ... onto Hiccup's head...a bright little green Common-or Garden dragon...perch(ed) on Hiccup's helmet, spreading his wings and hooting in short, excitable bursts... (Cowell 8) Here we see two contrasting examples of how the dragon is portrayed in children's stories. First, we meet a *nameless* dragon who induces immediate terror and whose only satisfying fate is death, and then a *named* dragon reminiscent of a childhood pet and a personal ally. The traditional symbol of the dragon representing the dark aspects of human nature has changed remarkably in the last 120 years into a symbol with a motley of characterizations. The dragon can be a symbol of something profoundly immoral or wicked, but more importantly, can be a symbol of the wildness within us, the unpredictable, creative, ever changing inner landscape. It is important to trace the development of this symbol in children's literature in order

to show how dragons in stories can help children understand and come to terms with their own wild aspects. In the following text I will demonstrate how the dragon symbol shift from foe towards friend clues us into ideological frameworks guiding humans through time, and how a growing humanization of the dragon points to a jump in awareness regarding the connection between the inner and outer worlds of the self. The dragon as a symbol varies in form and substance across cultures and time periods and is a subject worthy of numerous angles of study. However, for the scope of this paper the symbol of the dragon is focused on the Western European historical perspective in folklore and myths, up to modern-day British and American literature with a focus on children's literature. I will begin with a historical roadmap featuring influential dragon tales which have shaped the modern dragon, and end with the present-day dragon of the picture book. I will then demonstrate how the ancient and modern approach to the dragon is inextricably tied to the evolving relationship with the self.

The modern two-winged, four-legged dragon with flying and fire-breathing capabilities did not always exist. Its birth began with the serpent. The first recorded serpent-dragon in European literature comes from the Greek legend of Cadmus, the first king of the city Thebes, by the ambiguous author, Homer, in about the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE over 2,500 years ago. Homer recites how Cadmus' guards were killed by a serpent when he sent them to a valley spring to collect water. Cadmus then goes to the spring himself where he confronts and slays the serpent. (Homer) Serpents in varying forms make a cameo appearance throughout Greek myths. To name a few, there is Python, the half-man, half-serpent; Hydra, the many headed water-snake Heracles defeated; and the horrid sea-serpent Perseus kills to save Andromeda. (Ingersoll 80) Following behind the Greek myths, we read of the heroic feats of Beowulf, from an Anglo-Saxon epic poem authored sometime between the 8<sup>th</sup> and early 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, depicting a terrifying,

fire-breathing dragon which Beowulf slays, but not before being mortally wounded. Beowulf's dragon "...sounded the clapping of mighty wings..." giving us a winged dragon. (Sutcliff 96) Additionally, The Saga of the Volsunga in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, has its share of serpent-dragons including Fafnir who was a cursed being turned into a dragon. He breathed poisonous fire and was eventually killed by the hero, Sigurd. (Byock)

The Arthurian legends, popular in Wales from sometime in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, further inform our historical serpent journey. One such story is of Efflam, the son of an Irish king, who slays a dragon along with the help of Arthur. From these legends we also hear of Merlin, the wizard, who watches as red and white serpent-dragons battle each other in the water under Uther Pendragon's tower until the red serpent is killed and the white serpent escapes into the depths of the earth never to be seen again. (Ingersoll 99-101)

The Irish and Celtic regions told dragon stories often associated with water, such as the Lochness monster which lives on today in regional folklore. One famous myth to Ireland tells of Cuchulain, the hero, who tears out the heart of a serpent who is half-woman, half-snake. (Ingersoll 97) *The Faerie Queen*, an epic English poem from 1590 by Edmund Spenser, weaves a dragon like Cuchulain's. Also from the same region, in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, comes the tale of Tristan and Iseult set in Ireland where a terrible dragon who lives in a mountain cave threatens and terrorizes the surrounding land. Tristan fights the dragon in a long and gruesome battle which ends with Tristan taking the dragon's tongue to Iseult and her mother as proof of his good deed. As you can see up to this point the serpent-dragon is portrayed as a beast without any redeeming qualities. It is interesting to note how some of the serpents we have heard of so far are

half human. These tales illustrate a human who is lost to its beastly lower nature and therefore only deserving of death. (Ingersoll 97)

We cannot speak of dragons without mentioning the serpent of the *Old Testament* from *The Book of Genesis* who tempts Eve into eating an apple from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. (King James Bible, Genesis 3:2) Even though biblical *Old Testament* legends arise out of the middle east, their impact on Western Europeans through the rise of Christianity is substantial. It must be noted that the serpent of *The Bible* is cognitive. Interestingly, over time the serpent as tempter morphs into the devil as a figure with horns, hooves, scales, and to be associated with the color red: a conglomeration of dragon qualities. (Ingersoll 91) Furthermore, from the 11<sup>th</sup> century order of Teutonic knights with Catholic ties that still exists today, comes the “very old and primitive Teutonic tale of the dragons of the Underworld which come flying toward...the dead, trying to obstruct their advance when on their way to the realm of a blissful eternity.” (Ingersoll 94) In this tale we begin to see how the biblical serpent blends with the flying dragon. We also see how the symbol of the dragon is represented as that which hinders spiritual advancement in the human.

*The Golden Legend*, a book of hagiographies by Jacobus de Voragine from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, gives us the first written account of *Saint George and the Dragon*. It should be said here that hagiographic stories were considered factual and furthered ideologies of the time about sin, evil and the devil, and more specifically, that children were “special gifts from God but are infected with original sin” (Coats 17). Before arriving in the Latin text, the story of *Saint George and the Dragon* had morphed for centuries. A common version still read today was printed in 1984 in America written by Margaret Hodges and artistically rendered by renowned illustrator

Trina Schart Hyman. Hodges' version combines the original story from *The Golden Legend* with elements from Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*. Hodges' retelling depicts a dreadful dragon who terrorized the people of a fairytale kingdom in England. The dragon is finally slain by a Red Cross Knight named George, who then marries the princess with approval from the king. The legend of *Saint George and the Dragon* is alive even today in England. Saint George was made the patron saint of England in 1350, about 100 years after the hagiographic version emerged, and to this day is celebrated on April 23, which is known as Saint George's Day or the Feast of Saint George.

For centuries following Saint George's story, little changed in dragon lore. However, after hundreds of years of the dragon being accepted as a symbol only of evil and darkness, there were a few attempts close to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to change the dragon. In a drastic shift, *The Reluctant Dragon* by Kenneth Grahame from England in 1898 was published and tells of a boy who befriends a dragon by reading poetry to the creature. Saint George is called by the townspeople to slay the dragon, but eventually the boy gets them to accept the dragon and leave it in peace. In *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth first published in 1798, he says "Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge" (302). To read poetry to a dragon is an effort to draw forth and connect through what separates humans from animals: self-knowledge. Following at its heels is *The Book of Dragons* by E. Nesbit, also from England, in 1899. This, too, tells of a princess who decides to befriend a dragon rather than slay him. Suddenly, dragons are intelligent creatures to befriend instead of behead. We see the similar, yet reversed roles, with the cognitive, communicative serpent of the Bible encouraging Eve to taste the sweetness of the apple, or self-knowledge, thus lifting the veil of innocence, awakening the concept of contrast and a wilderness of possibilities. For over a thousand years the western European dragon was a symbol

of a destructive, dark, deadly monster. The signs of a shift happening occur when a few British authors write stories casting doubt upon the evil nature of Saint George's dragon.

Looking at what was going on historically outside of literature, the Age of Enlightenment was afoot in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries heralding new thought in every area of study. Noteworthy is how Sigmund Freud created the field of psychoanalysis at the turn of century around the time our dragon began to change. Closely followed was Carl Jung's profound contribution to our understanding of dreams, symbolism and the complex inner workings of emotion. Jung coined the term "the Self", therefore recognizing an inner personal experience. Suddenly, Europe and America were introduced to a new approach. No longer were dragons only to be killed or relegated to the dungeon. Perhaps, as these early psychoanalysts alluded, the inner self was meant to be explored and understood in a new way. Ursula Le Guin once wrote "Dragons are one of the truths about us...People who deny the existence of dragons are often eaten by dragons. From within." (Le Guin, "The Wave" 261) A growing recognition that aspects of the human once thought to be only worthy of shame and damnation now in fact needed to be understood as a vehicle for human progression. A new humanization toward dragon aspects of the human being was occurring. As these new theories of emotional literacy flowed out into the populace, writers were changing their ideologies alongside everyone else giving us complex, aware dragons.

Almost 40 years later we encounter the well-known story written by J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, published in 1937. Tolkien's dragon steps back towards the earlier dragons with Smaug, an evil yet highly intelligent dragon. The fact that the dragon has cognition, and the ability to reason and communicate with language, gives it the human quality of self-awareness. The shifting symbology of the dragon occurred in scattered stories after Tolkien's Smaug, showing

increasing compassion for dragons themselves and a deepened wisdom within the dragon psyche. For instance, the story *My Father's Dragon* from 1945 tells of a young boy who runs away to rescue a baby dragon, showing us an infant, and therefore vulnerable dragon, for the first time. We go on to see Ursula Le Guin's popular series, *Tales From Earthsea* first published in 1968, depicting neither good nor evil dragons, but ancient and extremely wise dragons who are the oldest creatures in the world. Le Guin's popularity is a precursor for what is to come. An exponential crescendo grew from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and climaxed with an inundation of dragon stories seen today with titles like *Me and My Dragon*, *Ellie and Her Emotional Dragons*, and *Raising Dragons*.

Today we see a massive market flurry of dragon themed stories and unceasing popularity. To better understand the dragon of today, I took a random sample of thirty children's picture books from my local library's shelves and documented my findings in Appendix A. The publication years are between 1971 and 2020. Each book is categorized in three ways. The first category lists whether the dragon is conveyed to the reader as evil, neutral or good at the beginning of the story and at the end. The second category shows whether the dragon's relationship with the protagonist is as friend, neutral, or foe, also both at the beginning and the end of the book. The third category lists the tone of the book as light, medium or serious. For the first category, the beginning of the books demonstrate thirteen good dragons, three neutral and fifteen evil dragons and at the end, twenty-four good dragons, two neutral and five evil dragons, showing a significant shift towards the resolution of evil. The second category displays twelve friend relationships, three neutral and sixteen foe relationships at the beginning of the books while by the end we have twenty-four friend relationships, two neutral and five foe relationships. The tone meter shows fifteen light books, thirteen medium and just two serious books. As you

can see, twenty-four out of thirty books depict a good, friend-worthy dragon at the end of the story and carry a light to medium story tone. It must be noted that this sample excludes books about dragons for middle grade and YA literature.

The dragons depicted in these thirty picture books are so varied it is difficult to find a singular definition or theme of the modern dragon other than a definite swing towards good and friendly, versus beastly and evil. This sample of stories is varied in every way imaginable from a household of pet dragons who resemble dogs or cats and go flying during the day, to exploring the love dragons have for tacos, to dragons who help the child reader understand “stranger danger”. Out of the thirty stories which do carry more of a traditional dragon narrative, they almost always depict characters who befriend the dragon. The dragon is shown as being worthy of understanding and friendship, and in the few instances of evil, outsmarted and driven away. The only children’s story out of the sample where a dragon is killed is notably written by the same author who illustrated the 1984 version of *Saint George and the Dragon*, Trina Schart Hyman, and is called *The Serpent Slayer*. *The Serpent Slayer* is also the only story depicting the older serpent form of the dragon. What many of these stories have in common is that the dragon is shown as a humanized creature significantly altered from its original evil serpent origins.

When attempting to translate the modern dragon into a symbol with one meaning, the dragon becomes even more difficult to define. In *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols*, J.C. Cooper states “Symbolism is an instrument of knowledge and the most ancient and fundamental method of expression, one which reveals aspects of reality which escape other modes of expression.” (7) Cooper goes on to say a symbol can only be understood within the context of a religious, social or cultural background, and that symbols and their significance “can



be inclusive and expansive, and there may be many and diverse applications of the same symbol which can become ambivalent or polyvalent with subsidiary connections.” (8) Our modern dragon has certainly changed and expanded. With globalization, and the subsequent cultural and religious diversity, what a dragon means in story today depends on the story itself and how the author, with their individual identity, background and ideologies has chosen to depict the dragon.

To further understand the modern approach to dragons we turn to Jungian analyst, Dennis McCarthy, who has worked with children for thirty years using play therapy. McCarthy records in the book *If You Turned Into a Monster: Transformation Through Play*, that for children observed in his practice,

“The dragon is again a symbol of necessary revolution and the birth of a new order. It is also a vibrant symbol of wholeness. ...it symbolizes the entire process of working therapeutically with children. It arises when the child begins to reconnect with his or her deeper self. The child uses it to infuse the self with aliveness and to proclaim this life force. Children stand in awe of the symbol even though they themselves have created it. The dragon is fantastic and terrifying, wonderful and hideous, familiar and mysterious, very much like life itself.” (McCarthy 136)

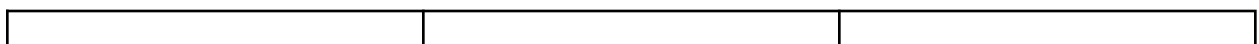
McCarthy is suggesting the dragon shows up in play when the child finally enters their personal emotional landscape and reconnects with themselves. He further proves the point with case studies of children who create both frightening and friendly dragons depending on what they are currently working through emotionally in their lives. All types of dragons show up in his practice informing us that every dragon is important as a representative of a multitude of aspects of the self, both “wonderful and hideous”. (McCarthy 129-135) The dragon as a symbol is vital

for a child who is processing emotionally charged experiences and upon the resolve of those experiences, leads to a sense of wholeness.

After the advent of psychoanalysis, people had new tools to openly explore the emotional inner landscape. Human emotion researcher Brene Brown in *Braving the Wilderness* describes the inner emotional landscape as, “a wilderness: an untamed, unpredictable place of solitude and searching. It is a place as dangerous as it is breathtaking, a place as sought after as it is feared. The wilderness can often feel unholy...” (76) The dragon was considered the most unholy, vile creature before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Brown is suggesting a wilderness exists within the psyche that is meant to be explored, not ignored; and that which is found within the wilderness can bring great personal freedom when explored and understood in all its seemingly terrifying, bewildering wildness. Brown says that engaging in the process of self-discovery is how we learn about ourselves and uncover personal wisdom. She goes on further to say, “...it’s about becoming the wilderness. It’s about breaking down the walls, abandoning our ideological bunkers...” (77) What Brown is suggesting is that true emotional freedom takes entering the inner wilderness, confronting and befriending the dragons we may find, and making them a part of ourselves. We see this exploration reflected in modern dragon stories through a multitude of dragon types. The dragon signifies we have entered the wilderness. The variations of dragons tell us what aspect of ourselves we are actively exploring.

It makes perfect sense that children’s stories would also mirror the profundity of this psychological change. After all, what are stories but the mirror of current ideologies? Children’s stories that feature dragons are simply communicating the many ways in which the human psyche is evolving towards increasing self-awareness. Furthermore, the dragon’s current popularity points to a human thirst for guidance on *how* to enter the wilderness within. For

children, there now exists within literature a wide range of possible approaches to their own wildness. The frequent use of the dragon in children's stories symbolizes that as humanity, we have courageously entered the wilderness. May we learn and grow from the many dragons living there.



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