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A Clash of Chronotopes: Adult reading of Children's and Young Adult Literature

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Abstract: In this paper we explore ways in which adults engage children's and young adult books in primary and secondary schools in relation to Bakhtin's (1981) posited chronotope. We base our discussion on an analysis of experienced practising teachers' own engagement with books that are offered to children and young adults as part of teachers' didactic activities in developing literacy skills and literature appreciation in classrooms, drawing on the concept of the chronotope as going beyond the didactic to embrace the artistic and cultural in children's responses to their reading and writing. The suggestive possibilities of the chronotope as an organising feature of teaching reading and writing in a number of genres and production of text types, affords new ways of approaching reading by teachers, at the same time as it invites these teachers to examine their own responses to the literature that they engage in the process. The concept of the chronotope opens up spaces for literary and pedagogical responses that derive from children's own experience of their world, but we argue that teacher responses that are restricted by their own views of the world may inhibit a full exploration by children of the possibilities that the books that they encounter as didactically bound and culturally limiting.

Keywords: Chronotope, Children's and Young Adult Literature, Reader Response

The Chronotope

E DUCATORS HAVE IMPORTANT decisions to make in relation to what is offered to children and young adults in the way of the books to be engaged in the pursuit not only of literacy but also of a taste for literature in their classrooms. The chronotope is a useful conceptual tool that enables teachers to frame not only what is presented to the children but also the questions that will arise from their engagement with texts. It is a tool that has the potential to help inform classroom teaching practices, practices which are based on pedagogical concerns for all teachers of English in that part that has been designated as Literacy or Literature or Reading.

Literally 'time space' (Bakhtin, [1937-1938] 1981) the chronotope is 'the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature' (p. 84). As part of his explorations of the possibilities suggested by his posited chronotope, Bakhtin provides the literary artistic chronotope where spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole; where 'time thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible' and space 'becomes charged and responsive to movements of time, plot, and history' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84). Space, depending on the chronotope, may be distant and fantasy-filled in foreign lands and/or extra-terrestrial spheres. It may be filled with concrete, real people and events negotiating lived experience of day-to-day household

goods and matters, speaking the language of the everyday or in pronouncements of higher order beings with special powers. The fantasy chronotope, such as we see in *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1974), fills its space with that which is distinctly not the everyday.

These are generic attributes evident when applied to close scrutinies of epic novels, of romance novels, of historic novels, of parodies, and so on. Particular types of time and space (say in the epic where there is the beginning and end time points, but no matter what goes on between these points, there is little bearing on the character[s] involved, for they do not even age throughout the trials of their epics) have long served as models for children's books and stories. As Nikolajeva (1996) suggests, the chronotope takes a step beyond the concept of genre, with a more specific discernment of text types. Chronotopes as framing children's and young adult literature, throws them up for consideration as becoming more and more complicated as texts in this genre develop from relatively simple structures based on epic story models (that provide ample scope for didactic approaches by adults) to complex personal and social interrelationships (that provide enormous scope for young people to explore their world and thereby gain some meaning as to their experience of it) (p. 151).

Anecdotally Speaking

According to Johnstone (2001) the chronotope as the organising centre for the fundamental narrative events of the novel (p. 407) provides a tool to use in opening up educators' and young people's opportunities for enriched engagement in explorations of text types and of characterisations in ways which may expand horizons of literature and what it means for the reader in relation to enjoyment, appreciation, and pure reading pleasure. Developments in recent years suggest that particular types of time and space connections have seen the emergence of a particular chronotope, that of the children's and young adult literature chronotope.

In our work as academics conducting classes with pre-service teachers (PSTs), that is, undergraduates, and practising teachers, that is, as graduate students, we have over the years encountered particular positions taken by those who would undertake the education of young people to produce literature and culturally engaged lifelong readers. A series of anecdotes of our experience with such teachers or potential teachers has led us to explore a number of features of what we have called *the teacher chronotope* emerging from teacher engagement with children's and young adult literature.

We have encountered stories of adults approaching children's literature as Freudian manifestations of an incipient children's sexuality, such as the case of one teacher examining Little Red Riding Hood as a metaphor for the onset of menstruation. Another story of a teacher has the class filling in a questionnaire on their own early sexual experiences on which to base their studies of children's books. We have a number of such stories, and we have drawn on van Manen's (1989) argument on the value of anecdotes: 'It is worth noting that in everyday life the anecdote is probably the most common device by which people talk about their experiences [which] allows the person to reflect in a concrete way on experience and thus appropriate that experience' (p. 232). It is this sort of activity that helped to inform the initial stages of the case study of teacher chronotopes that we are in the process of conducting. As van Manen argues, 'To anecdote is to reflect, to think' (p. 232). As we discussed the issues that had come to the fore in the course of our operations, we were telling each other stories of individual students at our universities, and while we had dealt with these on

the individual bases they obviously have needed, we were able to identify emerging patterns. It had become apparent to us that it was wrong to assume that our under- and graduate students had embarked upon a Literacy, Literature or Reading education program purely as a means of credentialing themselves.

This led us to a systematic enquiry into a group of students in the USA that would exemplify issues that had emerged in our own students' engagement with the possibilities that teaching children's literature suggest. In this paper, we argue that this teacher chronotope has the potential to influence children's engagement with books specifically designed for them, and forming part of a children's literature chronotope, to the extent that children are not provided with opportunities to engage their own chronotopes. In the course of our investigation, we have found that they are dictated by teachers, especially at the primary level, where the teachers' chronotope is determined by their personal beliefs rather than deriving from professionally informed pedagogical decisions. In this case study, the dominance of teachers' own religious convictions over considerations of pedagogy have been most salient, especially as these same teachers then defend their decision using constitutional law providing defence for freedom of speech in the First Amendment. Situating our case study in an historical context framed by the concept of the chronotope, we have examined a number of possible chronotopes to explore the ramifications of the case study that we are conducting.

The Child within an Historical Chronotope

While we see for ourselves the stages of physical development in maturing children, social constructs of childhood and adolescence are relatively recent ones (Larson, 2002), the construct of the 'teenager' and not just the adolescent or the youth having 'emerged during the 1970s as a distinct cultural category' (Watkins & Sutherland, 1995). No longer considered a miniature adults waiting to grow into the more mature versions of increasing age, childhood and adolescence are socially constructed and particular stages of development to be addressed by adults charged with the care and nurturing of the young of any society. It is worth considering just what this word, 'child' means. One scholar (Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994) has gone so far as to pronounce that the child does not exist, that what we see as that little creature in our homes and classrooms, while it is no doubt a living, breathing human being, is only a child insofar as our society has determined its characteristics, its properties, its configurations, if you like, as being non-adult.

This 'child' is a social construct, not a naturally occurring thing. Human offspring is natural, but a child is a socially constructed thing, constructed from certain ideas, beliefs, values, knowledge, assumptions and even economics. There has been a number of social constructs of the 'child', and of childhood. A strong feature of Christian beliefs is that of Original Sin—the notion that all babies are born with a sin that cannot be removed from their souls without religious intervention of some kind, such as Baptism. This is a ritual and symbolic cleansing of the Sin, but its residual effects means that the baby will be prone to continual sinning throughout the rest of their life without continual intervention, usually religious or spiritual. Part of the deal is that without the intervention, the punishment is eternal damnation—Hell for all eternity.

The parent now has a construct of an habitual sinner who needs constant monitoring by adults to ensure that the child does not commit those sins that will lead it to Hell. They have a grave responsibility on their hands, and will focus on teaching the child the ways of right-

eousness and avoidance of sin in the manner of their culture. When taking that child into literacy and literature, it will be with a view to spiritual benefits and any pleasure from books will be a by-product of that reading for goodness and a path to Heaven after death.

Puritan religious dominance provides the construct of a child as being born evil, and having to 'learn how to die' (Hunt, 1991; Kinnell, 1995) with the benefit of 'plain, holy books' as a result of the parents' attitude to education as a 'sacred trust' (Kinnell, 1995, p. 26). Another dimension of this social construct is worth considering. From earliest times, infant mortality had been high, and it still is in Third World countries (and in indigenous communities within First World countries) and the idea of one's child dying was by no means a far-fetched one, unlike today where we have greater reason to assume that we adults will die before our children do. With the combination of mass poverty, widespread malnutrition, lack of sanitation and perfect conditions for infectious epidemics, death was very much a daily reality for child and adult alike. There is a touching story of a French village in mediæval times that has its children's bodies buried around the yards of houses, much in the same way as we would bury our loved domestic pets nowadays (Ariès, 1962). By 1750, much of this had been addressed, although there was still a long way to go. Inoculation against smallpox was introduced in 1721, and became widespread practice by 1726, although things like TB (the 'consumption' of Victorian novels) and influenza were still capable of wiping out whole sections of populations up until World War II, and the AIDs epidemic has similar catastrophic results for whole populations in the modern world. Nevertheless, more and more children started surviving to adulthood, and with the rise in children's populations spaces began to unfold where new constructs might emerge.

The wealthy, for example, needed an educated servant class to enhance the gentility of their existences in their Country and Town establishments, and servants had to be educated if they were to be at all suitable for such positions. Village schools started to open—the notorious Dame Schools of some of the novels of the often run by elderly and impoverished women, usually widows, who had themselves come down in the world and forced to support themselves in such ignominious ways. At the same time, larger surviving numbers of illiterate children of the lower classes threatened to grow up into ungodly adults who would constitute a dangerously large criminal class in the country towns and cities, and such a threat to the wealthy could not be ignored. Sunday Schools began to be established around the turn of the nineteenth century, again with a view to moral and spiritual wellbeing of the children. The children's and young adult literature of the time, even though it was intended for only those children who could read, usually the upper middle and aristocratic classes, shows a great deal of concern for inculcating good moral values and behaviours in children, as part of their preparation for a moral adulthood (Saxby, 1997).

With such changes come further developments in the social construction of the child. The constructs show signs of being contested, as the child characters in these books are often sickeningly sweet, such as the constant 'dear little thing' baby in books like Day's *Carl* books where the baby is portrayed as an adorable young child, as in *Carl's Afternoon in the Park* (Day, 1991). They are so pervasive in the literature that they become part of the alternative social construct. We have a number of impossible good heroes and heroines, and some of them are even angelic in their attributes. We start seeing angels as part of the tombstone depictions of children, and we start having these qualities attributed to children in real life.

We see developing views of natural innocence, originally made popular by the likes of *Émile* (Rousseau, 1762), a child who is represented as being born naturally good, only to be

corrupted by the adults around him (Ross, 2000). Nevertheless, the threat of the ungoverned and ungovernable child retains a strong hold on parents and educators, and the idea of ‘sparing the rod and spoiling the child’ is a very difficult one to shake loose, even up to our own times.

Given this history, we can see that even as schools and schooling for children are a relatively recent Western invention (Wood, 1996), based on socially constructed ideals, beliefs, values, and even fears, so are those of child and childhood. Their very existence is part of social constructions—of students and of teachers—in relation to rearing children to successful adulthood. Constructed in such ways, schools are places where the teachers, as adults, try consciously and deliberately in a number of ways to pass on their knowledge and culture, and children, as successful learners, try deliberately to learn, memorise and think in specially-constructed buildings away from and out of contact with the rest of adult social activity (Wood, 1996, p. 74). What may have happened in homes in didactic relationships with parents, minders, and perhaps masters and tutors employed by wealthy families has been largely marginalised as teachers have taken up the task.

We no longer have children only as our offspring growing to replace us as they mature and we age; we also have categories and sub-categories (young, older children, young adults and so on). Given this, when we make selections of books to offer them in the development of literacy, appreciation of literature, and acculturation that engagement with literature brings, we consider the subdivisions accorded our young people and these guide our selections: the genre, the age group, and popular tastes and interests in relation to both of these.

Publishing houses have responded to needs for suitable literature for the various groups of young people, going so far as to create needs that had never existed before. The very numbers of books being produced for these young people means that a vast range and variety of material is available for selection by educators, with 5,000 new titles in the United Kingdom being produced each year (Hunt, 1991), the United States with a similar number, and Australia producing up to 4,000 and more (Clarke, 1997). Add the ‘explosion’ (Johnston, 2001a) of picture books, another late 20th century phenomenon, and we have around 100,000 titles from more than 1,000 publishers before us (Clarke, 1997, p. 5). We have the expertise of others in the field to guide us in the selection (Morrow, 1994) and useful lists of titles in articles and books devoted to children’s and young adult literature (see for example the Index to Book Titles given in Saxby, 1997, pp. 433-460).

Children’s and Young Adult Literature Chronotope

Features of what may be considered the children’s and young adult literature chronotope are not new to readers of these works. On first encounter, it is almost as if a formula is applied. First of all, there is a place that belongs to the young people alone. This is contrived through accident, design, or unfortunate circumstances, such as in *Junie B. Jones and the Yucky Blucky Fruitcake* (Park, 1995) and *A girl called Boy* (Hurmence, 1982) (about a girl from the 20th century who falls back into the 1850s and comes to grips with her heritage) Other examples include the Madeline L’Engle series which begins with *A Wrinkle in Time* where children (young to teens) travel through time and space to save a child’s father, or the world itself are explications of this, and Harry Potter’s (Rowling, 1997) boarding school in a parallel time and space accessed by crashing through an invisible-to-ordinary-mortals barrier in a normal London train station to take the Hogwarts Express takes this a step further, but

the parallel time and space principle is part of the chronotope. The time of this chronotope is the period of change and development associated with maturation from some stage of childhood to some stage closer to adulthood. The space is that space remaining once adults are removed. There is an important point to be made in this regard of childness, as suggested by Hollindale, 1997, that particular feature of a life that is simply separate from that which is adult.

Looking at the share of children's and young adult literature titles worldwide, Nikolajeva (1996) points out that with very few exceptions, there is little to be found in common in children's and young adult literature in different countries (p. 43). Within these works, spaces open up to allow young people to explore and perhaps even to explode some of the myths about their childness. Not all young people all over the world experience the same sorts of phenomena attached to youth. It has become almost a truism that young people will experience the agony and the ecstasy of the forging of individual identities as part of an adulthood that presumes separation from the family unit, such as we may see in Cynthia Voigt's "Dicey" books (beginning with *Homecoming*) as well as Jerry Spinelli's *Maniac Magee*. Yet not all cultures require such separation from family with its associations of angst. It is really a part of a larger demographic development that has cut young people out of labour markets and extended their financial dependence on families while demanding higher levels of schooling and educational standards—extending their preparation for independent adulthood—that has given rise to such new sets of phenomena in young lives 'Gone is the concept of a single "natural" adolescence. The role of biology in shaping adolescent experience remains important, but current research identifies it as a contributor to individual differences than as a template for a universal pathway' (Larson, 2002, p. 2). Given this, the chronotope can be seen as what Bakhtin (1981) says is 'an optic for reading texts as X-rays of the culture system from which they spring' (p. 425).

The Teacher Chronotope

Another major contributor to the discussion of Bakhtin's chronotope is the role of the classroom teacher. As part of our investigations into the chronotope and its suggestive possibilities for classroom practice, we have embarked on a case study of a number of American teachers who use children's literature as part of their literacy programs in their classrooms. In the United States, recognized for its numerous court cases exploring the extent of freedom of expression by the classroom teacher juxtaposed against a more traditional function of public schools as institutions founded to 'socialize children and inculcate them with shared values, including support for democracy, the community, or other beliefs deemed acceptable by society' (Gee, 2009, p. 23), questions arise regarding how issues of religion can and should be addressed. *West Virginia State Board of Education vs. Barnett (1943)* protects students' right to exposure to a broad spectrum of ideas and viewpoints in the public school classroom. The balance struck between these roles by some U.S. teachers is to provide students with didactic instruction via the use of Judeo-Christian children's books, which they defend as the promotion of shared values, with little or no consideration given to those students of different religious, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Thus, the classroom teacher, through the selection of the chronotope presented to students, plays a pivotal role in shaping children's belief systems, setting up a potential clash between chronotopes found in texts that children self-select and those provided for them by societal members other than their teachers.

The Clash of Chronotopes

Chronotopes, Bakhtin (1981) suggests, are mutually inclusive in that they may interwoven with each other, replace each other, oppose each other, and even contradict each other. The involvement of the real people (not just the characters) in an artistic work—the author(s), the listener(s), the reader(s)—'may be (and often are) located in different time-spaces, sometimes separated from each other by centuries or great spatial distances...all located in a real, unitary, and as yet incomplete historical world' one which is not at all the same as the represented world in the text (p. 253). This real world cannot be chronotopically the same as that represented world. Yet that real world induces responses to the text as readers and/or listeners, more than passive receivers of any text, engage in more than one-way, multiple processes, allowing the emergence of at least two (the author's and the reader/listener) meanings. Such meanings are only created against a background of previous texts, and each engagement by each reader is part of a dynamic process of interactivity between the author's reality, the text's fictitious reality, and the reader's reality (Nikolajeva, 1996). What develops is multiple, probably contested meanings, perhaps most evident in literary works in general where the language displays a high index of dialogism (Webster, 1991) and the novel in particular, which 'exploits, celebrates, revels' in its scope for the interplaying of multiplicities of voices (Dentith, 1995). It may be seen as 'artistic transaction' (Bleich, 1989) between the people involved, where interpretive strategies are not natural and universal, but learned (Fish, 1989).

Negotiating the Clash

The implications of a children's and young adult literature chronotope, as a legitimate and identifiable descriptor of what frames what is produced for and read by young people, has the potential to help adults to derive meaning from young people's reading preferences and habits. Similarly adult literature chronotopes frame and underpin adult engagement with their literature that is for them satisfying, enlightening, stimulating, affirming, and necessary to feed the human need for narrative. To assume that this may be the same form of literature that young people may respond to in ways similar to those adults is to deny childness.

An education tradition of engaging in pedagogical dialogue enhances scope for dialogic learning through the interpenetration of points of view. Rather than debase the dialogue by overlaying discussions with teacher perceptive, it is possible to exploit the potential of the chronotope to enable young people and their teachers to find the voices that really have something to say. Through the chronotope and related concepts applied in our evaluations of children and young adult writers' works for young people, we may engage the young ones in a dialogic world open to us (Emerson, 1989), where meaning is linked to specific positioning with regard to truth for the individual personality of each reader/listener engaging a text. This is not the place for universals, nor even for specific teacher orientations, to clash with children's chronotopes to narrow the development of their world views.

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