

Twentieth-Century
Literary Criticism

TCLC 136

Volume 136

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 136

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 76-46132

ISBN 0-7876-7035-9
ISSN 0276-8178

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, "there is nothing comparable available." TCLC "is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own."

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey on an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of TCLC is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (CLC) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between CLC and TCLC.

Organization of the Book

A TCLC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by the Gale Group, including *TCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Brossard, Nicole. "Poetic Politics." In *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, edited by Charles Bernstein, 73-82. New York: Roof Books, 1990. Reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Vol. 127, edited by Janet Witlec, 3-8. Detroit: Gale, 2003.

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The Wind in the Willows

Kenneth Grahame

Scottish novelist, short story writer, and essayist.

The following entry presents criticism of Grahame's novel *The Wind in the Willows* (1908). For discussion of Grahame's complete career, see *TCLC*, Volume 64.

INTRODUCTION

Published in 1908, *The Wind in the Willows* is regarded as a classic children's novel. Originating from a series of bedtime stories Grahame told his son Alastair, the book chronicles the adventures of a group of plucky animals, led by the impulsive and childish Mr. Toad. *The Wind in the Willows* remains one of the most popular books for children in England and the United States and has been translated into several different languages. In addition, it has been adapted for film, television, and the stage many times and inspired several sequels written by different authors.

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Wind in the Willows focuses on the adventures of a group of four animal friends that exhibit human behavior: Mole, Badger, Rat, and Toad. Commentators note that the book consists of three narratives placed together: the adventures of Toad, the tale of the friendship of Rat and Mole, and the two lyrical chapters on nature entitled "The Piper at the Gates of Dawn" and "Wayfarers All." The story begins when Mole abandons the spring cleaning of his underground home to take a walk along the riverbank. He meets Rat, and the two become friends. Mole also becomes friends with Toad, the rich owner of Toad Hall. Toad convinces Rat and Mole to take a trip on his gypsy caravan, but during the ride they are forced off the road by a speeding automobile. Entranced, Toad abandons the caravan to follow the car. Rat and Mole return home. Later, Mole gets lost exploring the area across the river known as the Wild Wood. Rat rescues him, and the two find refuge in the safe and warm home of the Badger. Meanwhile, Toad has become obsessed with automobiles and has crashed several cars. Concerned about his young friend, Badger asks Rat and Mole to help him convince Toad to be



more responsible. Their appeal to him fails, and Toad is caught stealing a car and is sentenced to twenty years in jail. Toad escapes jail and has many adventures on his trip home. When he finally arrives back at Toad Hall, he finds it overrun with weasels, stoats, and ferrets from the Wild Wood. With the help of his friends, they are able to run the squatters out of the house and enjoy a celebratory banquet. The story ends with Toad resolving to reform.

MAJOR THEMES

Commentators have identified one of the major thematic concerns of *The Wind of Willows* as the journey; in the story, various characters feel the pull of wanderlust and the need to explore space outside of their home region. Yet most of these journeys result in danger and homesickness. Several critics perceive *The Wind in the*

Willows as nostalgic for a long-ago England, before industrialization began to alter the British landscape and customs. Grahame's antagonism toward industrialism has also been detected in Toad's dangerous obsession with automobiles. Toad's pretentiousness and foolishness is a ripe subject for Grahame's humor; therefore, the story is viewed as a comment on England's rigid class system. The beauty of the natural world is another dominant theme in *The Wind in the Willows*. Reviewers have examined the anthropomorphic nature of the characters: Toad, Rat, Mole, and Badger are archetypal character types who act like human beings.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critical response to *The Wind in the Willows* was mixed, but opinion eventually improved as a result of its surprising and enduring popularity with children. In fact, Theodore Roosevelt was disappointed by the novel at first, but when his children urged a second reading, he became a fan of *The Wind in the Willows*. Many critics praised the stylistic variation, slang-filled dialogue, and the repeated comic devices in the story. Commentators maintained that the foolishness and charismatic appeal of Mr. Toad, whose adventures are broken into short sequences, was effective for small children. Reviewers discussed the satire in the novel, particularly the mock-heroic epic section "The Return of Ulysses," which satirizes the Greek epic poem *The Odyssey*. They also commended Grahame's attention to detail and power of description, and considered the appeal of Grahame's novel as universal and timeless. *The Wind in the Willows* remains one of the most beloved children's books in the world.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Pagan Papers* (essays) 1893
- The Golden Age* (short stories) 1895
- Dream Days* (short stories) 1898
- The Headswoman* (short story) 1898
- The Wind in the Willows* (novel) 1908
- The Cambridge Book of Poetry for Children* [editor] (poetry) 1916; revised edition, 1932
- Fun o' the Fair* (essay) 1929
- The Reluctant Dragon* (fairy tale) 1938
- **First Whisper of 'The Wind in the Willows'* (short story and letters) 1944

*This collection includes the short story "Bertie's Escapade."

CRITICISM

Nicholas Tucker (essay date 1969)

SOURCE: Tucker, Nicholas. "The Children's Falstaff." In *Suitable for Children?: Controversies in Children's Literature*, edited by Nicholas Tucker, pp. 160-64. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.

[In the following essay, originally published in 1969, Tucker examines the continuing fascination children have with the character of Toad in *The Wind in the Willows*.]

Although *The Wind in the Willows* was written over sixty years ago, there are still no signs of its popularity waning with today's children and parents. It is now in its 105th edition, has a huge annual sale, and every Christmas A.A. Milne's adaptation *Toad of Toad Hall* is put on in the West End to full houses.

There are many enchanting things in this great work, but undoubtedly part of its continual fascination for children lies in the character and adventures of Toad. For Kenneth Grahame too, Toad was the first inspiration for the whole work. It is in letters to his son, Alastair, that we first hear stories about "this wicked animal", long before mention of the other riverbank characters. Although, of course, these early adventures of Toad were later absorbed into the main body of the book, they still stand virtually on their own in two of the main chapters, and certainly contain some of the funniest and most exciting episodes.

It says a great deal about children's reading tastes that they should so take to this "bad, low animal", in Grahame's own words, rather than to some of the more exalted characters that have appeared in children's books. In many ways, of course, Toad is the personification of the spoilt infant and is generally shown to glory in this, despite naggings from Badger and others. Adults who look to children's books for their generally improving qualities will find very little support in this character, which is perhaps why children enjoy him so. With his abundant flow of cash, Toad revels in his own omnipotence, buying house-boats, caravans and motor cars at will, just as in any childish fantasy, and for good measure steals on impulse as well. He is, as Piaget says of infants in general, in the classical egocentric stage; self-willed, boastful, unable to share the limelight, but basically insecure in strange situations, as in the fearful Wild Wood. He is a skilful liar too, but again, like so many infants, Toad seems almost to believe in his own fantasies, and perhaps cannot help treating the truth in such a relative way. When corrected, Toad can be quite

genuinely sorry, but his sobs never last for very long, and cannot disguise his basic single-minded obstinacy. Indeed, this can result in the most violent infantile tantrums, where it takes two other animals to haul him upstairs to bed in disgrace, after having been rude and defiant to the stern parent-figure, Mr. Badger.

There is one especially interesting way in which Toad comes close to the hearts of today's children, and in a manner that Grahame could hardly have predicted. Toad was, perhaps, the first of the demon car drivers, or in his own phrases: "Toad the terror, the traffic-queller, the Lord of the lone trail, before whom all must give way or be smitten into nothingness and everlasting night." Children still warm to this fearful example far more than to any respectable puppet or policeman demonstrating the canons of road safety. Whatever the frightening statistics and the extra menace since Grahame's day, children's sympathies still seem to belong basically with the law-breaker in this tragic field, and the following report from the *Belfast Telegraph*, although not recent, is still typical in this:

Over 1,000 Belfast school children were shown a series of films dealing with road safety in the Ritz cinema this morning. . . . The children's reactions to the pictures were worthy of note. They cheered the accidents, and laughed when an elderly cyclist wobbling over the road caused a collision ending in the death of one boy and the maiming of another.

Indeed, one can almost imagine Toad, with his seven smashes and three bouts in hospital under his belt, joining heartily in the fun.

Finally, of course, Toad renounces his old self, just as his audience one day will have to turn away from childhood. But typically, and consistent with Toad's almost irrepressible high spirits, this personal transformation is only wrung out of him extremely unwillingly after a final fling where Toad shows that he has no intention at all of learning any lessons from his previous bad behaviour.

Indeed, young readers sometimes wonder how long this change of personality is really going to last, and answering one such inquiry later on. Grahame himself wrote, "Of course Toad never really reformed; he was by nature incapable of it. But the subject is a painful one to pursue".

In his admirable biography, *Kenneth Grahame*, Peter Green traces the origin of Toad to Grahame's son, Alastair, along with touches of Horatio Bottomley and Oscar Wilde in Toad's penchant for loud clothes, after-dinner speaking and final downfall and imprisonment. There is also a certain ludicrous resemblance to the adventures and return of Ulysses. But there is surely another literary origin that must be mentioned, both in his

likeness to Toad's actual shape and in his general effect upon the other characters. Grahame himself was for some time Honorary Secretary to the New Shakespeare Society, and Shakespeare was always one of his favourite authors: surely, when writing about Toad the image of Falstaff must have had some influence over him too. As it is, both characters have an intimate, although enforced, connexion with laundry, which finally results in their being thrown into the Thames. They each dress up as somebody else's aunt, and make a presentable, if finally unsuccessful, shot at passing off as an elderly lady. But more importantly, of course, through both of them runs the spirit of personified Riot, a perpetual and irrepressible threat to the status quo both of their friends and of the rather stuffy society outside that condemns them so freely. Falstaff torments the Lord Chief Justice, while Toad, never short of repartee, receives fifteen years' imprisonment for his "gross impertinence" to the rural police. Although Grahame described *The Wind in the Willows* as "Clean of the clash of sex", Toad alone has an eye for the women and takes it for granted that the Gaoler's daughter has fallen in love with him, in spite of the social gulf that also separates Falstaff from Doll Tearsheet. Toad's version of his escape from prison improves with each telling very much like Falstaff's Gadshill exploits, and while Falstaff is renounced at the end of the play, the riverbank animals renounce the old Toad, and the book itself goes on to assure us, as opposed to Grahame's letter quoted earlier, that the new Toad goes on to win the universal respect of all local inhabitants around him. Falstaff, in spite of or possibly because of what Tolstoy described as his "Gluttony, drunkenness, debauchery, rascality, deceit and cowardice", is probably Shakespeare's most popular comic character; Toad, that "dangerous and desperate fellow", has always been an especial favourite with children.

In fact, so far as adults were concerned, *The Wind in the Willows* had a cool reception to begin with, and was memorably condemned by *The Times*, which found that "As a contribution to natural history, the work is negligible". Opinion soon changed, however, often through the enthusiasm of children. The American President Theodore Roosevelt, for example, was persuaded by his family to give the book a second reading, and overcame his initial disappointment to become an enthusiastic convert. For children themselves, *The Wind in the Willows*, and especially the adventures of Toad, constituted one of those few books written not at them but for them. Toad himself was a character who dared do and express many of the things they may often have felt like doing, and such children could both feel superior to Toad's obvious deficiencies and excesses and also revel in them at the same time. With any amount of opportunity for moralizing, Grahame leaves the field mercifully clear to a few, largely unsuccessful efforts by the other riverbank animals to get Toad to mend his ways.

In fact, all the characters Grahame created are real and alive and in *Toad* he gave us a character who was even larger than life and in this sense, surely, becomes the children's Falstaff, whether Grahame consciously intended the connexion or not. We do not find in these pages any of those miserable creations who are merely the mouth-pieces for an adult's stereotyped vision of what is considered to be especially suitable for children. And in this, as in so many other things, *The Wind in the Willows* continues to be an object lesson for many of those who are writing for children today.

Tony Watkins (essay date spring 1984)

SOURCE: Watkins, Tony. "'Making a Break for the Real England': The River Bankers Revisited." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (spring 1984): 34-5.

[In the following essay, Watkins views the enduring popularity of *The Wind in the Willows* as a result of nostalgia for a long-ago England.]

On January 1st, 1983, *The Wind in the Willows* came out of copyright. A month or two later, the English Tourist Board ran a series of double-spread magazine advertisements featuring *The Wind in the Willows* prints by Nicholas Price. The advertisements, which depicted Toad, Mole or Rat riding in a vintage car or consulting a map on their way to a castle, bore the slogan: "The Real England: Make a Break for it." The ads invited us to explore a "real England" of ancient monuments and of small villages virtually untouched by social and economic change: an England that is timeless, mysterious and yet, simultaneously, small, rural, comfortable and domestic; made up of communities with pastoral and comic-pastoral names like: "Sheepwash," "Badger's Mount," "Butterwick" and "Buttocks Booth." They promise, "Hidden just beyond the noise of the motorway you'll find secret places that have barely changed for hundreds of years:" the real England, the nation's real home.

This series of advertisements sent me back to re-read *The Wind in the Willows* and to think about the relationship between such established works of children's literature and history: both the history from which the text emerged and the history into which it is received by us as readers. What accounts for the extraordinary popularity of this novel, seventy-five years after its publication?

As commentators have pointed out, *The Wind in the Willows* consists of three narratives welded (some would say "pasted") together: the adventures of Toad, derived from bedtime stories and letters from Grahame

to his son Alistair, the tale of the friendship of Rat and Mole, and the two lyrical celebrations of nature mysticism, "The Piper at the Gates of Dawn" and "Wayfarers All." What holds these disparate narratives together? Part of the answer is supplied by two articles, one by Geraldine Poss and the other by Lois Kuznets, that appeared in issues of the Association's annual, *Children's Literature*. Geraldine Poss's exploration of recurrent pastoral images in the novel and the parallels between Toad's adventures and *The Odyssey* leads her to describe *The Wind in the Willows* as "the sweet epic in Arcadia." Lois Kuznets' article is even more important: she uncovers the significant structural pattern of oppositions in the novel that cluster around "wanderlust" at one pole and "homesickness" at the other. Using Gaston Bachelard's concept of "topophilia," Lois Kuznets argues that a sense of felicitous space appears in Grahame's

leisurely, almost languid descriptions of the general landscape of *The Wind in the Willows* and in the attention he pays to particular habitats of his main characters. A search for felicitous space . . . permeates the structure of *The Wind in the Willows*.

There is no doubt about the crucial importance in the novel of the tension between a longing for travel and "nostalgia" (homesickness). The latter is the predominant feeling, experienced as loss combined with either an intense longing for home as a place to be regained (Mole End and, to some extent, Toad Hall), or a strong feeling of home as a place to celebrate for its welcome and reassuring continuity (in particular, Badger's kitchen). As Lois Kuznets suggests, such images and feelings certainly relate to both Grahame's own psychology and the appeal the book has had for children and adults. But images of home and the "topophilic" landscape can be related not only at the individual level to the author's or reader's biography, but also at the social and cultural level to the nonconscious structures of the period within which the text was produced or within which it is received. As the geographers D. W. Meinig argues, a landscape can acquire a symbolic status as "an image derived from our national experience, which has been simplified, beautified and widely advertised so as to become a commonly understood symbol." Further, such landscapes can be "most influential at the national level" as symbols of idealized communities.

The shape of what Raymond Williams calls the "structure of feeling" within which *The Wind in the Willows* was written is a complex one. According to Jan Marsh, the collapse of agriculture in the 1870s and the visible decline of the countryside "prompted a sudden rush of nostalgia for rural life. . . . Pastoral attitudes were reasserted with intensity" among, in particular, "the professional and the rentier classes." They were the only ones who, "cushioned financially by the proceeds of the hated industrial system," could afford either to move to

the country or holiday there in weekend cottages or gypsy-style caravans. Grahame himself, as a late entrant to such classes, tended to overrate their ideals. The attraction of such a life was partly religious, partly political. Pantheistic Nature worship offered a substitute for a Christianity undermined by Darwinism (articulated in *The Wind in the Willows* most clearly in the chapter, "The Piper at the Gates of Dawn."). According to Peter Green, riots in the cities produced among the middle-classes, "terror of revolution and mob violence, the supposed dangers latent in an anarchic, industrialized, no longer rural-subservient proletariat." In *The Wind in the Willows*, such a threat comes from the stoats, weasels and ferrets of the Wild Wood; but they are driven back by what Jules Zanger calls representatives of the ordered world of nineteenth century England:

thinly disguised types: Water Rat as private gentleman with a touch of Oxbridge still lingering about him, Badger as bluff country squire, Toad of Toad Hall as landed aristocrat, Mole as emerging Mr. Polly"

The roles and types described here are, perhaps, too schematic, but the description does illuminate our understanding of one dimension of the social and political concerns of the novel. After all, it is Toad who "lets the side down," betrays the leisured life of the River-Bankers through his addiction to the new attractions of the motor-car. He squanders the money left him by his father, gives the other animals a bad name, and is responsible for letting the insurgents take over Toad Hall. However, Toad Hall is cleansed through the collective efforts of the River-Bankers; the "self-contained gentleman's residence dating in part from the 14th century," with "handsome Tudor window" and banquet hall, "but replete with every modern convenience;" "the handsome, dignified old house of mellowed red brick," part of the heritage of the River-Bankers, is saved. The aristocratic, heroic values are simultaneously mocked and lauded. But, above all, what is restored at the end of the novel is a vision of the good life: order, tranquility, harmony: the virtues that men like Ruskin believed were being destroyed by industrial progress. But it is utopia of a particular social group: the River-Bankers. A way of life that Peter Green has described as "the rentier's rural dream," with the countryside not as a place of work but redefined as an Arcadia of rural leisure.

What is important for us is the way that version of utopia has come to occupy a dominant place in the cultural myth of "the English way of life." It has become part of the "real England," a national felicitous space, our home, for which many express intense nostalgia. That "real England" co-exists with an actual England that is far from ideal; the real is "hidden away," "just beyond the noise of the motorways." Through the agency of romance fantasy, ordinary reality can be transformed.

What was formed in the latter half of the nineteenth century as a result of specific social, economic and industrial changes, was a set of cultural representations (inscribed within actual social activities) which has come to constitute a kind of National Heritage. This Heritage has, through tourism, forged a link with leisure. According to Michael Bommes and Patrick Wright, it depicts utopia as

a dichotomous realm existing alongside the everyday. Like the utopianism from which it draws, National Heritage involves positive energies which certainly can't be written off as ideology. It engages hopes, dissatisfactions, senses of tradition and freedom, but it tends to do so in a way that diverts these potentially disruptive energies into the separate and regulated space of leisure.

National Heritage is predominantly rural, pre-industrial and apparently classless and timeless. It stands above history. Yet it has an ambivalent relationship to Toad's pride and joy—the motor-car. Automobiles are both a threat to the utopia offered *and* the means by which people may find it. Thus, the images have been sustained over the years by such contradictory groups as the National Trust, the Shell Oil Company and now, the English Tourist Board.

National Heritage seems closely related to what Fredric Jameson calls a "protonarrative," to which a more recognizable narrative—*The Wind in the Willows*—can be articulated. The images can be drawn upon by the English Tourist Board because there is a remarkable compatibility between the nostalgia of Grahame's book and that of the "protonarrative" of National Heritage, the "real England." Both are simultaneously utopian and ideological.

The continuing popularity of the novel may be due not only to the resonances of homesickness it evokes in individual readers. It can be argued that texts of any kind are never offered to readers in isolation: they are offered through the institutional practices of various kinds within a specific historical context. The texts of children's literature are offered through the practices and discourses of criticism and through the cultural institutions of the family and education. The "meanings" of a work are offered to children and adults within a specific social context. Rereading *The Wind in the Willows* in the context of nostalgia for the "real England" may help us understand a little more about the space occupied by the category "children's literature" in our culture.

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Roderick McGillis (essay date winter 1984-1985)

SOURCE: McGillis, Roderick. "Utopian Hopes: Criticism Beyond Itself." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (winter 1984-1985): 184-86.

[In the following essay, McGillis offers conservative, radical, and visionary perspectives on *The Wind in the Willows*.]

"Teaching literature is impossible; that is why it is difficult."

—Northrop Frye

You will remember in the "sort of fore-court" outside Mole's front door in *The Wind in the Willows* there are a number of brackets carrying "plaster statuary." Kenneth Grahame identifies three of the plaster statues as Garibaldi, the infant Samuel, and Queen Victoria. None of these three were literary critics, but had they been, each of their critical perspectives would have been quite different from the others'. I feel somewhat in the position of the infant Samuel, if for a moment we can imagine him as a critic called by the voice of theory. The voice called Samuel three times, but three times he was unable to respond because he did not know his subject; the fourth time the call came, Samuel responded, but being young and inexperienced he feared to repeat what he had heard. The voice of theory must call each of us, but like Samuel I am not sure I understand what it says. Unlike the voice Samuel heard, the voice of theory is not single and revelatory, but multitudinous and bewildering.

The topic addresses this multitudinous and bewildering voice: critical perspectives on children's literature. Perhaps the topic is actually the problem, since we have no lack of critical perspectives and most, if not all, of them have the frustrating tendency of coming between the reader and his experience. We are so quick to theorize, to classify, to articulate structural principles, to moralize, or to defend a point of view that the experience of literature, the experience of what Georges Poulet calls "interiority," the mutual possession of reader and text, is lost. I suspect that much of what is wrong with the teaching of literature to the young stems from the belief that something called "literary competence" is to be achieved through the early and systematic study of what we now refer to as the "grammar" of literature, or from the opposite notion that since all knowledge is subjective we ought to encourage the student to emote, to say whatever comes into her head when we ask her to comment on a text. If we must situate ourselves somewhere between these two extremes, I presently lean to the subjective approach, because it offers a means of circumventing criticism in order to return the reader to the text. Of course, there is no way to circumvent criticism; either we remain in innocence or we enter the land unknown and look for its secrets.

Many students I have known look, like Thel, with hesitant, timorous, and decidedly reluctant gaze, on the critical landscape; a few others become good little clods of clay. But surely criticism need not become, as it has for so many academic readers, more important than the literature it takes for its raw material. I fear descending into cliché, but the "experience of literature itself" should be our goal, and this experience is available to all readers. If criticism is to help us share our experience of literature, it must do so by pointing beyond itself, and to point beyond itself criticism, as Northrop Frye suggests, "needs to be actively iconoclastic about itself" (77).

The land unknown that I referred to with allegoric briskness in the last paragraph is that formidable structure of words that criticism attempts to make sense of: literature. An example of the secrets literature has is the plaster statuary I mentioned when I began. In a book about a group of amiable animals who live near an English river, who rarely travel beyond the sound of the current's ripple, and who have an allegiance to the great god Pan, why do we have statues of a biblical prophet in his infancy, the Queen of England, and one of the most famous mid-century radicals? I have for a long time considered these statues as the keys to the book's meaning, but for my purpose here I will suggest that they may also present us with three ways of reading *The Wind in the Willows*, and by implication of reading any book. At the risk of being shamefully reductive, I will call these ways of reading the conservative, the radical, and the visionary. All three have as an ultimate

aim the furtherance of utopian hopes, but my contention is that only the last, refusing as it does the quest for power and the voice of authority, preserves the integrity of these hopes.

A conservative approach to *The Wind in the Willows* might well look on the book with nostalgia, and find the emphasis on the sweetness of home, on the simplicity of life, and on the order of society convincing and attractive. The "inner myth" of the book, as Peter Green calls it, suggests a middle-class view of the world. A critic approaching the book from what I am calling a conservative perspective would allow himself to indulge in affective assertions. For example, he might write, as Roger Sale has in fact written, that the pleasure of *The Wind in the Willows* "is the pleasure of enclosed space, of entering a charmed circle, of living in a timeless snugness" (168). If the critic's concern is with children, he might argue that the child reader can identify with the characters and that the value structure of the book, built as it is on such attractive ideas as "home," "friendship," "experience," and "nature," offers security and reinforcement for the young reader. We are warmed, Rebecca Lukens notes, "by discovering among other things that one loves one's home where one's belongings are, and that even the most contented finds faraway places alluring" (50).

The emphasis on "home" is especially important. Here is Fred Inglis on Grahame's evocation of home:

Badger's kitchen unselfconsciously embodies continuity: the magic reverberance of the word 'home' and all its rich cognates tingle in the plenitude of the ceiling hung with 'bundles of dried herbs' and 'nets of onions' . . . All that home means in Kenneth Grahame has since undergone a sharp attenuation under the minute, relentless bombardment of the doctrines of mobility, obsolescence, and acquisitiveness.

(122)

The values of the River Bank society are dear to this critic, who concentrates his reading of the book on the first five chapters. When he does allude to the politics of social inequality, he does so to slight this aspect of the book. He writes: "It is not a trivial point that they are insurgent working-class weasels and stoats who are thrown out of Toad Hall at the end but the point does not touch the heart of Grahame's matter; the recovery of home is as important there as it is when Mole finds Mole End again one snow-threatening Christmas Eve. . . . Quite simply, Grahame creates a Utopia . . . and its outline is visible today" (122-123). For Inglis, Grahame offers the reader "an image of happiness perfectly combined with innocence, and all of us would wish our children to feel the strength of such an image" (119-120). I hope it is apparent that readings of this kind function on the belief that literature can sustain us, warm us, reassure us, make us better people, perhaps even quieten us.

It is worth noting that such impressionistic and affective commentary has its formal complement. The same critic who states that *The Wind in the Willows* warms us, also uses the book as an example of a work with an "episodic plot." This kind of plot differs from the "progressive plot" in that the pattern of action does not lead through the "rising action to the central climax," but rather it proceeds through discrete episodes (Lukens, 57). This is the approach I experienced when I was in elementary school years ago. Memorize the structures of literature and you will have acquired essential knowledge for living. I hated it. To be chocked full of literary competence was to transform you into an educated, cultured individual prepared to assume your station in society. Besides knowing that *The Wind in the Willows* has an episodic plot (even here it is perhaps truer to say that the book uses both episodic and progressive plots), you might also know that it has a pastoral vision and that it contains a parody of the heroic quest. This last point, understated or not, will be important to the conservative critic because the hero as adventurer threatens society; the critic will wish to see Toad as a converted toad fixed firmly within the society he had once threatened through his irresponsible individualism. In this book, the group, the community itself is heroic.

Such a view of *The Wind in the Willows* will leave some readers uneasy. From the formal and emotional perspective is not Grahame's vision, as winsome and warm as it is, regressive? Do we not miss much of the point if we ignore the tensions in the book, tensions that derive from the historical moment? Is it not misleading to find values of permanent relevance in the pastoralism of *The Wind in the Willows*? Instead of the "Thames-side Shangri-La of simple pleasures" that Peter Green sees in the book's pastoralism (xvii), might a better account read something like this:

[Pastoral] offers a political interpretation of both past and present. It is a propagandist reconstruction of history. . . . An audience is lulled into a false sense of empirical security by being told relatively unimportant things that are demonstrably true. Topographical details work well like this. Then the 'great lie' is smuggled in among such a collection of platitudes. The 'great lie' in pastoral concerns its presentation of change. Economic change in rural society is invariably presented as an external agency, despite the fact that rural society carried the seeds of its own destruction within itself. Capitalism was really quite at home in both the long and the short grass of rural England . . . pastoral endorsed the essentially aristocratic codes of conspicuous consumption, idle ease and languid leisure. Oaten reeds merely disguised aristocratic deeds. . . . Before you become too nostalgic about the merry old days of rural England, it is worth thinking about which groups have a vested interest in such nostalgia.

(17-18)

Such a view of pastoral is historical and overtly political, and although the writer—Roger Sales—concerns