

Beyond the apron: Archetypes, stereotypes,  
and alternative portrayals of mothers in  
children's literature.

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## **Beyond the Apron: Archetypes, Stereotypes, and Alternative Portrayals of Mothers in Children's Literature**

Lois Rauch Gibson

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Beyond the Apron:  
Archetypes, Stereotypes, and Alternative Portrayals of  
Mothers in Children's Literature**

*Lois Rauch Gibson (bio)*

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As every school child knows—or, in any case, has surely been told by some well-meaning adult—books are our friends; books can take us on journeys of the mind; books are our windows on the world. But school children probably do not know and adults rarely tell them that books are also an important way for a culture to transmit its varied social values to its children. One set of social values children's books transmit involves attitudes toward certain groups of people: races, nationalities, classes, occupations, sexes, religions, and so on. Not surprisingly, a group frequently represented in children's literature are mothers, and the mother-figures children encounter vary widely, from the archetypal images of myth and folklore to the caricatures of Lewis Carroll, from the stereotypes of J.M. Barrie and many modern picture books to the welcome alternatives in such books as *Mary Poppins*.

By now, most of us recognize stereotypes fairly readily. Still, it may prove useful to distinguish clearly between archetypes and stereotypes before examining closely the portrayals of mothers in three of the more enduringly popular children's books: *Peter Pan*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and *Mary Poppins*.

To state it simply, archetypes provide foundations to build on and allow endless variety; stereotypes label and limit by assuming all members of a group share similar traits. Jung says an archetype is a "primordial image" somewhat like Plato's "idea," except that instead of existing in "a place beyond the skies," the archetype exists in the human mind (*Four Archetypes* 9-13). The archetype itself is just a form or idea—like the general idea of mother, or father, or spirit. The idea exists in all human minds, but the concrete manifestations, the representations or expressions of the idea, may vary from era to era and country to country. As Jung says, "Like any other archetype, the mother archetype appears under an almost infinite variety of aspects" (15).

In other words, archetypal images resonate and reverberate in the

richness of their implications while stereotypes flatten and stifle. A typical archetypal image appears in the Demeter/Kore (or Persephone) myth. It incorporates the image of mother as mother, as goddess, as daughter, as earth, as maiden, as creative nature, and so on. It suggests the flowers of spring and the fruits of harvest. It reverberates with suggestions of death in the daughter's sojourn underground as well as suggestions of sexuality in the union with Hades. It incorporates resurrection and new life in Kore-Persephone's reunion with Demeter in the archetypal spring.

In contrast, the stereotyped mother in children's literature wears aprons and bakes pies. In 1971, Alleen Pace Nilsen made special note of the preponderance of aprons on the comparatively few female characters in Caldecott Award winners and other selected children's books. Surveying representative recent books will leave readers surprised at how little this has changed since 1971. Like the stage Irishman defined by his red nose, or the little girl in a 1749 children's book by Sarah Fielding, who is defined by her name (Lucy Sly), the mother in children's literature is defined and limited by her apron. We move from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the multidimensional to the flat character.

This is not to say, however, that the apron-clad stereotype exercises exclusive control over all mothers in children's books. In fact, one may go beyond the apron in a variety of ways. An examination of *Peter Pan*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and *Mary Poppins* uncovers an array of archetypal images, stereotypes, caricatures, and alternative roles for the mother figure.

Like J. M. Barrie himself, *Peter Pan* is virtually obsessed with the figure of the mother. The central mother figure is, of course, Wendy—who agrees to go to Neverland in order to learn to fly and see mermaids, but mostly to be mother to Peter and the Lost Boys as well as to her own brothers. In Neverland, Wendy becomes a kind of Persephone, lured away from her own mother to...

Among the best-known and most interesting romances on American themes and backgrounds are *Le Alexis de Jacquesville* (D. La domination en Amérique, 1835 and 1840), *Parasitic Classes* (*Classes parasites de l'Amérique et les mœurs des Anglo-Américains*, 1851), and *Hypothèse* (*Une vision de M. Faldin*, Thomas Grandjeu, 1867). In addition, several novels by Jules Verne (all published by Hachette) helped to create in the young reader's imagination a so-called image of America that was a *leitmotiv* in Kurt Coburn's

Pleuresights, however, thanks to their access to a very large public, had the greatest influence in bringing French attention about America and more more than the highly popular *Vieillesse* (Bardet) and *Eugène Labiche*. Bardet's *Pleures-jour*

(1866) and *On dit* (1873) and Labiche's *Le Tour du monde à l'éclaircie* (1875) not only made fun of American greed and unrefinedness, but satirized, as well, the impudence of American women, especially young girls, who behaved as they pleased, free and completely unsupervised. See also Simon Jeanne, *De P.T. Grandjeu à A.O. Bernhardt: Les types américains dans le roman et le théâtre français 1860-1917* (Paris: Didier, 1963).

Jacques-Louis Colson, *Manuels d'Amérique* (Paris: Hachette, 1923), p. 41. Hereafter, all citations are in this edition and are given within the text. The translations are my own.

Steve L. Demme is at Wright State University.

## Beyond the Apron: Archetypes, Stereotypes, and Alternative Portrayals of Mothers in Children's Literature

by Jan Ruedi Chiles

As every school child knows—well, in any case, has likely been told by some self-meaning adult—there are our friends; books can take us on journeys of the mind, books are our windows on the world. But school children probably do not know and adults rarely tell them that books are also an important way for a culture to transmit its varied social values to its children. One set of social values in children's books transmit its values attitudes toward certain groups of people: races, nationalities, classes, occupations, sexes, religions, and so on. Not surprisingly, a group frequently represented in children's literature are mothers, and the mother-figures of fiction come in many guises. Even the archetypal images of Mary and Elizabeth in the canon of Lewis Carroll, from the stereotypes of J.M. Barrie and many modern picture books to the well-known alternatives in such books as *Mary Poppins*,

By now most of us recognize stereotypes fairly readily. Still, it may prove useful to clarify the difference between archetypes and stereotypes before examining closely the portrayals of mothers in three of the more enduring popular children's books: Peter Pan, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, and *Mary Poppins*.

To start, a simple archetype provides foundations to make up and allow endless variety; stereotypes level and are, by definition, "methods of a group share similar traits. Jung said an archetype is a "premonition, an image" summed up like Plato's "idea," except that instead of existing in "a place beyond the stars," the prototype exists in the human mind (Erickson, 1975, p. 17). The archetype is not just a form or idea—like the general idea of mother, or father, or sister. The idea exists in all human minds, but the concrete manifestations—the representations or expressions of the idea, may vary from era to era and country to country. As Jung says, "Like any other archetype, the mother archetype appears under an almost infinite variety of aspects" (1975).

In other words, archetypal images reemerge and reemerge in the children of their implicit, even while a crumpled blanket and rattle. A typical, or the very image appears in the *Diary of Kew* for Penelope's work. It incorporates the image of mother as mother, as goddess, as daughter, as earth, as maiden, as creative nature, and so on. It suggests the flowers of spring

and the fruits of harvest. It reverberates with suggestions of death in the daughter's sequestered underground as well as suggestions of sexuality in the union with Hades. It incorporates resurrection and new life in Kore-Persephone's reunion with Demeter in the archetypal spring.

In contrast to the archetypal mother in children's literature were mothers and babies play. In 1971, Alice Pace Nilson made special note of the preponderance of mothers in the comparatively few female characters in Caldecott Award winners and other selected children's books. Surveying representations recent books will leave readers surprised at how little this has changed since 1971. Like the stage Indian defined by his and now, or the integral to a 1749 children's book by Sarah Fielding, who is defined by her name (Mary), the mother in children's literature is defined and limited by her apron. We move from the archaic to the ridiculous, from the multidimensional to the flat character.

This is not to say, however, that the apron-clad stereotype exercises exclusive control over all mothers in children's books. In fact, one may go beyond the apron in a variety of ways. An examination of Peter Pan, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and *Mary Poppins* uncovers an array of archetypal images, stereotypes, caricatures, and alternative ways for the mother figure. Like J.M. Barrie himself, Peter Pan is eternally obsessed with the figure of the mother. The central to her figure is of course, Wendy—who agrees to go to Neverland in order to learn to fly and see her friends, but mostly to be mother to Peter and the Lost Boys as well as to her own brothers. In *Neverland*, Wendy becomes, and of Persephone, "tired away from her own mother to live in a house underground. Later, after she has returned home to grow up and lose her ability to fly, Wendy persuades her daughter Jane to go off with Peter to be his mother, "just for spring cleaning time" (p. 19). Later still, Jane's daughter, Margaret, does the same—and the pattern will be repeated endlessly with each new Persephone going underground for spring cleaning in a reversal of the myth. In *Wonderland*, Kore-Persephone returns to her mother, above ground, in the spring. As Lela Neumann observes in *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*



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