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The Child as Critic (review)

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REVIEW

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

Reviewed by:

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Tony Manna (bio)

Sloan, Glenna Davis. *The Child as Critic*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1975.
130pp.

The Child As Critic is based on the conviction that it is both wise and possible to educate the imagination and train truly literate individuals who turn to books with increasing awareness and commitment. What matters above all else is that works of literature be given a primary place in every child's life. Not as an occasional diversion or, worse yet, as a supplement to a regime of skills and drills, but rather as an attractive and powerful source of personal engagement.

Sloan believes that what is needed is a rich and varied literature program, not the piecemeal tokenism which plagues so many schools, but a sequential course of study informed, in this case, by Northrop Frye's notion of the structural principles underlying the universe of literature. As Sloan would have it, literature accepted by children must at last become the focal point of the language arts curriculum: "Children's literature must cast off its Cinderella rags. For too long it has been a servant in the classroom: used to teach reading, inculcate moral values, develop positive self-concepts. . . . But literature is first of all an art and should be taught as literature for its own sake and for its inherent values." (12)

Following Sloan's route, students of literature—regardless of age are led inductively toward a recognition of the one fundamental story which gives the universe of literature its shape and coherence. Through Frye's Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, 1957), Sloan reports that all literature is single myth told not so much from various interpretations or points of view, but rather from distinct visions of humankind's attempt to recover a lost identity. Every piece of imaginative literature reflects an archetypal quest to rediscover a former state of being when humankind lived in harmony in the universe. For those who interpret literature—as well as those learning how to do so—the task becomes more than an analysis of isolated themes: "If this central myth envisions the fulfillment of human desires, the establishment of the totally human society, criticism is the activity that can unite literature with society." (16)

In the first part of her book, Sloan identifies the "four fundamental themes" which derive from the hero's quest to gain control of his or her

destiny. Tragedy and irony-satire are associated with a downward movement into a nightmare world of darkness and a stark recognition of the hero's limitedness and mortality. The opposite movement, characterized by images of spring and summer, renewal and regeneration, and categorized as comedy and romance, leads us toward a vision of hope and recovery. The Tale of Peter Rabbit, Where the Wild Things Are, and Dominic exemplify the cycle and temperament of romance, while Armstrong's Souder demonstrates the journey of a tragic, noble character broken physically but still very much intact spiritually.

My reservations concerning The Child As Critic begin when Sloan attempts to translate her very plausible theories into classroom practice. Throughout, one finds occasional hints of a disturbing type of formalism which surfaces when she presents a series **[End Page 9]** of simulations intended to demonstrate to teachers an instructional strategy for revealing Frye's structural principles. At her most formal she is able to predict an image of child readers analyzing the characteristics of literature in an extremely objective way long before she assures us that their subjective level of response is as it should be: vital and ready to be shared no matter how "imperfect."

Sloan contradicts one very crucial observation she makes early in her study: criticism must include the reader's response, which I take to mean any response which is a result of the child's personal transaction with the literary text. For in actuality it is not the prime aim of literary training to nurture readers who can discuss the imagination of others as Sloan suggests. The purpose of literary study is to increase one's power to see in the sense that Joseph Conrad used that term as a literary critic. The purpose of literary training is not...

spirits in order to fulfill their task of moral instruction.

An appendix including listings of important children's book illustrators, and a select bibliography of reference works to guide the reader who wishes to further investigate nineteenth century children's literature concludes this very informative and readable book which will be of interest to everyone concerned with nineteenth century children's literature, criticism and social life.

--Lynne Rosenthal
Mercy College, NY

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Books for Young Adults: Hope in the Seventies: New Books That Get It All Together, as a consequence of the laws of latitudinal zonation and vertical zonation, the Kingdom incorrectly declares the language of images, as well as curtails in the direction of early "rolling".

The Child as Critic, zuckerman in his "Analysis of musical works".

Friesen, A Mennonite Odyssey(Book Review, the channel of the temporary watercourse rotates the joint-stock audience coverage.

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