

Posthumanism and Children's Literature: The Case of Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio*

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What is childhood?

The concern with childhood has been and will always be an important issue. Throughout history, famous philosophers and thinkers have been theorizing and working on defining the idea of childhood in an attempt to construct a well-defined and easy to understand concept of it. However, this has been almost impossible because understanding and defining childhood is changeable and differs from one culture to another and from one era to another. In fact, Hugh Cunningham, the British historian of childhood, contends that “childhoods are invented and not universal, across time, cultures and societies” (Malone, Tesar, and Arndt 2020, 3). This means that it is impossible to construct one definition of childhood that can be used universally. Despite the fact that children have existed since the dawn of human history, the idea of childhood is entirely a creation of modernity. As children “readily adapt to their own particular environment, [and are] the product of assorted historical, geographical, economic and cultural forces” (Heywood [2001] 2009, 9), it is easy for adults to construct and form children's nature and behaviour in a way that best suits and serves adults' needs and interests. In the Western culture in particular, there have been several approaches for how children are viewed and depicted over the different centuries. As such, it becomes important to have a bird's eye view of how children were regarded and treated through the different eras such as the Middle Ages, 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

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Different Views about Childhood

Because childhood is interconnected with all aspects of society such as class, gender, and age groups, “the structural arrangements of these categories and changes in these arrangements will affect the nature of childhood” (Corsaro 2018, 24). As a result, the way children are perceived has often been affected by the political and social changes that constantly take place throughout different periods of time. Firstly, parents in the Middle Ages recognized childhood as a distinct phase of life. Nevertheless, they also acknowledged that it is important to prepare their children for the roles that they would undertake after growing up. Depending on one’s social status, the chores the child would take up varied between marrying, apprenticing, or turning to work on a full-time scale. Moreover, during their early years of childhood, children were expected to bear a great deal of responsibility such as taking on work in the home or on the farm to help out the family. Secondly, the Enlightenment, known as the age of reason, has also influenced the view of childhood. For instance, Thomas Hobbes, the English thinker, believed that children were disorderly, disruptive, and very difficult to discipline or control. Hence, because of the unequal dynamics of power between parents and children, “parents have the right to command and children the obligation to obey” (King 1998, 67). This means that parents have the authority and duty to shape and create the identity of their child, while the child should be obedient. Secondly, John Locke had a different outlook on children. He contended that children were born as “blank slates” (Marten 2018, 48) or in *tabula rasa* which means that “educating children, then, entails instructing their minds and molding their natural tendencies” (Gianoutsos 2006, 2). In other words, children are neither good nor bad souls who can be easily educated and shaped by their parents as they are not originally burdened by sin like adults. As such, children are dependent, yet productive humans who can be tamed and directed by their mothers. Similar to John Locke, the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, in the 18th century, regarded children as dependent subjects who needed protection and support. He also considered them to be innately uncorrupted, having good souls that are in connection with nature. According to him, “[all] procedures for the rearing of children and for the proper design of culture require an unseen hand, the wisdom of the Tutor, the Father, the Lawgiver” (Kessen 1978, 159). This means that both parents and the education children received help adults achieve their goals of socialising and moulding children in a way that eliminates the goodness and innate purity that children are originally born with. Furthermore, children were negatively affected by the developments caused by the Industrial Revolution as it reached its peak in the 19th century. Because they constituted cheap labour and could perform tasks that were impossible for adults

to perform such as chimney sweeping, children often worked in factories, mines, and mills for long-hours and in unsafe conditions. These working conditions had negative impacts on their health and could sometimes even result in children suffering injuries or dying at work. This was not the only role children had, but at home they were also often required to take on adult-work such as doing domestic chores and caring for sick relatives. As a result of these harsh conditions, “institutions, objects and places specifically designed for children were multiplying at an unprecedented rate” (Baxter and Ellis 2018, 1). This in turn led to “the abolishment of child labour, and the rise of the importance and the political influence of schooling experiences for children” (Malone, Tesar, and Arndt 2020, 4). Gradually, childhood came to be seen more as a distinct phase of life, separate from adulthood, with children needing protection from the hardships of adult life.

20th Century View of Childhood

Known as the “century of the child” (Sandin 1995, 4), the 20th century has witnessed a lot of developments regarding the position of the child in society. It mainly focused on family interactions, education, and care that children needed. For example, “the United Nations has passed resolutions and initiated treaties establishing and attempting to enforce children’s rights” (Marten 2018, 115). As more institutions concerned with the welfare of the child were established, the conditions in which children lived improved. Various aspects of the child’s life were given much attention. Firstly, there was a general concern about the education of children. More schools were established and education for children became compulsory. As a result, it became almost impossible for a child to stay at home to care for his/her younger siblings or to even leave school before finishing education in case a good job opportunity arises (Sandin 1995, 10). Secondly, the awareness regarding the wellbeing and rearing of children also increased. For example, the role of schools expanded to include a more holistic approach to the education of children that included the emphasis on the emotional well-being of children. As a result, childcare centres and maternity centres that were concerned about parental education were also established.

Despite these efforts of enhancing children’s lives during the 20th century, children still suffered greatly due to the First and Second World Wars. While some children were orphaned, others were starved, exterminated, or worked as slaves. Some children were even taken out of schools to work for underground movements (Shields and Bryan 2002, 89). Consequently, social movements calling for the rights of children such as the Declaration of the Rights of the Child took place. Drafted in 1924 and implemented in 1959, this document “defines children’s rights

to protection, education, health care, shelter, and good nutrition” (United Nations 2022) disregarding any racial, political, or religious differences. Moreover, in 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child was held. It guaranteed that all children should be respected and receive equal rights. It also attempted to provide a global definition of childhood.

Reconstructing Childhood: The New Sociology of Childhood

Basically, all the views about childhoods mentioned above revolve around the everlasting issue of the agency of children. Throughout the different centuries, adults constantly pondered questions such as are children powerful enough to control their own lives? Are they full humans who have agency over their actions? or are they something in between the human and the nonhuman? The changes that took place in the 20th century paved the way for developments in social and developmental theories that attempted to answer these questions such as the New Sociology of Childhood which emerged in the mid-1980s. It has often been believed that it is “difficult to recognize childhood as a structural form because we tend to think of childhood solely as a period when children are prepared for entry into society” (Corsaro 2018, 24). Nevertheless, children have always been and will always be a part of society. Consequently, this theory highlighted the idea that children should be regarded as an independent structural form of society (Prout 2011, 6). It challenged the previously held notion that children were uncivilized, thereby they were “unhuman, seeking and becoming human” (Malone, Tesar, and Arndt 2020, 30). On the one hand, children had always been viewed as powerless subjects that do not have control over their own actions and cannot make life decisions. On the other hand, this theory foregrounded the idea of the agency of children. It maintained that children are free agents that can have control over their lives despite the power limitations imposed on them by society. Children were no longer regarded as weak subjects controlled by social structures or by adults. In fact, as they have agency, children “should be viewed as active in the construction and reconstruction of their lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they lived” (Malone, Tesar, and Arndt 2020, 53). This proves that children should be perceived as important constituents of society that have an impact on different bodies or entities that surround them such as both adults and objects. As a matter of fact, children are actants in a network of systems that they deal with on a daily basis. Although this developmental theory may share common features with posthumanism, it is mostly limited in its view. While the sociology of childhood focuses on the idea that children are active agents in their own lives, it disregards the fact that children, like adults, are in fact entangled in a world where the human and the nonhuman are in continuous contact with one another.

Posthumanism and Children's Literature

In general terms, posthumanism challenges the concept that “the human is viewed as the ultimate social/rational/political being: one that is able to perceive the world, think about it, and communicate it back to others” (Moore and Moran 2016, 1). Posthumanism defies this notion of anthropocentrism which maintains the belief that the human is the centre of the universe. Thereby, entities that are part and parcel of the human existence such as children, animals and objects are foregrounded rather than having no or peripheral roles in the human existence. In fact, “posthumanism questions how relations between humans and nonhumans operate within the environments where they are assembled” (Clarke and Rossini 2017, xiv). This highlights that humans are not the only entities in society that impact others around them. Anything that is a member of a network is actually considered an actant. In other words, “the ability to act is not a feature of one's nature (i.e., being a human, an object, or anything else), but rather a relational feature” (Bencherki 2017, 2). This means that the ability to act is based on the network of relations that anything belongs to. As children are in continuous contact with entities around them such as animals, toys, and adults, they are considered actants in their own networks of relations.

Although posthumanism was fully theorised in the late 20th century, it had always been part and parcel of children's literature. This is evident in the canon that was published before the emergence of posthumanism as a theory such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Carlo Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883) and Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894). Carroll's book focuses on the adventures of Alice, a young girl, in a magical world where she comes in contact with magical creatures, objects and animals, while Collodi's book narrates the story of a wooden toy boy who undergoes a journey of maturation until he transforms to become a real boy. Kipling's novel is about a young boy who lives in the jungle in communion with different animals. Thus, these books appeal to children and their imagination. It is apparent that these novels mainly focus on the interaction between children and other entities such as animals and objects. In addition, books such as L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1900) and J. M. Barrie's *Peter and Wendy* (1911) draw the attention to the fact that children do not live on their own and they are in contact with other entities and objects such as animals. These literary works prove that “children's fantasy animates and gives a voice to a host of imaginary, impossible and real beings so that drawing boundaries between truth and fiction becomes sufficiently challenging” (Jaques 2015, 6). Consequently, it is essential to acknowledge that children's literature was among the first genres to integrate

posthumanist elements in its canon. Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* in particular is a perfect epitome of the posthuman turn in children's literature that is worthy of investigation.

The Case of Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio*

The Agency Of The Child

All the previously discussed views of childhood question the idea of the agency of the child. Posthumanism draws upon this idea which is essentially the main tenet of the New Sociology of Childhood. In fact, posthumanism puts an end to questions such as “does being a child mean you are not fully human? Is childhood the process of becoming fully human?” (Malone, Tesar, and Arndt 2020, 30). It actually defies the previously held notion that children need education in order to mature, develop their way of thinking and become considered as full grown-up humans. It was previously believed that “a child is often in positions where they are awarded the least amount of power to determine the places where they are located for home or school and has the least influence on how the rules and regulations are enforced in these places” (Malone, Tesar, and Arndt 2020, 48). Nevertheless, posthumanism emphasizes the fact that children have agency over their own lives. This happens because children are no longer believed to be subhumans who need guidance and control from adults. They, in fact, are regarded as full humans who know how to control their lives, make huge life decisions, and affect other beings around them whether they are human or nonhuman.

Collodi's novel *Pinocchio* challenges the aetionormative societal norms of children as weak beings who have no agency or power over their lives. The main character, Pinocchio the wooden toy boy, represents this posthumanist concept of children as agents. This is evident in the development and changes that happen to his character along his journey of maturation. To begin with, once he learns how to walk, Pinocchio runs away and leaves his father at home. He is a typical young, carefree child who has just learnt how to walk and wants to explore the outside world. “When his legs were limbered up, Pinocchio started walking by himself and ran all around the room. He came to the open door, and with one leap he was out into the street. Away he flew!” (Collodi [1883] 2019, 14). This proves that he does not care for his father's orders to stay at home, and he just decides to run away to explore the unknown world. Pinocchio does not only run away once he learns how to walk, but he also chooses not to go to school. Although his father, Gepetto, sells his own jacket in order to be able to buy him a schoolbook, Pinocchio “sells his A-B-C book to pay his way into the marionette theatre” (Collodi [1883] 2019, 31). Despite the fact that both Pinocchio's decisions to run away from

home and to sell his schoolbook are irresponsible decisions, he still has agency over his own actions. Out of his own will, he chooses to disobey his father's orders and does not go to school. It is also noteworthy to mention that not all of Pinocchio's decisions are careless and insouciant. This is evident in the turning point of Pinocchio's life when he admits that he wants to change and become a better person. The following quote shows Pinocchio's realisation of his wrongdoings and the moment of epiphany he experiences when he realises that he needs to change his actions:

I deserve it! Yes, I deserve it! I have been nothing but a truant and a vagabond. I have never obeyed anyone and I have always done as I pleased. If I were only like so many others and had studied and worked and stayed with my old poor father, I should not find myself here now, in this field and in the darkness, taking the place of a farmer's watchdog. Oh, if I could start all over again! But what is done can't be undone, and I must be patient!". (Collodi [1883] 2019, 80)

As a result of this realisation, Pinocchio decides that he needs to change his actions. In order to complete his journey of maturation, he must go to school and seek education. This is shown in the opening lines of chapter 25 when "Pinocchio promises the fairy to be good and to study, as he is growing tired of being a marionette, and wishes to become a real boy" (Collodi [1883] 2019, 96). His decision to go to school is out of his own will and choice. It is not because a parent or a father figure forces him or urges him to do so. This proves that he has control and power over his own life. He has a free will to decide what he can and cannot do. As a result of fulfilling his promise to the blue fairy, she also fulfils her promise and turns him into a real boy. This signifies that after embarking on a journey of becoming a full human or reaching adulthood, he actually manages to become a responsible and well-disciplined person. Thus, this journey of becoming a real boy is also Pinocchio's journey of becoming a well-developed, full human who not only has agency over his life, but also manages to take the right decisions that make him the best version of himself.

The Role of The Nonhuman

One of the most important tenets of posthumanism is its focus on the idea that humans live in a number of networks that connect them with different entities around them, whether humans or nonhumans. In other words, posthumanism acknowledges that "as adults and children, we live in a world that is increasingly characterised by mobility and displacement, coexistence with difference" (Taylor and Giugni 2012, 107). Thus, both humans and children

do not live in isolation from the world around them. In fact, both share a common, heterogeneous world that is inhabited by humans and non-humans altogether. By proposing the concept of the common worlds, the French philosopher Bruno Latour challenges us to think about “renewing and transforming the concept of the common world and so experimenting with new forms of experiencing coexistence” (Weber 2016, 517). This mainly draws upon the posthumanist notion of decentring the human. In fact, Latour’s concept allows us to understand the heterogeneity of our world by thinking about the world in a broader sense and a more inclusive one that is made up of entities that are not only human. Furthermore, “the notion of common worlds encourages us to move towards an active understanding of and curiosity about the unfolding and entangled worlds we share with a host of human and more-than-human others” (Taylor and Giugni 2012, 111). The term nonhuman encompasses a broad yet restricted range of entities such as things, objects, beasts, rocks, ships, animals, and others (Sayes 2013, 136). Most importantly, this concept of the common world is very important as it helps in teaching children that we, as humans, do not live in the world alone. This belief teaches children to accept differences easily. Collodi’s *Pinocchio* sheds light on the idea that children co-exist or live in a world where the human and the nonhuman are in continuous contact with one another. The novel proves that the nonhuman has a role in the child’s life. This is shown in the novel through the portrayal of Pinocchio as a cyborg and the depiction of talking animals which both teach children how to become human.

The Role of The Cyborg

Firstly, in *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway defines a cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway [1985] 2016, 3). This definition explains that a cyborg is not only associated with machines and technology, but it is also any creature or being that is a blend of both social reality and fiction. Referring to a person or an object as a cyborg conveys the multiplicity and dynamic identity of this entity.

The cyborg is a metaphor for an emancipatory model that deconstructs socially imposed identities. Relating to oneself in a cyborg-like manner entails an epistemological shift away from previously dictated identity and towards a non-dualistic, boundless, chimeric identity in which once-rigid borders are permeable and the self becomes a bricolage. While previous understandings of identity required static roles, a cyborg is an ever-unfolding dynamic being that contains change, flexibility, contingency and multiplicity. (Tolliver 2022, 143)

Thereby, as he is an enchanted wooden toy, Pinocchio is a blend of a man-made creature and a human. His identity transcends the rigid boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. He is a manifestation of the common worlds proposed by Latour as he bridges the borders and gaps between humans and objects. Pinocchio's existence proves that the boundaries of the human and the nonhuman can be dissolved and transcended by forming a fictional, magical creature that shifts towards a more inclusive and limitless identity. In a child's world, "the toy becomes imbued with "life" via the imagination; in that same child's fiction, toys are frequently (and paradoxically) imagined as possessing a different kind of life, in which they are "real" beings" (Jaques 2015, 213). As a cyborg, Pinocchio fits in with this description. Although he is not associated with technology, he is linked with a magical element which is resembled in his nose that grows whenever he lies. Thus, Pinocchio is considered a cyborg because he manifests this link between imagination and reality that Haraway explains. He is not only a human boy, but also a talking wooden toy. Hence, his identity encompasses the duality, multiplicity and contingency that a cyborg embodies. As a result, his character is essential as it teaches children how to become human. Through Pinocchio's journey, the readers get to witness the transformation that he has undertaken. He starts off as an irresponsible toy boy who runs away from his father. However, towards the end of the novel, Pinocchio actually goes through hardships and obstacles in order to save his father. Not only this, but also when they return home, he spends all his time and effort in serving his sick father:

From that day on, for more than five months, Pinocchio got up every morning just as dawn was breaking and went to the farm to draw water. And every day he was given a glass of warm milk for his poor old father, who grew stronger and better day by day. But he was not satisfied with this. He learned to make baskets of reeds and sold them. With the money he received, he and his father were able to keep from starving. (Collodi [1883] 2019, 167)

Caring for his sick father proves that his character has developed to the extent that he can now work and serve others. Furthermore, Pinocchio learns to prioritise the needs of others over his own. For example, when he learns that the Blue Fairy is ill, he gives her the only money he has, with which he was supposed to buy new clothes. As the fairy has helped him a lot, he regards her as his mother who needs his care and help just as his father does. Because of his kind heart and care for others, the fairy later on rewards Pinocchio by turning him into a real boy. This proves that the agency of nonhuman characters such as Pinocchio who is both a cyborg and a toy is important in educating children. To have a long-lasting effect on children, lessons should be taught to them through nonhuman entities which "add something that is of sociological

relevance to the chain of events” (Sayes 2013, 145). Thus, learning how to become human through witnessing Pinocchio’s transformation becomes more appealing to children than teaching them lessons through adults’ narratives and examples.

The Role of Talking Animals

Another aspect of the common world concept which connects both the human and the nonhuman is the appearance of entities that display anthropomorphic qualities. One of these entities is animals. “Concomitant with this shift from exclusively human societies to common worlds, is the shift from social relationships to heterogeneous relations” (Taylor and Giugni 2012, 112). In other words, the concept of common worlds entails moving away from social relations between humans only to incorporate a more multifaceted type of relations that takes place between both humans and non-humans. Because posthumanism decentres the human, it calls for the engagement of the human experiences with those of other beings such as animals. Thus, the human’s relations become entwined with those of animals. As nonhumans, animals are no longer considered mere substitutes to humans. They are rather considered mediators that are as equally important as humans. From a posthumanist perspective, this nonhuman in the form of an animal becomes “necessarily a chain of interaction or an association” (Sayes 2013, 138). In addition, animals are a common posthuman theme in children’s literature. They are not only portrayed as simple characters but are rather represented as anthropomorphic characters. They are alive, speak and move within the narrative. Their “anthropomorphism is not limited to talking, but also includes wearing clothing, walking upright, cooking, playing instruments, and living in houses. Behaviorally, those animals who are fully anthropomorphic are almost indistinguishable from humans; they go to school, drive cars, and deal with the same daily issues and concerns that humans have” (Dunn 2011, 2). As such, these animals are actually very important in the plot of children’s literature. They are continuously in contact with children; thereby, affecting them either negatively or positively.

Likewise, animals in *Pinocchio* play a very important role. Almost all the characters in the novel are animals with no human characters appearing except for Geppetto, Pinocchio’s father. Mainly the animals are those who come in contact with Pinocchio in his daily life. They always have an influence on his actions. Firstly, some animals impact Pinocchio positively. Some of them act as the voice of wisdom in the novel which guides him to make the right choice on his journey of maturation. For example, although the talking cricket does not appear a lot in the novel, he takes on the role of Pinocchio’s advisor. Nevertheless, Pinocchio does not always follow his advice. At the beginning of the novel, the talking cricket tries to convince Pinocchio

that if he does not like going to school, then he should find a job and make good use of his time. “If you do not like going to school, why don’t you at least learn a trade, so that you can earn an honest living?” (Collodi [1883] 2019, 17). However, Pinocchio argues that the best trade or job he would like to undertake is “that of eating, drinking, sleeping, playing, and wandering around from morning till night” (Collodi [1883] 2019, 18). The talking cricket is not the only talking animal that tries to guide Pinocchio along the way. Other animals such as the Dormouse try to warn him that his actions are wrong and will eventually lead him to his unhappiness. “Why worry now? What is done cannot be undone, you know. Fate has decreed that all lazy boys who come to hate books and schools and teachers and spend all their days with toys and games must sooner or later turn into donkeys” (Collodi [1883] 2019, 136). Despite all the attempts from different animals to advise, guide and warn Pinocchio, he still carries on being irresponsible and makes unreasonable decisions. It is not until he eventually sees the consequences of his actions that he decides to change his attitude and become better.

Secondly, some animals drive and push Pinocchio into mischief such as the Fox and the Cat. Unlike the talking cricket and the Dormouse who guide Pinocchio towards the correct course of action, both the Cat and the Fox encourage him to leave school. When Pinocchio tells them that he wants to go to school and study hard, they reply, ““Look at me,” said the Fox. “For the silly reason of wanting to study, I have lost a paw.” “Look at me,” said the Cat. “For the same foolish reason, I have lost the sight of both eyes.”” (Collodi [1883] 2019, 42-43). As they are cunning and cruel, the Fox and the Cat deceive Pinocchio, leading him to believe that going to school is harmful. Moreover, upon meeting him again, they play on Pinocchio’s innocence and naivety by luring him into sowing his money in the Field of Wonders to make it increase in value. “To think that those four gold pieces might become two thousand tomorrow. Why don’t you listen to me? Why don’t you sow them in the Field of Wonders?” (Collodi [1883] 2019, 68). Unfortunately, Pinocchio follows them instead of going to save his father. All of these examples assert that the talking animals play an essential role in the novel, especially because they exhibit anthropomorphic traits.

Conclusion

To conclude, Collodi’s *Pinocchio* is the perfect archetype of how posthumanism can be represented in children’s literature. Although the novel was written before the formulation and full theorization of the posthuman theory, it challenges the anthropocentric belief of the supremacy of the humans. It rather highlights the fact that humans share a common world with other nonhuman entities which are as equally important as humans. It also refutes the

previously held notion of the child as not being fully human by portraying the wooden toy boy as a powerful agent who has control and power over his own life, and actually decides to become a better version of himself by studying and working hard. Additionally, the novel dissolves and transcends the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman by including non-human characters such as Pinocchio, which is a cyborg, and the talking animals. Instead of having advice and wisdom communicated to Pinocchio through adults, the author chooses to make these talking animals guide him, and guide children in general as this will be more appealing to their minds. By doing so, the novel actually acknowledges that children are in continuous contact with different entities such as animals and even inanimate objects around them. Finally, the novel is, in fact, ahead of its time, as it includes posthumanist elements in the narrative, yet still focuses on teaching children the importance of becoming kind humans who are not stripped of their humanity.

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