

GIRLS HAVE THEIR NATURE, THE SAME AS BULL-DOGS HAVE

The Expression of Feminism in E. Nesbit's Bastable Trilogy

by

RUTH VAUGHAN HOULE

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APPROVAL

NAME: Ruth Houle

DEGREE: M.A. (English)

TITLE OF THESIS: Girls Have Their Nature, the Same as Bull-Dogs Have
The Expression of Feminism in E. Nesbit's Bastable Trilogy

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

Chairperson: Chin Banerjee

Michael Steig
Senior Supervisor
Professor of English, SFU

Andrea Lebowitz
Lecturer in English, SFU

Sue Alderson
External Examiner
Associate Professor of Creative Writing, UBC

Date Approved: November 22, 1985

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Title of Thesis/Project/Extended Essay

Girls Have Their Nature, the Same as Bull-Dogs Have

The Expression of Feminism in E. Nesbit's Bastable Trilogy

Author:

(signature)

Ruth Houle

(name)

November 22, 1985

(date)

ABSTRACT

In her political life, Edith Nesbit was a socialist; in her personal activities, a daring and inventive explorer whose unconventional outlook extended to the treatment of children and to the stories she wrote for them. Furthermore, she possessed a shrewd feminist sensibility which also found its way into her fiction. In the Bastable trilogy: The Story of the Treasure Seekers, The Wouldbegoods and New Treasure Seekers, the investigation of this feminism is facilitated by two basic theoretical assumptions. The first, taken from the theory of historical materialism, is that human activities and ideas are the products of a specific historical context--in the case of Nesbit, the capitalist and class divided society of nineteenth century England. The second assumption is that this society relegates females to an inferior status, a condition furthered by educational processes that train women and men to behave differently and in a predetermined manner. Nineteenth century juvenile literature indirectly reflected this reality. However, there is a development during this period from an authoritarian view of children to a more sympathetic treatment of their needs. At the end of the century, Kenneth Grahame's criticism of Victorian attitudes to girls and boys is clearly set out in The Golden Age and Dream Days--books that form a bridge to the Bastable stories.

Nesbit's feminism in the trilogy is conveyed through two characters: Oswald Bastable, the twelve year old narrator and a

key figure in the adventures; and Alice Bastable, his energetic and unusual ten year old sister. Oswald is the individual through whom Nesbit gives expression to a learned-by-rote sexism and, paradoxically, he is the person used to attack this outlook. She achieves this end by manipulating the boy's personality traits so that his opinions about life often provoke an ironic second level of meaning contrary to his explicitly stated prejudices. On the other hand, Alice is the individual through whom Nesbit channels her feminist views about human behaviour. As well, this girl is the person who shows the possibilities for female development, given a society where girls and women are free and equal. She brings about this result by also manipulating Alice's personality to suit these goals and as a further means of exposing Oswald. In fact, Nesbit ultimately succeeds in portraying two characters who display mixed personalities--that is, they possess rudimentary pan-human characteristics that offer a significant contribution to the struggle against sexist role-modelling in both fiction and reality.

To my friends

Emily

Charlotte

Anne

My
Appreciation to
Andrea, Mike
and my family
for their help and patience

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INTRODUCTION

I have returned to Edith Nesbit after a long absence: because her best stories were, and still are, literary feasts--each one, to quote Oswald Bastable, "a blissful dream of perfect A.-1.-ness";¹ because I wanted to investigate her Bastable trilogy--The Story of the Treasure Seekers, The Wouldbegoods, and the New Treasure Seekers--on a more advanced level than I did or ever could have done as a child. Two overriding reasons are associated with my grown-up appraisal of this author: she is a consummate artist and an astute politician. Now the first of these judgements is offensively general and tediously commonplace, and has probably been employed, at one time or another, by every critic who ever spoke about "art." Nevertheless, I still choose it and shall soon explain why. The second term is more specific and does not appear to be a commonplace evaluation at all; at least not when it is used to describe an author of children's literature. But appearances are deceptive. Actually, all juvenile novelists are politicians, if by this term we mean that they make statements about society in its broadest sense and apply some kind of critical standard by which to measure their expectations of this reality. What makes Edith Nesbit exceptional in this regard is her conscious use of innovative and radical political guidelines as vital components of her books--a sociological frame of reference that is certainly visible in her Bastable stories, and even more so in the later Psammead trilogy where her radical outlook is most evident.

But to return to my first reason for choosing Nesbit--if asked to define a memorable work of fiction, I would begin with an unspecific, all-inclusive statement that says the following: a "good" novel is a unique, complete, self-contained product, the chief characteristics of which is the ability to function and endure apart from its creator. Such a definition is only a beginning, of course. One is required to go on and state more precisely the internal mechanics of the kind of story that is great and memorable; and to specify the criteria used to measure such an achievement. On the mechanical level, for example, rules of grammar and structure must be followed fairly accurately if the work is to be coherent and intelligible--at least this guideline is more important if the story is for children; but, beyond this dictum, the form, content and style are direct correlatives of the artist's personality, interests, and the historical period during which he or she wrote. Consequently, in the aesthetic appreciation of fiction, rigid rules are worthless; what is more, no unchanging, purely objective standards of excellence exist or can exist. Much of what is sanctioned as scholarly, impartial criticism is not so at all--a fact which most feminist critics have banged their literary shins on repeatedly. What is first-rate literature to one reader, will be second-rate and mediocre to another: what was great literature to a nineteenth century public, may be judged bad by the yard-stick of twentieth century interests. Stated another way, artistic tastes are subject to personal idiosyncrasies, and to social conditioning. Therefore, when I say that Edith Nesbit is a consummate artist and an astute

politician, she is being judged largely by my standards; which, incidentally, may just happen to coincide with the opinion of other readers, simply because criticism is a social process.

To begin, then, I like the seemingly artless simplicity that distinguishes Nesbit's style; and this description is obviously not meant to equate her work with the artlessness of the immature. What I do mean by this statement is Nesbit's ability to take ordinary words and arrange them into what appear to be ordinary sentences and then have the reader discover that the overall effect is not ordinary at all. Her words are transformed into something new and different by that extra ingredient--that private power--that all seasoned artists enjoy. Perhaps the ability to choose the right words, and put them together, "just so," can be achieved with practice; but the dense, vital sentences that flow with the easy rhythm of children's songs and contribute to her special prose style can only be the result of her hidden power. Nesbit's biographer, Doris Langley Moore, credits her with a clear, direct, economical method of writing, a more prosaic measure of praise that contains the essence of what I have just said.²

A second major source of pleasure to be found in this author's fiction is associated with the word, "energy." Her stories are imbued with a physical and spiritual vitality that is irresistibly contagious. It comes from her child characters primarily, for they manifest a drive, a curiosity, a highly-

tuned awareness of their surroundings that is unparalleled in nineteenth century juvenile literature. This tremendous child-force also exudes a kind of positive fin de siècle³ energy--a passionate attachment to life, described by Holbrook Jackson as a "concern for . . . the most effective, the most powerful, the most righteous--mode of living."⁴ And Nesbit's middle class youngsters seek the "good" life, not "goodness" in the narrow sense advanced by other authors of that period who wrote Christian tracts aimed at children. She not only records the passionate exuberance of the young with consummate skill; she does it accurately, a feature of her work that is especially evident in her treatment of the juvenile thought process. Nesbit knows how youngsters think, how they argue, and the way their misinformed and inconsistent innocence can lead to erroneous beliefs and inappropriate actions.

So far, then, I have said that Nesbit's style is free-flowing and fresh and simple, and her children exciting and true-to-life; but another quality must be mentioned or my assessment of her worth is incomplete. This third characteristic--the humour in her novels--derives, in part, from the inexperience of her fictional children. She creates comedy by placing them in situations where their innocence stimulates subtextual interpretations which are in opposition to actual events or their apparent meaning. The result of this finely tuned discrepancy between surface content and reality is a superb form of ironic humour--a kind that is frank and sure and never heavy-handed. Like all comedy, Nesbit's also has a dark

and serious side; but the ability to reduce tragedy to childish dimensions, to use children to point out the incongruent and the absurd in a world of adult magnitude, serves to soften the intolerable aspect of social pressures. This balance between the rational and the absurd in life is the point of departure for my appreciation of this woman's astute political sense.

Edith Nesbit's political commitment was to socialism, an uncommon but not entirely unheard of loyalty during the closing years of Victoria's reign.⁵ What made her devotion so exciting was the subtle translation of this ideology into her best stories. In this respect, she held a unique position as the first successful juvenile novelist who "recommended socialist solutions" to the problems of "contemporary England."⁶ Edith and her husband, Hubert Bland, were founding members of the Fabian Society (1883) at a time, according to Moore, when such ideas were regarded "as little less than seditious" (73). Her membership in this dynamic organization was consistent with her sense of justice and her compassionate and strong interest in life. And her role as one of the leading figures in the highly conspicuous political and intellectual unrest of the nineties was consistent with her personality as well. While Edith and Hubert retained a life-long loyalty to the reformist goals of the Fabians, their private activities often consisted of an undisciplined conjunction of bohemian and "decadent" tendencies.⁷ She rode a bicycle, smoked cigarettes, and clad "her slim uncorsetted figure" in "aesthetic gowns" that "showed

more of her neck than the ordinary mode allowed." According to Moore, Edith's personal habits and appearance were condemned by many neighbours and acquaintances--people, it could be inferred, who may have suspected feminist leanings during those years leading up to the birth of the nineties' "New Woman" (123). But this rebel's nonconformity did not stop with grown-ups: it extended to children as well. The opinions about child-rearing apparent in her stories, and in real life, were as daring as her personal and her political behaviour. In fact, her views were so "liberal" that many people of her time also regarded them "with suspicion or even with strong disapproval." Her own children ran about "at will"; often without hats, gloves or shoes--a situation not to be tolerated lightly by "the inhabitants of London suburbs in the nineties" (Moore, 119). As well, a regular concession to the Bland girls and boys was their participation in all the adult gatherings. A friend of the family, Mrs. Noel Griffith, wrote that "they were never shut away, and gave their opinions as definitely and dogmatically as the rest of us" (Moore, 181)--a comment which certainly explains the free and stimulating context created for the Bastable youngsters.

Nesbit's role as a saboteur of Victorian social values is of fundamental significance to the direction taken in this paper. In her bohemian/socialist milieu, avant-garde ideas of every variety were discussed, and most certainly the "woman question" would have been raised. In this regard, an additional factor must be considered in any assessment of this rebel as an

advocate for her own sex: she was married to a chronic womanizer. Hubert Bland was a "well-meaning . . . likeable man" who "could not by any effort of nature leave women alone" (Moore, 71). The most far-reaching outcome of this disposition was an intermittent and scarcely concealed intimacy with the Blands' live-in business assistant and friend, Alice Hoatson. Hubert fathered a boy and a girl by Alice, and Edith magnanimously pretended that she had borne them as her own in order to protect their real mother. It was certainly a noble face-saving step for Alice and the two children in an era when unwed mothers and their illegitimate offspring could suffer intolerable ostracism from those who upheld the misogynist moral code of the period. Why Edith never left Hubert is a question that can never be answered satisfactorily, but it would appear that a factor affecting her reluctance to go was, again, a Victorian marriage system which excluded females from the right to sue for divorce except under the most degrading of circumstances. On the basis of her research, Moore infers that Bland's strong, compelling personality was also a consideration; that he held sway over Edith with his magnetism, his social finesse, and his intellectual sophistication.⁸ Moore concludes that she must have "loved" this man and that she was emotionally dependent upon his good will and affection. However, this information comes from a biographer who was not a feminist, and who therefore may have failed to give due weight or adequate space to information indicative of Edith's independent side. In any event, it seems reasonable to assume that a husband like

Hubert would stimulate interest in the special discrimination faced by women, and that this interest would have been further deepened by books and pamphlets that came her way. She read constantly and her selection of material was diverse enough to include John Stuart Mill's The Subjection of Women (1869)--a document that illustrates with unassailable arguments and conviction the institutionalized oppression of the female sex (Moore, 77). Even so, in an attempt to make an objective and balanced assessment of Edith Nesbit's attitude to this question--and it must, of necessity, be based on the only valid biography available, and on her work--one must conclude that she was not a devout feminist. Nevertheless, this statement must be qualified by pointing out that she was apparently unpredictable and contradictory in her attitudes to personal and social concerns.⁹ Although she wrote in a diary entry in 1886: "On Monday we went to a Woman's Right meeting where I was infinitely bored" (Moore, 82), evidence of this nature cannot be taken too seriously in any attempt to estimate her degree of commitment to women's special problems. Many meetings are boring, even for individuals who support the issues under discussion, and later evidence suggests that her disaffection may well have been based on this particular gathering rather than on any antipathy to feminism. Certainly this view seems valid in the light of Moore's subsequent statement:

The behaviour of certain feminine agitators was exciting derision at that time all over the country, and E. Nesbit showed no greater sympathy towards them than was felt by women whose political views were less advanced than hers. Nevertheless, two or three

of her friends were of opinion [sic] that she was by no means opposed to the breaking down of sex barriers on principle, and might have taken part in the movement herself had it not been for Hubert Bland's influence. (243)

Since the reluctance to openly support reforms for women seems to have originated from the pressures of a husband who was a hypocrite and a male chauvinist, one can only be saddened by this aspect of Nesbit's political career. Saddened, perhaps, but not disheartened; for, if she was not a feminist as such, she certainly possessed a deeply felt feminist sensibility, and an appreciation of the second-class status of her own sex; and this acknowledgement was a strong, underlying component in her outlook, despite her dedication to mainstream "male" politics. If a feminist sensibility had not been a vital reality in Edith's life, she would never have written into her children's stories the unmistakable attacks on sexism meant for the perceptive reader. She would never have written about the Queen of Babylon in The Story of the Amulet in exactly the way that she did--a manner that can be taken on one level as a delicious attack upon her husband's private philandering.

"In our country," said the Queen scornfully, "a king would not reign a day who had only one wife. No one would respect him, and quite right too."

"Then are all the other thirteen alive?" asked Anthea.

"Of course they are--poor mean-spirited things! I don't associate with them, of course, I am the Queen: they're only the wives."

"I see," said Anthea, gasping. 10

And she would not have imagined a tale quite like "The Last of the Dragons," complete with a princess who goes to her father and says,

"Father, darling, couldn't we tie up one of the silly little princes for the dragon to look at--and then I could go and kill the dragon and rescue the prince? I fence much better than any of the princes we know."

Nor would her royal parent have answered,

"What an unladylike idea! . . . Dismiss the thought, my child. I rescued your mother from a dragon, and you won't want to set yourself up above her, I should hope?" 11

And, most importantly, she would not have raised throughout the Bastable trilogy the question of sexual role-modelling that is taken as the primary focus of this study.

The theoretical foundations for the investigation of Edith Nesbit's feminism consist of two closely connected assumptions about life and reality. The first is extracted from the theory of historical materialism, a concept which states that consciousness is determined by life, and that history and the people who make it are products of time-specific, material conditions.¹² Consequently, individuals are free to create the physical and cultural parameters of their lives, but only within a given historical context. They cannot function outside of time or reality; nor can they exist outside the class divisions brought into existence with the advent of private ownership of

the means of production. The second aspect of this model is the cognizance that class society educates women and men to behave differently and in a predetermined manner. For women, this predetermined behaviour is a direct correlative of their inferior status, a condition that was (and still is) legitimated by oppressive legal and moral codes. In addition to the preceding assumptions, my analysis of the trilogy is generated from an adult perspective--for obvious reasons I cannot do otherwise; but I do believe that children's stories belong to grown-ups as well as the young, a belief that is especially true of Nesbit who offers a pleasurable return to childhood combined with intellectual stimulation for those readers who take the time to taste this latter aspect of her work.

I have divided my investigation into three parts. The first is an historical materialist overview of important nineteenth century juvenile literature that preceded the publication of The Story of the Treasure Seekers in 1899. In doing so, I have attempted to show that the four states of British capitalism designated in this paper were obliquely reflected in fiction written for the young. Furthermore, in the choice of authors examined, emphasis has been placed upon those who wrote stories intended primarily for female readers. The second section contains a discussion of Oswald Bastable, a character, and the narrator of the trilogy and, as such, the interpreter of his sister, Alice. Like Chapter I, this evaluation takes as its point of departure the historically

conditioned outlook of children--in this case, the male supremacist ideology of the boy. As well, it looks at his other point of view, one that is a direct correlative of the fin de siècle spirit of open-minded curiosity to be seen in the adult world of that period. The last part is an examination of Alice in the light of Oswald's contradictory role as a sexist and as a boy-of-the-nineties narrator, and an appraisal of the child in the light of her "new girl" personality. For reasons of length I have confined my investigation of Nesbit's feminism¹³ to Oswald and Alice. While all of the children in the stories could be discussed with this point of reference in mind, only those who are crucial to my explication of the latter pair enter into the ensuing discussion.

Chapter I

PROPAGANDA OR ENTERTAINMENT?

A Survey of Nineteenth Century Children's Literature

Fiction mirrors life; life is the subject of fiction; and the reality of nineteenth century England centres upon the consolidation and expansion of the bourgeois revolution. Thus, English fiction spoke about the development of the capitalist system and indirectly and mediately¹⁴ reflected the vast and frightening changes wrought in the lives of women and men and children by this powerful new organizer of labour power. But if literature in its reflective scrutiny of bourgeois life often served or explained or criticized the system, according to Gillian Avery, the emphasis in books written for youngsters during most of the century was on the notion of service. She points out that children's literature really began during the Georgian period (1790-1830), and, although she does not identify it as such, this period coincides with the final destruction of the once mighty feudal order by the industrial revolution. According to Avery, the key thrust of stories written during this era were didactic; the lesson to be learned was more important than the entertainment value of the tale.¹⁵ Consequently, a story was merely a fictional framework upon which were projected lessons for the mental and moral improvement of the young. Although God and religious duty were used as the ultimate justifications for the direction given to juvenile behaviour, the Georgian philosophy was essentially a

materialist one: "be punctual and diligent, obedient and dutiful, and the earth is yours to inherit" (Avery, 12).

Such an outlook is well demonstrated in a book by Emily Ospringe called Punctuality, Sensibility and Disappointment, subtitled Pleasing Stories for the Improvement of the Minds of Youth (circa 1820). It tells a story about the two sons of a Manchester manufacturer who are called Peel and Arkwright. Their father "spends his nights dreaming up schemes for the improvement of his manufactory," and his days working upon his boys' "moral principles" in order to "render them truly good and great, as well as ingenious and rich." But the main story line is about a young relative, Mr. Allons, who loses in six months half a "splendid" inheritance and a prospective wife, all through "neglect of punctuality" (Avery, 11, 12). What happens to Peel and Arkwright is not made clear in Avery's summary of the tale, but the inferred outcome is obvious. They undoubtedly learn from Mr. Allon's mistakes, grow up to be punctual and diligent, thus proving their fitness to be heirs to the paternal business.

The story of the Manchester manufacturer is most instructive. It shows very clearly the Georgian demands upon male children (we are not told what happens to their one sister), but Avery's explication of the tale fails to state why these expectations were valuable at this time, why the manufacturer chose these virtues for his sons rather than others. If this critic had looked more closely at the

social/economic milieu from which her fictional family came, she might have discovered the connection between this story and the historical reality of the eighteen-twenties. She might have perceived that Punctuality advocates a type of laissez-faire individualism where the use of scientific principles and reason replaced the old collectivist irrational code of feudalism. Indeed, the ascendancy of the individual and science were the hallmarks of the free market economy of British industrialism, and the creator of the Manchester manufacturer knew this truth, just as she knew that the market functions best under the control of individuals who have developed habits of diligence, punctuality, and rational thought. Furthermore, if one understands the importance of factories and the accumulation of capital to the rising English middle class,¹⁶ then it is abundantly clear why the father in Punctuality is a business man in the important centre of Manchester, and it is abundantly clear why his sons are called Peel and Arkwright -- both prominent figures in the male world of English capitalism.¹⁷

Of course, the children who worked in the factories constructed by men like Peel were also expected to be punctual and diligent and rational, but the actual nature of these qualities, when recommended as a standard of conduct for the "labouring poor", was described as early as 1795 by Edmund Burke: "Patience, labour, sobriety, frugality and religion . . . all the rest is downright fraud."¹⁸ This politician was one of a number of talented individuals who spoke on behalf of the

English counter-revolution, a middle class reaction against the notion that liberty and happiness should extend to all classes in society. The growth of this conservative tendency can be attributed, in part, to the publication of dangerous egalitarian texts like Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1795) and Thomas Paine's Rights of Man (1790-2). One of the key respondents to Wollstonecraft and Paine was a writer by the name of Hannah More. A strong voice among British intellectuals, More aimed her counter-revolutionary message emphasizing "order" and "submissiveness" at young females (Thompson, 60). Moreover, she attacked the ideas associated with Wollstonecraft's Vindication in tracts addressed to both poor and rich women. Hers was the voice of the Anglican right; and yet, despite her connection with the main current of English Christianity, she believed in the inherent depravity of all human nature with the same vehemence as John Wesley. In her books for middle and upper class girls, Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education (1799), More held that it was a "fundamental error to consider children as innocent beings", rather than as sinners of "a corrupt nature and evil dispositions."¹⁹ That her strictures upon women were also a response to the dangerous ideas voiced by Wollstonecraft is clear in the following statement:

The rights of man have been discussed, till we are somewhat wearied with the discussion. To these have been opposed with more presumption than prudence the rights of women. It follows according to the natural progression of human things, that the next stage of that irradiation which our enlighteners are pouring in upon us will produce grave descants on the rights of children. (More, Pt.I, 135)

Instead of "rights" for children, she proposed that girls, especially, must learn early in life to see the world not as "a stage for the display of superficial talents," but as a dwelling-place for "the strict and sober exercise of fortitude, temperance, meekness, faith, diligence, and self denial" (More, Pt.I, 149. My emphasis). Just as the fictional Manchester manufacturer might have done, More singles out diligence from the above habits for special emphasis, stressing the value of time usefully employed.²⁰ In fact, she displays an unwonted degree of passion when she discusses this subject.

O snatch your offspring from adding to the number of those objects of supreme commiseration, who seek their happiness in doing nothing! Life is but a short day; but it is a working day. Activity may lead to evil; but inactivity cannot be led to good. (More, Pt.I, 117)

A new form of control over the young began to appear in popular fiction during the early years of Victoria's reign. The diligent child in life and literature gave way to the "religious" youngster whose conscience and parental authority ruled all actions.²¹ This statement may sound contradictory in view of the fact that Georgian industriousness was also associated with Christian values, but it is not so. Religion was a consistently strong influence in the life of the young during the nineteenth century; only the emphasis changed. If Georgian girls and boys were forced by adults to adopt habits of perseverance and piety, Victorian children learned to compel themselves to act with industry and godliness. But again Avery

fails to make clear why the ideal of the child with a conscience was no mere whim, brought into existence by writers of the early Victorian years. And she fails to clarify this question because she does not perceive that these youngsters, like their Georgian predecessors, can be seen as the juvenile reflection of a second stage in the bourgeois revolution--a stage which is distinguished by Victoria's ascension to the British throne--a stage which looked toward the first years of its "golden age." During this phase of growth, the bourgeoisie achieved control over English social life. The working class was disciplined to accept the well-established industrial regime; and, with the exception of minor labour disturbances and minor economic setbacks, British capitalism maintained its hegemony at home and in its colonies. The human and physical machinery of Andrew Ure's great factory was in place, and it worked.²² But maintenance of this state of equilibrium depended upon the self-discipline of all classes--and on that "inner compulsion" to submission and diligence which was especially required of the working class and women (Thompson, 393). It required that females of all ranks learn to exercise More's virtues of "fortitude, temperance, meekness, faith, diligence, and self-denial" if the system was to function at all. Indeed, the relentless conscience of the Victorian child was the equivalent of emotional masochism--a state of mind often more frightening for girls who were expected to provide the sweet and pure influence for the less spiritual male who was too busy building the British empire to worry about the state of his soul.

One of the most important authors during the second stage of British imperialism was Mrs. Gatty, whose "recurring theme" was "submission in all things," a form of behaviour which did not preclude the right to engage in charitable self-sacrifice to one's family or the poor (Avery, 71). The importance of this activity for girls was highlighted by another writer contemporary with Gatty, Maria Louisa Charlesworth, who authored an "enormously popular" book called Ministering Children (1854) (Avery, 90). The heroine of the tale is Mary Clifford, a child who is "the light of her family, the beacon of the Poor." When she dies, "all the country turns out to mourn her" because she is a model of Christian girlhood, a "child spirit who . . . [lived] to minister to others' good, to ease the burden of the weary-hearted . . . to win the lost to the Saviour's feet" (Avery, 91). Two other notable writers of mid-Victorian fiction who portrayed the "Mary Cliffords" of this world were Hesba Stretton and Charlotte Yonge. Stretton is best known for her street arab tracts, stories written about impoverished youngsters whose pathetic circumstances are meant to stimulate the charitable impulses of their betters--both within the fictional world they inhabit and in real life.²³ Probably the best known tale from this genre is Jessica's First Prayer (1867).

Like the heroine of Ministering Children, Jessica is devout, submissive and innately chaste; consequently, her life is a perfect fulfillment of the prophecy, "a little child shall

lead them." But, in spite of her natural affinity to God, Jessica has been raised a heathen; and so she must find Him, a discovery which happily occurs through the unexpected assistance of her grown-up friend, Daniel. This man is a miserly hypocrite who operates a coffee stall under one of London's "many railway-bridges," a business by which he is able to supplement the wages earned as a caretaker at one of the fashionable churches in the city. Jessica and Daniel become friends, and one dark night while she walks the streets to avoid abuse from her demoralized and alcoholic mother, she follows him to the church where he works. Of course, this beautiful "fairylane" temple, its pastor, and his two well cared for daughters are the instruments whereby Jessica learns to utter her first prayer.²⁴ In turn, the child's conversion leads Daniel Standing back to God. He finally sheds his miserly hardness of heart and adopts the little street arab as his own grateful and dutiful daughter.

Like Jessica, all of the children in Stretton's stories survive through sheer tenacity, and help comes through sheer luck; nevertheless, they quietly submit to the temporal order responsible for their victimization. In this respect, perhaps the most depressing aspect of Stretton's melodramatic reformist Christianity is the spirit of self-abasement that is displayed by the young casualties of industrial England. This abject self-hatred is particularly apparent with Kitty, the "bad" young woman in another story, Little Meg's Children, who has been driven to a life of drink and prostitution by her poverty. At a crucial point in the drama she cries out to Meg: "You don't know

wicked I am; but once I was a good little girl like you. And now I can never, never, never be good again."²⁵

While Hesba Stretton did attempt to soften the social barriers arising from a rigidly stratified community in order to rehabilitate the street arabs of English towns and cities, Charlotte Yonge was remarkably clear about her class position and her social outlook. She came from a well-bred middle class family which closely followed the Hannah More tradition in the education of its female members; in fact Yonge was so attracted to the author of Strictures that a biography of this teacher is to be found in her works. Naturally, she transferred More's precepts into her own fiction where, according to Avery, the demands she made of young characters were equal to the most stringent rules forced upon girls and boys in real life (104). One of her best known novels, The Daisy Chain, is indicative of these imperatives and the way they are applied to female behaviour. The story, characterized by Oswald Bastable as "a first-rate book for girls and little boys,"²⁶ is about the eleven-child May family, the eldest daughter of which is called Margaret. This girl's prolonged invalidism from a back injury, following a carriage accident in which her mother is killed, is pertinent to the author's over-all vision of the ideal female: it represented the destination for women trained in the More/Yonge strictures school of education. While Margaret is physically incapacitated, and languishes on her couch for several years before she dies, a full understanding of her

problem can only be grasped if her confinement is seen to exemplify a hideous form of psychological captivity. This restraint is especially insidious for the eldest daughter because it means that her father, Dr. May, can more readily coerce her into the role of spiritual advisor to her ten brothers and sisters. While she may not be able to work as efficiently from a sick bed, she cannot easily remove herself from this onerous responsibility--not that the girl would wish to--for she is a nearly perfect example of Yonge's ideal of the early Victorian female.

While Margaret wages a brave struggle to act as a mother to her siblings, her younger sister, Ethel, finds it difficult to adapt to the rules of the May home. In portraying this unusual girl who is a fictional antecedent to Alice Bastable, Yonge accomplishes an interesting reversal: Margaret is beautiful, conventional, passive; Ethel is ugly, non-conventional, enterprising. Poor Ethel! She is all wrong for a girl! She is "brown, sallow," with a "sharp long nose, and . . . eager eyes, and [a] brow a little knit by the desire to see as far as she could."²⁷ But her appearance is not improved by her personality. She is much too active and, as her eyes indicate, much too curious. She learns Latin and Greek from her brother, Norman, and attempts to maintain the same degree of excellence in the subjects as he does.²⁸ However, Dr. May is dismayed by Ethel's neglect of duties in order to study, and uses Margaret to point this out to his younger daughter. I quote a portion of the discussion at some length because it is a consummate example

of the More system in practice.

"You see," said Margaret, kindly, "we all know that men have more power than women, and I suppose the time has come for Norman to pass beyond you. He would not be cleverer than any one, if he could not do more than a girl at home."

"He has so much more time for it," said Ethel.

"That's the very thing. Now consider, Ethel. His work, after he goes to Oxford, will be doing his very utmost--and you know what an utmost that is. If you could keep up with him at all, you must give your whole time and thoughts to it, and when you had done so--if you could get all the honours in the University--what would it come to? You can't take a first-class."

"I don't want one," said Ethel; "I only can't bear not to do as Norman does, and I like Greek so much."

"And for that would you give up being a useful, steady daughter and sister at home? The sort of woman that dear mamma wished to make you, and a comfort to papa."

Ethel was silent, and large tears were gathering. (DCh, 181)

Not surprisingly, Ethel May submits, but she is permitted to open a charity school for the poor in her parish and this endeavour provides a safe and commendable outlet in place of her frustrated academic interests.

During the eighteen-sixties, a further change in the nature of children's fiction occurred, an event that was signified, according to Avery, by the publication of Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (1865). She calls this modification in the attitude to juvenile literature of the

sixties an "unobtrusive but immense revolution," a revolution wherein "stories of pure entertainment were allowed their place . . . on shelves previously reserved for didactic and . . . moral books" (Avery, 121--and 64). Avery also notes another important transformation. Parallel to the discovery that it was safe and desirable to entertain children emerged a new and related approach to the depiction of fictional girls and boys. Writers now took actual youngsters as models for their books just as Carroll had done. Consequently, they were no longer satisfied to create the artificial, unrealistic characters for their fiction who were merely vehicles for diligence, or a good conscience, or some such attribute, no longer satisfied to portray allegorical creations like those which had often passed for real people during the first sixty years of the century. Furthermore, these new attitudes were indicative of an altered view of the child in society at large; a view associated with the third stage of the industrial revolution and its attendant ideological shifts in the adult world of English capitalism. I, therefore propose that one factor associated with the creation and production of Alice was the powerful position of the bourgeoisie during the period following the Great Exhibition in 1851.²⁹ The successful middle class patriarch who had been struggling to establish hegemony over the economy could now relax a little; could display his wealth; could give his daughters and sons books like Alice--and the leisure to enjoy them. The game had been won--or, at least, the rules had been mastered--for it was the kind of contest that required constant

vigilance. And so, children's literature can be seen as an indirect and minor reflection of the stability and prosperity and the increased ability to mass produce books which was characteristic of that period.

The innocent, playful child of the nursery world who also asserted a strong influence over the fiction of that period was well served by a writer whose first book, Tell Me a Story, was published in 1875. Mary Louisa Molesworth (Mrs. Molesworth) is important because most of her tales are designed to soothe and beguile the golden-haired residents of middle class nurseries. More than any other writer of her generation, this woman gave the daughters and sons of the bourgeoisie "sweet things to eat," at the same time that "she lapped them in soothing security"-- and at the same time that she discouraged them from venturing very far into real life. As Avery puts it, "a child's duty was simple and straightforward: to obey, to be kind to his brothers and sisters and those about him, to be contented." Above all, "he was not encouraged to concern himself much with the world outside the nursery" (Avery, 163).

The prescription that children should not concern themselves with the world outside their home brings to mind another aspect of the Victorian economy, one that originated on the dark other side of the triumphs symbolized by the Crystal Palace and the Great Exhibition. The market place may have been a perfect arena to test the virility and ingenuity of enterprising men, but it was also a dangerous battleground where casualties were high in number. Competitors were constantly

oppressed by the fear of financial ruin, or a vague guilt, later characterized by Beatrice Webb as a "consciousness of sin." This latter burden was brought to public attention by certain scholars and radicals of that period who claimed that the capitalist system was not the golden age for most people.³⁰ And so, this other face of life can also provide an explanation for the increasing attraction of the entertainment books of the sixties. Fantasy and amusement literature tended to protect middle class children from the frightening realities of contemporary English industrialism. The circumstances under which girls and boys were isolated in upstairs nurseries in order to indulge in fairy tales may have had profound significance for them, but the meaning of such changes originated with their fathers. The retreat into recreational fiction not only protected the offspring of the ruling class, it also tended to provide a vicarious form of protection for the bourgeoisie themselves--a sort of make-believe escape from the world of business success--or failure.

But the dark face of English society also found its way into juvenile fiction, disguised though it was by the colourful props of the fairy story. Certainly this was the case with Alice in Wonderland, if one sees Carroll's strange disorienting reorganization of time and space as a commentary on the frustrations encountered in the adult world outside the book. And it certainly was the case with George MacDonald. Therefore, it is not an a-historical coincidence that The Princess and the

Goblin and The Princess and Curdie were published in 1872 and 1883 respectively, for they are books that successfully encompass both sides of the question under discussion. They are entertaining and wonderful, but they also mirror the moral dilemma of post-revolutionary England. MacDonald's thinly veiled personifications of social good and evil both strain against and support conventional morality and custom. While, on the one hand, he may advocate a heterodox version of Christian ethics, on the other, his social outlook with respect to family life and children is essentially Victorian. Nevertheless, his nonconformist views ultimately prevail, if the ending of The Princess and Curdie is taken seriously, and MacDonald seemed to be saying that it should be thus judged. In the last chapter, prophetically entitled "The End," the destined marriage between Irene and Curdie takes place. When her father dies, they become the rulers of Gwyntystorm, but they have no children--a most unusual situation in Victorian fiction--and so the lineage of this virtuous and socially-conscious couple terminates upon their deaths. The people choose a king who is so greedy for gold that he ceases to care about the behaviour of his subjects or about the safety of Gwyntystorm which is situated above the mines. Consequently, his subjects return to "their old wickedness,"³¹ and the underpinnings of the city are seriously weakened by new tunnels. And then, "one day at noon, when life . . . [is] at its highest, the whole city . . . [falls] with a roaring crash" and it disappears from the face of the earth forever (221). While the meaning of this short decisive chapter may be apparent to most children, they will certainly not pick

up MacDonald's wider message. Given the period in which he lived and his anti-establishment views, it is valid to assume that this ending is a veiled condemnation of the dark and greedy face of English capitalist society. Since, as I have already postulated, writers always reflect their own reality indirectly and mediately, this explanation accounts for the pessimistic postscript that is abruptly tacked on to the traditional happy marriage ending, and it accounts for MacDonald's exorcism of the demon of modern greed by symbolically destroying those individuals who cannot resist its enslaving influence.

A central figure among children's authors in the third period under discussion was Mrs. Gatty's daughter, Juliana Horatia Ewing, whose first book was published in 1869, and her last one just thirteen years before The Story of the Treasure Seekers came out in 1899. Ewing emphasized the concept of innocence featured by Mrs. Molesworth, and continued the trend to write about life-like girls and boys; but, as Avery points out, her characters are without the sentimentality that reduces the credibility of Molesworth's children and they are placed in a down-to-earth, realistic context. More importantly, Avery argues, Ewing introduced themes that were to be modified and used by Kenneth Grahame and Edith Nesbit--an analysis confirmed if one looks at Ewing's major novels. First, her youngsters do what they most prefer to do: they play. Secondly, she tends to ignore class differences that were so important to Charlotte Yonge. A third attribute of Ewing's stories is her somewhat

critical attitude towards grown-ups, a disposition which foreshadowed the nineties' challenge to the ideas and conventions advocated by adult wisdom and authority. Lastly, a vital aspect of this writer is her attitude to the young female character. In this respect, the girls in the novel Six to Sixteen deserve special mention because they stand out as the true copies of Yonge's Ethel and as the true antecedents to Nesbit's fictional girls, particularly those like Alice Bastable who strive to assert a "new girl" measure of independence.

Ewing's two heroines in Six to Sixteen, Margery, the narrator, and Eleanor, her friend, are strong-willed individuals who are likely to be more at home with Ethel and Alice than with Margaret May, and they are not marred by the obsession with study and charitable works that characterize their counterpart in The Daisy Chain. Instead, these protagonists take an interest in their school work, when required, but they prefer to play, an activity that is not easy to achieve in nineteenth century female institutions, and the Bush House School that they attend is not exceptional in this respect. They suffer there, as well, "from an excess of the meddlesome discipline which seems to be de rigeur in girls' schools"³²--a form of control that leaves them no freedom except for a fifteen-minute exercise break after dinner. Writing in retrospect, Margery points out: "to growing girls, . . . the nag of never being free from supervision was both irritating and depressing." Furthermore, they were "much worse off . . . than boys at school," for

No playing fields had we; no leave could be obtained for country rambles by ourselves. Our dismal exercise was a promenade in double file under the eye and ear of Madame herself. (SS, 141)

Like Ethel May, Ewing's heroines are cheated on the academic side of their education as well--a handicap that does not go unnoticed. In fact, "the need for a higher education for women" is one of the "many points" that Margery and Eleanor agree upon (SS, 137). And yet, despite Ewing's open-minded approach to questions that were of primary importance to children--and to Grahame and Nesbit, her more radical co-thinkers--her fictional youngsters remain safely within the bounds of conventional behaviour. They move in the direction of the youngsters in The Golden Age and Dream Days, and of the Bastable children, but they never quite reach them.

In his book, The Eighteen Nineties, Holbrook Jackson points out that disruptive "fin de siecle tendencies" always mark the "closure of centuries" (19). Needless to say, however, each closure bears the distinctive imprint of the historical context in which it occurs; and, for this reason, the eighteen nineties were a social and cultural reflection of the vitality and frame of mind of the British Empire. This fourth stage of capitalism, and the last to be examined in this survey, is marked, on the one hand, by an increasing abundance of commodities and

colonies; and on the other hand, by deepening class conflict brought about by the continuing antagonism between capital and labour. Heightened by the recession of the eighties, these inherent contradictions brought to fulfillment the popular mood of mistrust and enquiry that had begun to take root in the third phase. In England in the Nineteenth Century, David Thomson claims that this uncertainty reached its most conservative expression in the spirit of aggression and jingoism which appeared in "imperial affairs" during the last five years of the century. It was a bold and threatening stance and it found its way into the social conscience because England was vulnerable in a new and terrifying way. In other words, as Thomson points out, it was "another expression of that consciousness of decline" that had begun earlier; and

it was the truculence that came from a great Power, recently so complacent in its greatness, finding itself quite suddenly and through no special shortcomings of its own on the defensive. 33

Rudyard Kipling was the "unofficial spokesman" of the new outlook and, as such, became "the voice of unrepentant but chastened imperialism, seeking . . . to equip British power with a moral purpose and a human content." But Kipling's role as spokesman for British foreign aggression and conservatism in home affairs constituted only one perspective in an epoch that witnessed, according to Thomson, numerous progressive enquiries to discover the "moral" and "human content" of life (204). This historian's analysis of that decade is affirmed by Holbrook

Jackson when he declares that the period displayed a spirit of "vitality" and tolerance wherein its most "effective" energy was "destructive of ideas and conventions" which were seen "as more or less permanent" (20).

The predominant dispositions of confidence and uncertainty were expressed in both personal and collective moods and thoughts. Jackson sees the "central" characteristic as "a widespread concern for the correct--that is, the most effective, the most powerful, the most righteous--mode of living" (12), and both men and women were looking for a route to this "effective" control of life. Both sexes wanted to test life for themselves: "the new man wished to be himself, the new woman threatened to live her own life," and the last ten years of the century offered that opportunity more than ever before, owing to the democratic spirit of this epoch (33). The nineties, then, was a "renascent period" of growth (19): the times were "electric with new ideas which strove to find expression in the average national life." Thus,

if luxury had its art and its traffic, so had a saner and more balanced social consciousness. If the one demanded freedom for an individual expression tending towards degeneration and perversion, the other demanded a freedom which should give the common man opportunities for the redemption of himself and his kind. Side by side with the poseur worked the reformer, urged on by the revolutionist. There were demands for culture and social redemption. (25)

The view of the nineties as an age of dissolution as well as renaissance is also supported by Gail Cunningham in The New

Woman and the Victorian Novel. Cunningham claims that the "malaise" of the times was likened to an illness by some critics, an "infection" which had "spread from Europe through the new translation of Ibsen and Zola."³⁴ But, like Jackson, she also describes it as "a period of deeply serious inquiry, of impassioned debate over central questions of moral and social behaviour" (1). Cunningham's point of departure for her study centers upon the role of progressive women during the last ten years of the century, with special focus on fiction written at that time. With this critical tool, she lifts notable females from the hidden places of history, and highlights their contributions to the decade--contributions that were usually radically innovative. Certainly, many prominent women were so avant-garde that the anti-feminist, Mrs. Roy Devereux, felt compelled to write in 1895 that "'life has taken on a strange unloveliness, . . . and the least beautiful thing therein is the New Woman.'" These rebels who refused to adopt the kind of behaviour prescribed for women were "abused by many, ridiculed by the less hysterical," but in the tolerant mood of the nineties they refused to surrender the right to strive towards a fuller, brighter, and more powerful life.³⁵ If the achievement of these goals meant the destruction of ideas and conventions looked upon as more or less permanent, then this was the price that had to be paid.

The feminism present in the fiction of the nineties also drew upon the more liberal atmosphere of the times; and these

favourable circumstances provided the impetus for further literary offensives against a patriarchal culture which had suppressed women for too long. As well, like changes in juvenile literature, this "apparent revolution" had historic precedents. According to Cunningham, it was a more profound and spectacular outgrowth of the struggle for female emancipation that had been struggling to be heard throughout the century (3). The New Woman social protest movements and their literary counterparts, then, can be seen as one of two conjunctive historical currents. First, there was the mainstream opposition to old values, a group dominated by male intellectuals and supported by women who were willing to submerge their special grievances into the "larger" struggle. Secondly, there was the tributary, a current which coexisted with the primary movement and was dominated by articulate middle class women. However, it must be pointed out that a third, largely unnoticed social current moved parallel to these crucial trends. This tributary constituted the area of children and children's literature--a sphere that was bound to be affected by the ferment of the nineties as well.

It is a truism to state that children are curious, energetic beings who ask questions about the world and the adults who control it, when they are not occupied exploring its spaces around them. And the converse is true: grown-ups question their relationships with the young and constantly revise their perceptions of their offspring--a fact verified by the preceding survey of nineteenth century juvenile books.

Therefore, it is logical and necessary that children's stories must in some way reflect the moods and thoughts of the nineties; that fin de siècle tendencies should find expression in new methods of communication among adults and girls and boys, and among children themselves. In fiction this breakthrough came in two books by Kenneth Grahame: The Golden Age (1895) and Dream Days (1898). These important volumes were the first genuine expression of juvenile malaise and rebellion voiced in this period: and while they are framed within an essentially male outlook and written retrospectively from an adult point of view, Grahame has spoken with sensitivity and a reasonable measure of impartiality about both sexes. His pivotal role as the power behind the young, unnamed, middle class narrator, who is a critic of "Olympian" ways, is the key to an understanding of his art--a point missed by Holbrook Jackson when he summarizes this author's importance with brief praise.

It is not unnatural to find that a period so bent on discovering--or rediscovering--romance in many things and experiences did not overlook the romance of childhood. This enchanted land had been discovered, as we know, by Lewis Carroll and Robert Louis Stevenson, but a new realm was explored with splendid results by Kenneth Grahame, who with The Golden Age (1896) and Dream Days (1898) created a new delight by introducing us into a delectable kingdom whose existence we had scarcely imagined. (275)

In fact, the characters in Grahame's "delectable kingdom" commit every kind of heresy against the grown-up world in the same way that Jackson's actual dissidents of the eighteen-nineties did. Grahame's message is not entirely unfamiliar--on

some matters, Ewing was moving tenuously in his direction--but it was fundamentally different in one important respect: for him, it was not only permissible to question grown-ups' opinions about life, one should do so as a matter of principle. This theme is enunciated on the first page of The Golden Age and maintained throughout these episodic narratives which look at five siblings who still live in a nursery world where girls and boys mix together in a free and impartial atmosphere.

Looking back to those days of old, ere the gate shut to behind me, I can see how that to children with a proper equipment of parents these things would have worn a different aspect. . . . At a very early age I remember realizing in a quite impersonal and kindly way the existence of that stupidity, and its tremendous influence in the world; . . . a vague sense of a ruling power, wilful, and freakish, and prone to the practice of vagaries . . . as, for instance, the giving of authority over us to these hopeless and incapable creatures, when it might far more reasonably have been given to ourselves over them. 36

Although these "incapable creatures" have full authority over their youthful prisoners, they are unable to enjoy their power, or their freedom. Even when they attempt to play--to employ their "absolute licence" to indulge in the "pleasures of life"--their efforts are flat and feeble (GA, 4).

From below, strains of the jocund piano declared that the Olympians were enjoying themselves in their listless impotent way; for the new curate had been bidden to dinner that night, and was at the moment unclerically proclaiming to all the world that he feared no foe. (GA, 93)

But, if grown-ups do not know how to entertain themselves properly, nor wish to, the five children in the stories do, and crave every opportunity to express this inborn compulsion. For the narrator, this means the right to reject an adult kind of existence which is "entirely devoid of interests," and which displays habits that are "stereotyped and senseless" (GA, 4). Still, not all adults are like the Olympians. Occasionally the children encounter grown-ups who are also in revolt against convention, and therefore able to understand the full range of meaning in the word "play." One of these individuals is the William Morris-like "Artist" in "The Roman Road." This stranger proves to be an appropriate advocate of doctrines similar to the narrator's, since the artist is usually viewed as a marginal member of society, just as the child is. Thus, his appearance not only underscores the irony that is a constituent of the scene where he appears, he can further be viewed as a counterpart to Albert's uncle, the child-like novelist in the Bastable trilogy. Both men are alike in that they identify with a juvenile form of resistance to convention which is the exact contrary of the social outlook of the Olympians.

Aside from the all-important question of adults as a subject of criticism during the nineties, Grahame's books exhibit an overall fin de siècle mood which Jackson, of all critics, should have picked up. In fact, The Golden Age and Dream Days are destructive of almost all of the ideas and conventions looked upon as more or less permanent in an adult-controlled environment. Honesty is of minor value in the

wondrous tales told to them by the narrator's friend, the doctor. Of course, "time, the destroyer of all things beautiful" eventually reveals "the baselessness of . . . [his] legends," but the boy is not concerned; after all, "there are higher things than truth"--literal or otherwise (GA, 49). Other moral questions are also a matter of indifference, including the great Victorian religious conscience which is relegated to a low rank in his cosmic order. Indeed, Grahame's narrator speaks with an irreverence that was shocking to the more orthodox individuals among his contemporaries. He is bored by the rituals of his faith, and is equally repelled by the Vicar, from whom Bill Saunders, "the peerless bad boy of the village," steals biscuits one fine morning. Although he claims not to be on the thief's side as well, the narrator is forced to confess that "something" about "this immoral morning" seemed to say that "Bill had as much right to the biscuits as the Vicar, and would certainly enjoy them better" (GA, 23).

Dream Days picks up the same themes as those explored in The Golden Age, but it is a more successful book. The improvement is due to a better form, and to greater facility of language, brought about by a moderation of the rather pompous turn of speech which mars the first collection of sketches. With this new narrative strength, Dream Days foreshadows Grahame's great achievement, The Wind in the Willows and it anticipates Nesbit's easy flowing style. In Dream Days, rebellion against authority is circumscribed by an attitude to

class differences that would horrify Hannah More or Charlotte Yonge and their followers. Concretely, it means associating with tradespeople and domestics as if they were friends and equals. For Grahame's storyteller, servants are primarily allies who are around to give aid and support to children in their increasing defiance of the Olympians. When he is "ignominiously" led out of the house of Aunt Eliza's friend after fingering a costly picture book--an expulsion carried out by a "stony, impassive" butler--one is not surprised to learn that the next time he is "off duty," they will "meet . . . as man to man." Furthermore, the boy reports, "I . . . [will] punch him and ask him riddles, and he . . . [will] teach me tricks with corks and bits of string."³⁷

Dream Days also contains a greater measure of tolerance and flexibility in its attitude to the question of sex-role stereotyping. The five youngsters play together, the girls do boyish outdoor things; thus, in this respect as well, Grahame acted as a catalyst for Nesbit's more advanced views. And yet, at first glance, this assessment may appear to be erroneous, since the narrator speaks as an unmitigated sexist most of the time; but his retrospective prejudices are so clearly placed in the youthful context where they belong, that they often lose their sting and appear to be nothing more than prescriptions learned by rote from his Olympian betters. In addition, a feeling is insinuated, fleetingly perhaps, that Grahame intended the reader to see them in this light--an assumption that is reinforced by the first chapter of Dream Days entitled "The

Twenty-First of October."

The boy's eldest sister Selina is the centre of this drama which comes about as the result of her strangely ungirlish hobby, "naval history" (DD, 6). Unfortunately, the narrator is absent when Selina's twenty-first of October incident takes place, an absence he "never ceased to regret," for he found "a splendid uselessness about the whole performance that specially appealed to . . . [his] artistic sense." That it should happen to be his sister who is attacked by this "weird seizure" serves to magnify the splendid quality of the act and raise it to the level of a work of art.

That it should have been Selina, too, who should break out this way--Selina, who had just become a regular subscriber to the "Young Ladies' Journal," and who allowed herself to be taken out to strange teas with an air of resignation palpably assumed--this was a special joy, and served to remind me that much of this dreaded convention that was creeping over us might be, after all, only veneer. (DD, 8)

Seen by the boy as a reaction against acceptable gender role-modelling expected of older children and adults, the girl's "Trafalgar Day" attack is intended as a memorial to her hero, Nelson, and comes about because no one would listen to her wish to "do something" for the dead officer (DD, 12). To this end, she transforms the pile of burning leaves in the garden into a glorious memorial to the man; and with the help of her youngest brother Harold, the smoking pyre is transmuted from a "paltry makeshift" into a "genuine bonfire." Likewise, Selina is

changed from a mere girl into a wild "Maenad."

Selina, . . . now hatless and tossing disordered locks, all the dross of the young lady purged out of her, stalked around the pyre of her own purloining, or prodded it with a pea-stick. And as she prodded she murmured at intervals, "I knew there was something we could do! It isn't much--but still it's something!" (DD, 17)

Of course, the girl is forced to return from her "brief inebriation" where she "lived in an ecstasy as golden as our drab existence affords" (DD, 19). She is appropriately punished for her reckless conduct; and when the

young-lady portion of her had crept timorously back to its wonted lodging, she could only see herself as a plain fool, unjustified, undeniable, without a shadow of an excuse or explanation. (DD, 20)

The opposition to artificial sexist conventions--a major theme in the Selina episode--is ignored in "The Reluctant Dragon." In its stead a mainstream message is projected which may be taken to imply a condemnation of strident sexism without doing violence to Grahame's overall intentions. Indeed, this delightful story within a story stresses the importance of all non-conventional behaviour. It does so by its form and content and by emphasizing the importance of play and fantasy; the wondrous, transforming power of the imagination; and the need to oppose senseless, outdated practices. In this respect, "The Reluctant Dragon" can be seen as a model for the prominence given to imaginative play and the resistance to mindless rituals

in Nesbit's works; but it can also be viewed as a fin de siècle tale par excellence, and as a juvenile emblem for the moods and thoughts of the nineties.

The story involves three major characters: the Boy, St. George, and the dragon--all of whom act in a manner which is the antithesis of normal expectations. But the Boy and St. George only do so after the gentle, kindly, and womanish beast compels them to change their minds about ideas and conventions they had come to look upon as more or less permanent. When the monster refuses to fight the knight in order to oblige everyone, its explanation articulates, in a fairy tale context, the resistance to custom characteristic of that decade.

"Believe me, St. George, . . . there's nobody in the world I'd sooner oblige than you and this young gentleman here. But the whole thing's nonsense, and conventionality, and popular thick-headedness. There's absolutely nothing to fight about, from beginning to end. And anyhow I'm not going to, so that settles it"! (DD, 182)

The dragon not only refuses to fight to the death as he is supposed to, but the three protagonists organize a mock contest in order to placate the foolish villagers. Everyone is happy with the outcome, which shows that unconventional behaviour is worth trying, even when some people must be deceived in order to do so.

St. George, hauling on his spear with both hands, released the dragon, who rose and shook himself and ran his eye over his spikes and scales and things, to see that they were all in order. Then the Saint mounted and led off the procession, the dragon following meekly in the company of the Boy, while the thirsty spectators kept at a respectful interval behind. (DD, 196)

A second dénouement adds a superb touch of irony to the tale. It derives from a song, overheard by Charlotte and her brother as they hurry home after parting from their storyteller. Sung by a grown-up, a member of the church choir who is also returning home after a practice--

"Then St. George: ee made rev'rence: in the stable
so dim,
Oo vanquished the dragon: so fearful and grim.
So-o grim: and so-o fierce: that now may we say
All peaceful is our wakin': on Chri-istmas Day!"
(DD, 203)

--the dragon in the hymn forms a link with the one in the fairy tale. This structural parallellism forces into the children's present the problem of "conventionality" and "popular thickheadedness." By moving the struggle against conformity from the era of the dragon to that of the children, Grahame also moves it to the present, since the story and the reader become a single unit in time at the point of reading.

Chapter II

NO MAN EVER WANTS TO BE A WOMAN

Oswald Bastable--Sexist Narrator and Rebel

As the narrator of the stories and as a key character, Oswald Bastable can scarcely be excluded from any study of the Bastable trilogy. But, if some degree of recognition and investigation of Oswald is crucial to any assessment of the books, regardless of the theoretical models employed, he is even more important when a feminist frame of reference is used as the basis of study. And this last comment is true because Oswald Bastable is the focal point of male chauvinism as well as the focal point of a kind of fin de siècle awareness of women's unrealized importance and worth. As such, he is the agent through whom Edith Nesbit exposes the patriarchal society around her, as well as a major agent through whom she opens up the prospects for the realization of a non-sexist environment. In other words, the boy's outspoken chauvinism, as well as his bright-eyed avowal of unconventional opinions, are the means whereby Nesbit forces the issue of feminism into the open. In so doing, she outstrips Kenneth Grahame's narrator as a vehicle for a new and radical approach to life. And yet, despite Oswald's unerring march in a feminist direction, a journey that is only suggested by Grahame's story-teller, an immediate link exists between the two speakers and between Grahame and Nesbit with regard to The Golden Age, Dream Days, and the Bastable trilogy. Nesbit confirms this link through the voice of Oswald when he says, "The Golden Age . . . is Al except where it gets

mixed up with grown-up nonsense" (W, 85). Furthermore, an examination of the Bastable stories as a whole verifies this connection and shows that she adapted the mood of inquiry and resistance verbalized by Grahame's fictional children to her own ends.³⁸ And, like her predecessor, she creates a context or setting consisting of two key elements: the environment of her child characters, and the social issues to be highlighted by them.

The first of these components consists of a background where adults are less interfering than in Grahame's books. Those who do become involved in the daily activities of the Bastable youngsters are easygoing individuals--like Mrs. Bax, or Albert's uncle who is a counterpart to the guileless Artist in Dream Days. The children's mother is dead and their father is preoccupied with his business problems so that he has little time for them; and, because he is temporarily bankrupt, they are forced to withdraw from school. They return to the relative freedom of nursery-like conditions, similar to those enjoyed by Grahame's characters--a setting where they are thrust together in a more egalitarian, a-sexist atmosphere than exists at school or in public life. With the second of these elements, Nesbit also reflects Grahame's guidelines. Play is elevated to a high rank in the order of human activities; adults are demoted from their flawless Olympian heights; being good and patronizing goodness is dismissed with a momentary gesture--"Dora had feelings about tossing up on Sunday, so we did it with a hymn-

book instead of a penny" (NTS, 79). However, as I have already emphasized, in her "New Woman" awareness of the special problems faced by females, Nesbit moves beyond Grahame. For her, the question of their relationship to society as a whole cannot be separated from the conditioning of youngsters to conform to gender stereotypes. What she does in the Bastable trilogy, therefore, is use her radical approach to these subjects as the basis for her censure of sexism. To be more specific, she manipulates the major themes of play and the perspective of children in order to make a criticism of adult views around the question of gender. Consequently, as in The Golden Age and Dream Days, her topic is seen through the child-vision of a narrator who perceives the proper use of leisure time as the key to satisfaction and fulfillment, and who often evaluates the girls in the stories by this yardstick.

To return to Oswald, then, and the pivotal observations made at the beginning of this chapter, the youth's major claim to recognition as storyteller and character is his status as the focal point of traditional and non-traditional views, including sexism and its converse, feminism. Because the boy is an immature and ambivalent blend of traits, we will see that he both defends and attacks male chauvinism and defends and attacks a feminist point of view, but he does so by default, not by means of any developed and fully understood philosophical or political point of departure. And while he is, in the long run, the principal and most effective voice in support of Nesbit's far-reaching ideas, she makes him so by fusing into his

personality certain important and frequently contradictory features that will be examined subsequently. These features are, in turn, artfully employed in order to score points against the adult world and its patriarchal culture. Of course, it is perhaps unnecessary to point out that Nesbit's control over Oswald to promote her own ends is not accidental or unexpected. Writers are never fully objective about their characters or ^{attachment} completely distanced from them; nor are they emotionally detached, therefore, from the process of artistic selection--an aspect of creativity that Nesbit has Oswald highlight in The Treasure Seekers (24). Certainly this personalization of artistic options would have been intensified in the case of Nesbit. After all, she moved in stimulating circles and championed unusual causes, and she championed them so seriously that they clamoured to be given expression in the juvenile genre where she was most at ease as a writer. But a novelist always treads on dangerous ground in any manipulation of character and characters in order to realize author-driven goals--a hazard that is especially relevant in a series of books for children where the narrator is also a child. Oswald cannot be too wise or too uncommon or he will be a mere puppet, not a true-to-life twelve year old who will appeal to young readers. On the other hand, he cannot be unduly obtuse or ordinary or he will not be perceptive enough to act as the vehicle to bring her political and feminist aims to life. A balance between the two extremes must be achieved if he is to be adequate to the dual task Nesbit sets for him. Needless to say, this writer accomplishes both

objectives and she does so because she knows how to entertain youngsters and how to give voice to her convictions without resorting to sober and sanctimonious didacticism, whether of the Ministering Children variety or her own socialistic brand. Consequently, she never permits Oswald to regress to a mere transmitter for her ideas. Instead, he is a life-like youngster who is also a successful combination of "a little child shall lead them" artlessness, of self-assurance, and of conventional and unconventional views--a balance that is perfectly suited to his task as a critic of adult attitudes to each other and to their children. This shrewd promotion of her own political outlook and her feminist beliefs through the voice of a child who amuses other children is Nesbit's great strength and one that never falters throughout the Bastable trilogy.³⁹ One of the many examples of her skill in this technique concerns the departure of the Bastable youngsters' Indian uncle in The Wouldbegoods.

Then uncle let us all go with him to the station when the fly came back for him; and when we said good-bye he tipped us all half a quid, without any insidious distinctions about age or consideration whether you were a boy or a girl. (W, 167)

The key to an understanding of this quotation lies in the clause where the word "insidious" appears. As he often does, Oswald outreaches himself again and chooses "insidious" when he obviously meant to use the commonly accepted term, "invidious." In allowing him to make this error Nesbit presses home his lack of skill and, therefore, his lack of credibility--in this case

as a purveyor of words--and she underlines in strong terms his occasional attitudes of unprejudiced impartiality to the opposite sex. But she does more than this, for insidious is certainly not the same as invidious. While the latter word may indicate undisguised favouritism or unfairness or, perhaps, ill-will, the former term clearly stands for a form of treachery that is slyly masked and not readily apparent to its victims. In this case, that treachery is the all-pervasive sexism of English society--a condition so well entrenched in social habit that it is usually not seen as such by most people. The substitution of a more powerful and pointed term for the intended one is, in this example, a clear illustration of the skill with which Nesbit gets her message across without disrupting or effacing the one that is of greatest interest to the juvenile reader; namely, the unexpected gift of half a quid each.

Although Nesbit's unmatched skill in the creation of humour as a means of exposing and supporting Oswald is also a mainstay in her manipulation of his character, it will not be used as a point of reference in the analysis of the boy or in the analysis of Alice in the following chapter. Still, I must point out that the ironic opposition between Oswald's limited perspective of life and a grown-up's apparently wider view is the primary source of her comedy, and a fundamental method whereby she often provokes questions about traditional behaviour. Because her wit encompasses adults as well as children, the discrepancy between

her narrator's view of reality and "reality" does not end with him. Certain grown-ups are also unmasked by his artless perceptions and are found to be as naive as he is. A superb example is the Sandal family in New Treasure Seekers--with the exception of their sister, Mrs. Bax--for they, too, are not aware of the gap that exists between their limited outlook on life, and life itself. Oswald's critique of individuals like the Sandals illustrates the way his childish innocence acts as a source of wisdom which serves to expand his influence. His exposure is successful because the Sandals are sad and silly people, and it is successful because they increase his intellectual stature by contrast with their own. He may be simple in many respects, but some adults are equally so; consequently, he seems to be a greater source of truth and wisdom than he really is. He may behave childishly at times, but many grown-ups do so as well; and therefore his mistakes are no worse than the misguided, ill-judged actions of adults. Finally, her humour functions as a corrective to the tragic and sombre conditions of English bourgeois society. And, since her comical situations arise from the milieu of the Bastable children--the ever struggling middle class--they are never gratuitous, for they always serve to expose the senseless side of their culture as it is revealed to these youngsters from day to day.

When we shift from the above overview of Nesbit's use of Oswald Bastable to specific examples, the inquiry is facilitated by the recognition of the two interdependent perspectives from

which he must be seen. Both of these perspectives grow directly from his ambivalent personality, referred to before, a personality which advocates a traditional male chauvinist creed at the same time that he often supports a freethinking progressive outlook. I shall deal with the former and most important category first, and begin with the following assertion: although male chauvinist beliefs are to be expected of a Victorian boy, fictional or otherwise, Oswald is different from some heroes by virtue of his outspoken advocacy of these attitudes. But sexist opinions--and actions--by a character as important as this child would seem to be a contradiction of Nesbit's intentions. In other words, if her aim is an exposure of sexism, and the suggestion of alternative patterns of conduct among girls and boys and men and women, a boy as the alleged originator of the texts may seem puzzling at first. Female writers may not always treat girl characters fairly or with feminist sensitivity--the books already discussed in Chapter I bear this truth out--but a youth who openly professes male supremacist views would seem to guarantee that the stories will be distorted by these gender biases. However, if we expand upon the preceding general evaluation where the importance of Oswald for this role is posited, textual evidence confirms that the creation of this type of narrator is a brilliant coup on Nesbit's part. And this is so because she sets him up so that the reverse of normal expectations happens: his prejudices are frequently turned around and transformed into their opposite more effectively than would be the case with a female

storyteller. To express it another way, she achieves her end through the creation of a narrator and character who is undermined by his own socially conditioned male nature, rather than by an external mechanism.⁴⁰ Oswald's sabotage of Oswald and its consequences--the ascendancy of Nesbit's objectives--stems from apparent shortcomings in his personality that really prove to be assets from her point of view. But the starting point for any analysis of these attributes, and the key to his value as a voice for this author, is his age. The boy is a pre-adolescent twelve year old who is typically ignorant and naive about most aspects of life. As a result, he absorbs opinions and fragmentary ideas from his elders that are not fully understood and they become part of a collection of judgements waiting for maturity in order to be meshed into some kind of overall ideology. But in voicing these opinions and ideas, Oswald constantly trips over his own ignorance, making it impossible to take his narrow-minded views seriously. Instead, they provoke an ironic second level of meaning that is a denial of the one stated in the explicit text. This process is assisted by three primary age-related factors that have been selected and used by Nesbit in order to heighten the awareness that the stories are being told by an unreliable child who cannot always be taken at face value. These are: his lack of practical experience, evidenced in his narrational skills; his lack of judgment, seen in his evaluation of himself; and his ignorance with regard to social questions, expressed in his unthinking, learned-by-rote attitudes.

Evidence of his vulnerability in the first of these devices is immediately apparent in the opening book of the trilogy, The Story of the Treasure Seekers, where he raises the question of the narrator's identity. On the first page of the first chapter, he says to his audience, "While the story is going on you may be trying to guess, only I bet you don't."⁴¹ This threat proves to be typical Oswaldian vain boasting only six pages later, where he reveals himself--"when I was only four"--in a context where the four year old can be no one but Oswald (21). If this inadvertent revelation is too subtle, others appear that are quite obvious.

. . . and Oswald drew a picture of the Malabar going down with all hands. It was a full-rigged schooner, and all the ropes and sails were correct; because my cousin is in the Navy, and he showed me. (TS, 49)

Or, on the next page: "I went with Noel, because I am the eldest" (50).

But Oswald's lack of experience is unmistakable in the area of writing practice. Although he is aware that a person's style is often unwholesomely influenced by others--

(I hope you do not think that the words I use are getting too long. I know they are the right words. And Albert's uncle says your style is always altered a bit by what you read. And I have been reading the Vicomte de Bragelonne. Nearly all my new words come out of those.) (W, 111)

--he is constantly swept along on flights of rhetoric that he obviously picked up from others. He uses his Romantic manner from time to time, addressing his public as "gentle reader" (TS, 152); or, more dramatically, as "O reader" (TS, 158); and he picks up epic grandeur as well, inserting it willy-nilly into the middle of his own plain prose.

And we agreed to get up the very next day, ere yet the rosy dawn had flushed the east, and have a go at Mrs. Simpkin's garden. (W, 55)

Sometimes he suddenly remembers this affectation in mid-sentence --"we had a very beautiful supper--out of doors, too--with jam sandwiches and cakes and things that were over; and as we watched the setting monarch of the skies--I mean the sun" (W, 197); but most of the time he strikes a style that is peculiarly his own: "and if any of you kids who read this ever had two such adventures in one night you can just write and tell me. That's all" (TS, 173). It is a style that is often disfigured by awkward but amusing constructions as well: "the ones of us who had started the Society of the Wouldbegoods began, at about this time, to bother" (W, 107).

While Oswald's sentence structure is usually more eloquent than the last example, his vocabulary is another matter. He misuses words--the Bastable children seek "to aid and abet the poor widow . . . in her desolate and oppressedness" (W, 54). He uses words in the wrong context, claiming that Albert's uncle is not "extirpated" from the law regarding marriage (W, 281). And,

to make matters worse--or better--as he progresses in his writing career, Oswald exhibits greater daring in his use of language. Not only does he inappropriately apply standard English terms, he invents new ones. This habit is most apparent in New Treasure Seekers where he describes the lady in the workhouse as "Judgular" (38), claims that he is filled with "mixed flusteredness and furification" (40), or points out that Alice bears upon her brow "the marks of ravaging agitatedness" (59). The boy's unique terminology is splendidly illustrated as well in reference to a lunch at the Red House, described as "a blissful dream of perfect A.l.-ness" (NTS, 88), and in another aside to his audience where he says, "the intelligible reader may easily guess" (NTS, 99). Although he has learned of literary style from Albert's uncle: "a great glorious glow of goodness gladdened (those go all together and are called alliteration)" (W, 215), Oswald still has trouble with his sentences. The juxtaposition of nouns is sometimes rather unusual--a "stupor of despair" (TS, 73), or "a gay galaxy of animals" (W, 110), to name but two; and he forgets how to punctuate his oddly constructed periods, his most notable muddle being a forest of brackets inserted in a programme for their make-believe circus.

Alpine feat of daring. The climbing of the Andes, by Billy, the well-known acrobatic goat. (We thought we could make the Andes out of hurdles and things, and so we could have but for what always happens. (This is the unexpected. (This is a saying father told me--but I see I am three deep in brackets so will close them before I get into any more).)). (W, 118)

Despite the foregoing, Oswald's greenness does not deter him from narrating three books. In order to bring about such an accomplishment, a further personal ingredient is necessary: the possession of a generous store of self-confidence. Indeed, if Oswald's frequent, ill-judged praise of his own abilities is to be believed, the youth is a giant among boys. Although the intensity with which he strives to show the world his intelligent and "noble" character certainly suggests an element of insecurity, this timidity is a minor aspect of his personality. By and large, Oswald is filled with a cocksure boldness arising from his highly conscious sense of self, and his status as the eldest boy in a permissive middle class family. To read about his self-aggrandizement is to scrutinize a catalogue of traits applicable to the conventionally nearly perfect male. Although only twelve, he is "a very thoughtful boy for his age" (TS, 99); is a person of "firm and unswerving character" (TS, 112); and he possesses such a "noble" disposition that this quality can only be given just treatment in an entire episode, "The Nobleness of Oswald" (TS, 139). After "anticipating" possible reader skepticism about the title of the chapter, the narrator presses his case with the reminder, "I do not say he was a noble boy--I just tell you what he did, and you can decide for yourself about the nobleness" (TS, 152). And the list goes on. He displays "delicacy and good breeding" (W, 54) on most occasions; is resourceful (W, 97); is "naturally" a "leader" (W, 142); is "prompt" (NTS, 18) at all times; and, like his father, is always decisive when

"decisiveness" is required (NTS, 18). The boy is also "very patient and will say the same thing any number of times" (NTS, 28) when attempting to reason with his less gifted brothers and sisters. He is "ingenious and felicitious"--whatever he thinks the second word is supposed to mean (NTS, 109)--and, to top all of these traits, this brash child says,

Oswald is a very modest boy, I believe, but even he would not deny that he has an active brain. The author has heard both his father and Albert's uncle say so. And the most far-reaching ideas often come to him quite naturally--just as silly notions that aren't any good might come to you. (NTS, 58)

Unfortunately, some of the ideas that come to him are not "far-reaching" or new: on the contrary, they are the well-established, grown-up beliefs of the Hannah More variety. And so, for all his professed originality, the child is still a mimic of Victorian patriarchal values, among which the first principle states that girls and boys are innately different. The follow epigrammatic statements by Oswald summarize this outlook perfectly:

Girls . . . have their nature, the same as bull-dogs have, and it is this that makes them so useful in smoothing the pillows of the sick-bed and tending wounded heroes. (W, 109)

It is not right to let girls smoke. They get to think too much of themselves if you let them do everything the same as men. (TS, 141)

Furthermore, he flaunts his assumed superiority over his sisters and over Noel, his girlish, would-be-poet brother, at every

opportunity; and he constantly moralizes about these so-called differences by means of further statements or editorial diversions about girls and "their nature" that he mistakenly assumes to be true under all circumstances. But the substance of Oswald's concurrence with patriarchal values and his crude attempts to undervalue the ^{why opposite? what's opposite about male & female?} opposite sex can be seen most clearly in two episodes. The first, which illustrates his approval of these standards within the family, takes place in The Treasure Seekers in the chapter called "Robber and Burglar." As the heroes of the adventure, the boys are permitted to stay up for a feast of leftovers with their father and the "robber" who is actually his friend. Not so with the girls: they are excluded and sent to bed, and Oswald accepts this unjustifiable inequality without protest. On the contrary, he merely comments, "we sat up till past twelve o'clock, and I never felt so pleased to think I was not born a girl" (172). The second demonstrates his disdain for the opposite sex and occurs in New Treasure Seekers. Here he agrees to wear a female disguise and accompany Alice on a visit to Albert's uncle's editor, an offer over which he makes the following lament:

No man ever wants to be a woman, and it was a bitter thing for Oswald's pride, but at last he consented. He is glad he is not a girl. (NTS, 130)

*2.
a term a
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Clearly, then, Oswald does not want to be a girl, or a milk-sop like Noel, and the reasons for this conviction are fundamental to his notions about the true nature of the female

personality. Girls and women may be "useful" for "tending" sick or wounded boys and men, but they are inherently passive, unimaginative, emotional individuals who are given to frequent attacks of tears. In fact, he sees his sisters' nervous irritability as sufficient reason to be kind to them in minor matters--"Dora wanted to be editor and so did Oswald, but he gave way to her because she is a girl" (TS, 84). Had he not done so, Dora would most certainly have cried; an opinion he stresses more than once in order to emphasize the difference between girls and boys, and an opinion verbalized in the "Castilian Amoroso" incident.

I am afraid there is a great deal of crying in this chapter, but I can't help it. Girls will sometimes; I suppose it is their nature, and we ought to be sorry for their affliction. (TS, 136)

However, if the narrator's prejudices against his sisters are further investigated, it will be discovered that they are established on foundations as untrustworthy as his narrative skills or his ability to judge his own worth. Indeed, Oswald's continual unpremeditated sabotage of his partially assimilated ideology and the exposure of his own weaknesses undermines his authority as a member of the dominant sex. This predicament is made evident during a conversation where Alice is challenged by Dicky and Oswald to accompany them up the staircase of the tower in "The Tower of Mystery."

"All right, I'm not afraid. I'm only afraid of being late home," and came up after us. And perhaps, though not downright many truthfulness, this was as much as you could expect from a girl.

There were holes in the little tower of the staircase to let light in. At the top of it was a thick door with iron bolts. We shot these back, and it was not fear but caution that made Oswald push open the door so very slowly and carefully.

Because, of course, a stray dog or cat might have got shut up in there by accident, and it would have startled Alice very much if it had jumped out on us. (W, 75)

Here it can be seen that Oswald is as deceptive as Alice is supposed to be in the attempt to conceal his own fear, unintentionally revealed in this passage. In spite of the "brave young blood" (W, 24) that flows in his veins, Oswald is not the stout-hearted warrior he chooses to portray himself to be. Unfortunately, the boy's refusal to face the truth about himself and his failure to live up to socially conditioned standards for proper masculine behaviour tends to provoke a reaction against Alice. He becomes somewhat too adamant in his insistence that she is lying about her apprehension--a strategy that is rather useful. If he privately recognizes his own cowardice in this situation, a way to mitigate the discomfort of this self-knowledge is to make his sister look worse. This tactic helps him out of his difficulties in two ways: it renews his confidence and it leaves his preconceptions about gender differences unchanged, thus preserving in Oswald's eyes his tenuous status as a brave and noble male.

While Nesbit has given Oswald all of the apparent shortcomings detailed so far, she has also equipped her hero with other traits that increase his value as the unwitting judge of narrow-minded custom. Indeed, if we examine him briefly from our second perspective, evidence shows that he possesses rather unusual qualities for a twelve year old that are quite the opposite to the attributes already catalogued. But to say they are in opposition is, perhaps, misleading. In reality, while they may be different, they are closely linked to the personality factors discussed so far. And so, in spite of his bumbling naiveté and his aping of other people's doctrines, Oswald is a bright, curious, unusual child who stumbles into error and imitates an adult point of view simply because he is curious and because he is bright enough to pick up on the grown-up milieu around him. In practical terms this means that she permits him to transcend the limitations of age and the disadvantages that accompany immaturity and act in unexpectedly mature ways. Therefore, despite a lack of practice, Oswald knows how to tell a more compelling story than Grahame's narrator; and he is aware of his faults in a way that is more characteristic of grown-up writers--a circumstance that never occurs with the latter storyteller.⁴² Secondly, despite his ill-concealed lack of modesty, he is a boy worthy of praise, for he is intelligent, resourceful--and charming. Finally, despite his sexism, he is often open-minded and innovative in a reluctant dragon fashion, an outlook that is most significant when we look at his mixed and ambivalent relationship with Alice

in the next chapter.

Oswald also transcends the limitations of age and becomes a youthful critic of adult ways by virtue of the truth and wisdom that is traditionally thought to issue from the mouths of babes and the pure in heart. In this regard, Nesbit takes up and refashions in realist terms the notion of childish innocence as a source of intuitive knowledge and integrates it into Oswald's personality. Thus the highly exaggerated and sentimental "a little child shall lead them" theme that was adopted by Hesba Stretton and other writers of Christian tracts is transformed into an instrument to further Nesbit's feminist aims. As a result of this transformation, Oswald succeeds in exposing "conventionality" and "popular thickheadedness" by means of the guileless denunciation of unacceptable adult-endorsed customs; and these include sexism, even though he does so inadvertently and frequently in a backhanded manner. Of course, innocent children are dangerous, as Nesbit well knows. They stray out of control and accentuate social evils to an even greater extent than the author's original intentions, and to a greater extent than a grown-up storyteller who is as much a partisan of the system as Oswald considers himself to be. Consequently, the boy's child-power has ramifications that extend beyond the formal scope of the questions he raises; it inspires a reading that endorses his reasonable and fair-minded insights--insights that are really based on his own observations and thoughts rather than intuitive knowledge or other people's opinions. And so, when he boldly

attacks the predominant concept of absolute parental authority with the plea--"I do like a person to say they're sorry when they ought to be--especially a grown-up. They do it so seldom" (TS, 130)--the reason and justice behind this argument will stimulate interest in the subject just as his outspoken attacks on females stimulate awareness of sexism. And, since his argument is fair and logical and liberal-minded, it will activate support among children and adults just as his immoderate anti-female position provokes rejection.

But the examination of Oswald's bright and unconventional side is incomplete without reiterating how closely he resembles his double in The Golden Age and Dream Days. Indeed, the fictitious originator of the Bastable trilogy possesses the same charm and same avant-garde and rebellious personality as his grown-up/child counterpart in these books. Both storytellers adopt as their central preoccupation a concern for "the most effective, the most powerful . . . mode of living" (Jackson, 12) and both writers attempt to realize this mission in practice. Although Oswald is hampered by his limited knowledge and burdened by his partially assimilated patriarchal ideology, he does attempt to transcend his environment and reject ideas and conventions that no longer seem valid. Rather than follow the "insidious" habits of custom, he tries to test life for himself and expects others to do the same. Furthermore, the boy's role as a kind of fin de siècle social critic is never artificial or strained. It is always compatible

with the realities of his own childhood milieu in the same way that the humour in the books is in tune with his life situation.

To recapitulate, then, the issues pertinent to Oswald and Grahame's storytellers as critics of English culture are centred on play, a child's relationship to adults, and to other children. But the ability to play, which is really the capacity to reject convention, to explore new modes of living, to test life for one's self, is central to their standards of behaviour. It is the fulcrum upon which the question of adult authority and sexism turns. Boys worthy to be boys know how to amuse themselves adequately and imaginatively, and girls who "ought to have been" (NTS, 200) boys know how to do so as well. These strongly voiced principles are especially germane to the evaluation of Alice Bastable which follows.

Chapter III

DON'T KEEP SAYING WE'RE ONLY GIRLS

Alice Bastable - the Child Narrated

As the principal component of male supremacist opinions Oswald often patronizes and belittles his sisters. While he may love them as well, his affection does not override his misogynist outlook or deter him from mimicking only too often the typical misconceptions about their characters that are learned from his elders. However, his code of conduct for the sexes is still unpolished and malleable--a situation directly associated with his age, and age-related traits, and his father's business problems which prevent attendance at school and force a prolonged and close association with his sisters. As a result, he often transcends the male frame of reference, largely learned in the outside world, insofar as his favourite sister, Alice, is concerned. And he is able to do so because her proximity enables him to observe her at all times, and, therefore, perceive that she has a personality similar to his own faultless one. Even so, Oswald's observations of his sister give rise to a perplexing difficulty: the traditional boy's school side of his mind dictates that she should be dealt with as a mere girl, while his undifferentiated non-traditional sympathies plead that she be given the privileges and respect afforded to boys. In fact, the conflict between social and personal attitudes--between the public arena and the democracy of nursery conditions--makes him into a split personality

insofar as his perceptions of Alice and himself are concerned. Furthermore, this dualistic outlook is magnified owing to his extremely naive and untutored condition--a fact stated earlier and a fact that cannot be stressed too much. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, it is the chief reason for his ability to get away with his brand of sexism time and again, and the overriding reason why a feminist reading of this outlook can be extracted from the assessment of his sisters that she permits him to make. In addition, we know from Nesbit's orchestration of Oswald that Alice is, in fact, not a "normal" girl. Rather, she is the author's example of a new kind of fictional female child, an individual who was foreshadowed by Ewing's and Grahame's girl characters, and as such, a counterpart to the "New Woman" who was to be seen in the fiction and reality of the nineties. In this role, Alice fulfills a crucial function as the focal point of Nesbit's feminism, and she acts as an unwitting agent to further expose her brother's male chauvinist attitudes, as well as his failure to live up to conventional standards of malehood.

With the above point of reference in mind, the first information pertinent to Nesbit's direction of Oswald's narratorial view of Alice is recorded in Chapter Three of The Treasure Seekers. In this episode, called "Being Detectives," she refuses to reveal her information about the night light in the house next door except on one condition. "'I'll tell you if you boys will promise not ever to go fishing again without me'" (TS, 37). When they decide to investigate the mystery, there is

an attempt on the part of Dicky to protect his sister and bar her from the "danger" likely to be encountered in such an enterprise, but Oswald refuses to comply, pointing out that "they had promised . . . and a promise is a sacred thing" (TS, 39). As a result, the three children spy on the house that evening, expecting to find burglars or a dangerous gang of coiners at work. Everyone is fearful, but Alice is the only one who admits that she does not "half like it"--a confession devalued by Oswald's interjection about her female nature:

and as she is a girl I do not blame her. Indeed, I thought myself at first that perhaps it would be better to retire for the present. (TS, 40)

Like "The Tower of Mystery" incident, the same pattern is repeated in this adventure. The aim is to undermine his sister's courage and stress her anxiety--a tactic which can serve several purposes. It helps to undermine his intermittent and unorthodox admiration of Alice, and it conceals his own inarticulated fear and cowardice. These motives are sustained by his further unwillingness to draw attention to Alice's victory over her fright, a triumph evidenced by her refusal to escape home and leave the boys to fight the imaginary invaders alone. What is actually achieved by this attack, then, is a partially successful displacement of the narrator's fear to his sister. The "but Alice didn't half like it . . . I do not blame her" confession contains an odd change of tense, suggesting more than the slip of an inexperienced speaker. The effect of this

transition is to move outside the hour of the incident and add a timeless quality to the girl's fear. It implies that Alice was and is and perhaps will always be a coward because she is female; and Oswald was not, is not, and will never be one because he is male. Oswald's unerring equivocation is also injected into this scene. He may condemn his sister for cowardice, and release himself from similar criticism by the "as she is a girl" phrase; but the entire statement is an oblique admission that he, too, is frightened. Unwittingly, his censure of Alice leads him into a position where he judges himself as well. And this unintentional self-appraisal is certainly confirmed by the unspoken opinion that they "return later with a strongly armed force" (TS, 40).

As it turns out, Alice proves an indispensable addition to the detective squad: she runs for help when Oswald is knocked unconscious. The boy's subsequent report of her resourcefulness contains his customary editorial elaboration and the usual double-edged message.

Now you will perhaps expect that at this moment Alice would have cried "Murder!" If you think so you little know what girls are. Directly she was left alone in that tree she made a bolt to tell Albert's uncle all about it and bring him to our rescue in case the coiner's gang was a very desperate one.
(TS, 42)

When he says, "what girls are" in this particular context, he obviously means his favourite sister, but he also means all girls--an opinion which is the opposite to Oswald's stance two

pages earlier--and an opinion which defers to the latent reserve of initiative and courage possessed by all females. From the boy's double-talk, then, the following information can be gleaned: Alice is persistent--she refuses to let the boys bar her from the detective adventure; she is courageous--although she does not "half like it," she stays with them; and she is resourceful--she "bolts" to Albert's uncle to get help for her brother. Therefore, the "Being Detectives" episode establishes the child as an individual who displays "male" behaviour patterns, and, consequently, is more valuable in her brother's eyes than most girls. Finally, it reveals in concrete terms the disparate components of Oswald's sexism and shows how his male chauvinist beliefs are undermined by reality and transformed into an ambivalent combination of typical and atypical conclusions about his sister, and, indirectly, about himself.

With the exception of a few incidents like the one just analyzed, The Treasure Seekers describes the attempts of the six children to restore the "fortunes" of the "ancient House of Bastable" (TS, 16) by means of a series of illusory treasure hunting adventures, each one suggested by a different member of the family. The setting for the story is the middle class world of financial risk, a world that is intimately joined to the marketplace of British imperialism referred to in Chapter One. As already stated, Mr. Bastable becomes a casualty of this economy and he and his family are suddenly confronted by hard times. But, while the middle class milieu is a place where

fortunes are made and lost overnight, it is also a stratum of society where Victorian moral values per se are of crucial importance. The second novel of the trilogy, The Wouldbegoods, focuses on a specific aspect of these values--one that was reviewed in some detail during our survey of earlier literature, and one that has always been considered the special prerogative of females. The book is a brilliant critique of the brand of "goodness," in one's conduct and one's attitude to others, that was characteristic of the self-righteous philistines of the Victorian middle and upper classes. These people often hated the recipients of their charity, although they tried to create the opposite impression by their ostentatious generosity--a disposition represented in Ministering Children (Avery, 90). Even so, their well-publicized, mean-spirited benevolence did little to alter fundamentally the lives of destitute workers and their children. As a critic of adult-fostered charity, Oswald condemns this pretentious variety of virtue and its correlative, the craving to be more perfectly good than others, a condemnation that is incisively demonstrated when Denny attempts to walk to Canterbury with hard peas in his boots. He is forced to abandon his martyrdom part way though the journey, a reversal that prompts Oswald to write: "'Greedy young ass'. For it is greedy to want to have more of anything than other people, even goodness" (W, 231).

The Wouldbegoods demonstrates, also, how well-intentioned acts can result in the opposite effects from those intended, if they are performed by incompetent people like the Bastable

youngsters who try to help others without their permission and without regard to their pride. But, aside from the broad criticism of "goodness" found in the book, this so-called virtue is of greatest consequence to our argument when seen as a standard by which Nesbit measures and exposes socially conditioned female behaviour by revealing the difference between Alice and her older sister, Dora. By means of this comparison, the divergent traits of the Bastable girls and their guest, Daisy, are brought into relief more effectively than they are in The Treasure Seekers or New Treasure Seekers. And a major reason for the significance and success of the comparison is due to Nesbit's point of departure: a rejection of the More/Yonge moral code that denies any outlet for female energies except through service to others, and, axiomatically, the rejection of an attitude that is largely anti-play. In addition, Nesbit shows that a factor in the education of girls to assure avoidance of play, and fill every idle moment with some useful activity, is the kind of books they are permitted to read. Goodness and industry can be learned and emulated from the right stories; evil and idleness from the wrong ones, a truth well known by the author of Strictures. But Nesbit does not allow Oswald to be outdone by More insofar as books are concerned; instead, she has him make use of the writing of others as a further means of advancing her views. He is the kind of narrator who knows as well as More and Yonge the crucial importance of the right kind of stories for girls and boys; and he employs the literary content of juvenile fiction to his

advantage in the offensive against narrow-minded moralizing and all that it stands for.

The vain attempts of the Bastable children to be good begin at the Moat House to which they are exiled after the outcome of their Jungle Book play. They are accompanied there by Daisy and Denny, their accomplices in the ill-fated drama, who are "little pinky, frightened things" (W, 12), as well as the daughter and son of their father's friend. The eight repentant youngsters are scarcely settled in their new home when they decide to form a society "for being good in" (W, 31). Significantly, the plan comes from the "white mouse," Daisy, but the other girls support her proposal, although Alice has some reluctance about the idea, a hesitancy that becomes increasingly evident during the short life of the society. On the other hand, the boys listen to the preamble with passionate horror. In fact, their reception of the proposal elicits Oswald's first reference to the kind of "goody-books" (IS, 114) condemned by him and Dicky. The latter youth stresses that he will not "play" this game if it means "reading books about children who die" (W, 32). Dicky's objection notwithstanding, the preamble adopted by the new organization borrows the language and moral mood of nineteenth century tracts and embellishes it with an effusive sentiment that only these children would think of.

The aim of the society is nobleness and goodness, and great and unselfish deeds. We wish not to be such a nuisance to grown-up people and to perform prodigies of real goodness. We wish to spread our wings . . . and rise above the kind of

interesting things that you ought not to do, but to do kindnesses to all, however low and mean. (W, 31)

As this excerpt implies, virtue is likely to be boring as well as morbid, an implication that is further strengthened by the rules of the society. For example: "Every member is to be as good as possible" or "No day must pass without our doing some kind action to a suffering fellow-creature" or "We are to do good to people we don't like as often as we can" (W, 33). What these directives do is serve to reaffirm the clear-cut dichotomy between play and good works. The former activity consists of "interesting things" to do; the latter consists of tedious, forced actions which usually bring little real pleasure to the benefactor, and none to the recipients, other than a sense of frustration because they do not have the wherewithal to look after their own needs. More importantly, this dichotomy is mirrored in the conduct of the children: the boys fall into the play camp, the girls into the charity faction. The opinion of the former group is again vocalized by Dicky who complains, "There must be some interesting things that are not wrong" (W, 34), and by Oswald who replies,

"I suppose so, . . . but being good is so much like being a muff, generally. Anyhow I'm not going to smooth the pillows of the sick, or read to the aged poor, or any rot out of Ministering Children." (W, 34)

Nevertheless, they decide to go along with the experiment in order to "please" the girls, and Oswald suggests that they

"begin by looking out for something useful to do" (W, 35).

"The boys in books chop kindling wood and save their pennies to buy tea and tracts."

"Little beasts!" said Dick. "I say, let's talk about something else." And Oswald was glad to, for he was beginning to feel jolly uncomfortable. (W, 35)

And so the heavy weight of Strictures and Ministering Children fall upon their heads and hearts and imparts a mood of gloom so far-reaching that it cannot be dispelled, even by the glorious dawn of a new morning in the country. When the narrator wakes up, he cannot comprehend his depressed spirits until, suddenly, he remembers the Wouldbegoods and wishes "he hadn't" (W, 35). On this particular day, the boys try to help the girls to be virtuous and charitable--with rather mixed success. Later that morning, Dora cuts her foot on a rusty meat tin at the bottom of the moat, an accident resulting from attempts by the children to retrieve a milk pan knocked from the dairy window ledge by Dicky. This mishap is ironically underscored by the fact that the boy was trying to exhibit his goodness by mending the catch at the time he knocked the pan off.

Dora's injury injects a new element into the society: the drama of the sickroom, a device which proves a superb mechanism to enable Oswald to more precisely judge the behaviour of the three girls. While Dora's "illness" can be viewed, on one level, as a parody of the high flown sickness and death scenes of Victorian literature that were condemned by Dicky, more

serious repercussions are suggested by the child's confinement. Obviously, the injury places her in a situation where dependency and submission can more readily be fostered--and expressed--and a situation where the difference between the invalid and Alice can be explored without resorting to the artificial introduction of events or ideas which do not properly belong in the story. Indeed, the information supplied in the sickroom episode confirms the type of criticism Oswald habitually directs against Dora, and, his major misgivings pertain to issues that are central to the thrust of this paper. First, as one might expect of a traditional female, she is less imaginative and physically active than Alice or the boys. In fact, Oswald complains that she is the kind of child who "always begins to take part in a play just when the rest of us are getting tired of it" (TS, 66). While Dora may be rather backward in her recreational abilities, she has a more highly developed religious sensibility than the rest of her family. She wonders if the Bible condones the use of a divining rod to look for treasure (IS, 21), a concern that is also reflected during the toss-up to see which child should write and request a reading of their antiquary papers at the Red House--"Dora had feelings about tossing up on Sunday, so we did it with a hymn-book instead of a penny" (NTS, 79). Her personal worry over moral questions is also demonstrated in a day-to-day concern about the quality of conduct among the members of her family. Forms of behaviour seen to be dangerous in this regard are condemned with a swiftness of mind not exhibited during play--a predisposition demonstrated by her complaint following

the Chinese hunt: "'Well, you may say I'm always preaching, but I don't think Father would like Alice to be fighting street boys in Millwall'" (NTS, 71). In this respect as well Dora is a potential exponent of a related theme which was emphasized by Hannah More: the premise that idleness can often lead to evil conduct.

According to Oswald, then, Dora tends to be a self-righteous, autocratic prig. But, in spite of her tyranny in minor matters, she is self-effacing when larger issues are at stake. Consequently, in her overall conduct, she continually puts the interests and needs of others ahead of her own wishes. Her brother is fully aware of this trait as well, and with patronizing patience, he reminds his readers--and himself--of the merits of certain types of submissive goodness. And so, while Oswald may criticize his sister for entering the game when others are getting tired of it,⁴³ he qualifies his attack with the assurance: "I don't mean this unkindly, because . . . I cannot forget how kind she was when I had bronchitis" (TS, 66). Like Margaret May, Dora is self-effacing; and, like the eldest daughter in The Daisy Chain from whom such sacrifices are expected, she tries to act as a mother to her family. The child's frustrations over this burdensome responsibility are expressed in a touching outburst in The Treasure Seekers. The source of her complaint concerns their trouble with the Vicar during the "Castilian Amoroso" business venture.

"Oh dear, oh dear--I do try, I do. And when Mother died she said, 'Dora, take care of the others, and teach them to be good, and keep them out of trouble and make them happy.' She said, 'Take care of them for me, Dora dear.' And I have tried, and all of you hate me for it; and to-day I let you do this, though I knew all the time it was silly." (136)

A reader unmoved by Dora's words would be heartless indeed, but sympathy does not cancel out the truth, confirmed in this scene as well, that she is the kind of child who is more readily trapped in dead end situations and self-pity than her sister. And she falls into these snares because of her soft and hesitant disposition, and because of social pressures that she cannot cast aside. And so, readers with feminist convictions may not like what is happening to this child who is only slightly older than Oswald, but their distress does not alter the fact that she is a legitimate descendant of girls who were to be found in the pages of Hannah More's writing. This conclusion notwithstanding, Dora is the kind of girl one can love as much as Alice, but in an impatient sort of way, for she is an exasperating mixture of too little of Alice's spirit and too much of Daisy's reticence and docility. Undoubtedly, this exasperation is due, in part, to the infectious intolerance contained in the narrator's judgment of his sister, but it is also due to the reader's perception of the objective truth about the girl which comes through despite Oswald's distorted portrayal of her personality and her interests--an inclination stimulated by his personal antipathy towards her irritating habits.

Since Oswald often reveals the truth about his elder sister in The Treasure Seekers, it is not surprising that she should become a prototypical Margaret May in The Wouldbegoods. Had there been any change in Dora from the first story to the second, sufficient reason would have existed to avoid casting her as the patient in the Victorian sickbed episode. But the girl does not improve, and evidence other than the foot injury scene bears this out. She is still the same in the area of imaginative play, and the Jungle Book disaster illustrates this conviction very well. When she forgets the context of the story and, at one point, suggests to Daisy that they "take refuge in yonder covert" while a "good knight" in the drama does battle for them, Oswald states his disapproval with customary brevity: "Dora might have remembered that we were savages, but she did not. And that is Dora all over" (W, 23). This girl is not imaginative, nor is she particularly heroic when caught in exploits that cause unladylike inconvenience and discomfort. In fact the narrator feels quite justified in calling her a "half-hearted unadventurous person" (W, 273) when they are forced to take turns carrying their bulldog, Martha. And yet, while she may not be venturesome when a dog must be babied, her attitude is transformed by a genuine infant. One need only witness the train of events she initiates in the affair of "The High-Born Babe," a chapter which follows rather appropriately, it would seem, immediately after Alice's excursion to discover the source of the Nile. Dora's abduction of a baby who appears to be abandoned, and her assertion to the others that she knows "all

about babies," (W, 157) illustrates, once again, the girl's dependence upon the narrow interests permitted to women. While Daisy gives her full support to her friend in this romantic escapade, Alice is less enthusiastic, although she does like the excitement to be found in this secret and shady adventure.

But perhaps the chief referential point of departure for Dora as a traditional female comes later, in New Treasure Seekers, during a "council" meeting to discuss the feasibility of organizing another society. Dora is given first chance to reveal her ideas about such a venture, but she can think of nothing except the line of Charles Kingsley's poetry, "Be good sweet maid, and let who will be clever," a maxim which inspires her suggestion that they "try to find some new ways to be good in" (NTS, 107). Of course, the connection is clear. Dora is the "sweet maid" of her quotation and, being just as bland and simple during the period of the Wouldbegoods society as she is at this time, this member of the family is the logical victim of a jagged meat can at the bottom of the moat. Dora's injury is totally consistent with her later suggestion, for girls who usually succumb to ill health are more likely to be similar to the child in the poem. And so, fate brings about an accident that will ensure such a condition.

When one turns to the white mouse, Daisy, who only appears in The Wouldbegoods, the contrast among the girls is heightened. While Dora is the antithesis of her sister--a foil, created in part, to accentuate Alice's boyish qualities, Daisy serves a

double purpose in this respect. She is an ideological twin to Dora, as well as a character who acts as a contrast to Alice. As a counterpart to Dora, the mouse reinforces and enlarges upon the negative influence of girls who are the opposite to Oswald's favourite sister, and thus the damaging effects of conformity and submission are given a wider context. But Daisy helps to create this contrast in another way as well. She also acts as a foil for her companion; and, in so doing, makes clear that bad as Doris is, she is improved through her membership in the free-spirited Bastable household. Daisy does not live in such an environment, and so, this timid creature who is more conventional than Dora's deficient imagination could fancy, is the right person to inspire the ill-fated Wouldbegoods society, and the right person to encourage her friend's bad habits.

As a result of their compatible personalities, Dora and Daisy have an unwholesome affinity for each other. As Oswald puts it, "they always hang together" (W, 108) and can usually be seen "with their arms round each other's necks" looking much like "a picture on a grocer's almanac" (W, 131). This rather preposterous physical arrangement precludes for both girls any independent exercise for their minds and bodies. And so it is not surprising that the younger child does not know how to play properly either; and, like Dora, cannot handle the highly creative realism of the Jungle Book spectacle. When she stops "mooning indoors" and goes outside to view the show, the "tigers" frighten her so much that she utters "a shriek like a

railway whistle" and falls "flat on the ground" (W, 23). But shunning play and fainting at the sight of others' games is not a surprising female infirmity in one who is normally too weak except to voice thin and feeble screams (W, 86); who is of a "retiring character" (W, 112); who is "ever docile and obedient" (W, 161); who chooses to avoid being "naughty" (W, 37) at all times; and often does so by sitting and reading "goody-books."

While both Dora and Daisy may waste their time studying Ministering Children and other didactic fiction during the time the Wouldbegoods society is in existence, Oswald makes use of such novels in order to strengthen his argument against their organization and the role the two girls play in it. His use of material from certain of these books is particularly relevant during the period of Dora's injury. The attitude of the two friends to this illness is expressed by Alice in a report to the narrator; and this report initiates the topic of literature in a manner which is in full accord with the characteristics of this literate group of youngsters.

"It is hard lines, but Dora's very jolly about it. Daisy's been telling her about how we should all go to her with our little joys and sorrows and things, and about the sweet influence from a sick bed that can be felt all over the house, like in What Katy Did, and Dora said she hoped she might prove a blessing to us all while she's laid up." (W, 45)

Of course Daisy's knowledge about edifying novels extends far beyond Ministering Children and What Katy Did. Other titles referred to by Oswald (W, 64) undoubtedly increase her moral

influence with everyone during Dora's recuperation. But the negative implications of the girl's disability are most significantly enlarged upon if one sees her accident as a commentary on another situation familiar to Daisy, that of Margaret May in The Daisy Chain; and Margaret's rather absurd and tragic martyrdom as a statement about the dangers inherent in Dora's situation. The prolonged illness and death of the heroine of Yonge's novel accentuates the mawkish sentiment with regard to something as straightforward and ugly as sickness and death. It also strengthens the underlying censure in The Wouldbegoods of females who are sick because they are expected to be or who cannot forego the false sense of power which is the byproduct of that "sweet influence from a sick bed." Thus, in its fullest scope, the sickness theme is of vital consequence, for it symbolizes the immobilizing fetters placed upon Victorian women. And so, despite the humour and lack of constraint in The Wouldbegoods that is absent from The Daisy Chain, it is apparent that even Dora is portrayed as a captive of the "suffer and be still" mentality of her culture. In Yonge's novel the benevolent influence of the submitting spirit is extolled; in Nesbit's book the idiocy and the perils of total submission are condemned.

Yet another crucial area of life is directly affected by Dora's injury. It concerns the necessary prohibition of all meaningful play. For Oswald, of course, this misfortune is the primary disaster, an impediment which amounts to a pathological state in and of itself; and, it must be noted, again a state

represented by Daisy as well as Dora.

It was very rough on Dora having her foot bad, but we took it in turns to stay in with her, and she was very decent about it. Daisy was most with her. I do not dislike Daisy, but I wish she had been taught how to play. Because Dora is rather like that naturally, and sometimes I have thought that Daisy makes her worse. (W, 64)

And so, while Dora projects a "sweet influence" from her sickbed, and Daisy nurses her, Alice fulfills a different function in the society during this period--a function that is elucidated by her adventure in Chapter Seven. This episode demonstrates in a tangible form the difference between play as a symbol for the capacity to dismiss convention, to explore new modes of living, to test life for one's self, and the kind of charitable diligence and submission proclaimed by Hannah More. As well, the scene extends and completes the comparison between Alice and her sister that originates in the foot injury episode. Finally, it illustrates by the description of an actual event, and not just by editorial observations on the part of Oswald, the true nature of his younger sister.

In this chapter, the narrator relates the second of two expeditions to "discover the source of the Nile (or the North Pole)" (W, 128). Although the infection in Dora's foot has cleared sufficiently to enable her to walk, she and Daisy refuse to take the journey

owing to their habit of sticking together and doing dull and praiseworthy things, like sewing, and helping with the cooking, and taking invalid delicacies to the poor and indignant. (W, 128)

(not indignant -

The friends do not give a specific reason for their refusal to join the second trip: about the first one Oswald reports: "they said they did not mind . . . because they like to keep themselves clean; it is another of their queer ways."

Unfortunately, these "queer ways," he points out, will make them "the kind of girls who . . . grow up very good, and perhaps marry missionaries." Once again, his appraisal of Dora and Daisy stimulates an association between the way they behave and books--the kind "they give you for a prize at a girls' school" (W, 128). Oswald then attempts to tell his story after this fashion, an endeavour that is given up in despair, but not before another point has been scored against the Ministering Children mentality and literary style.

"Dear brothers and sisters," the blushing girl went on, "could we not, even now, at the eleventh hour, turn to account these wasted lives of ours, and seek some occupation at once improving and agreeable?" (W, 129)

The Bastables do not fall into the same "improving" mood in the eleventh hour of their lives; instead, Alice makes a suggestion quite the opposite to that voiced by the "maiden" in Oswald's parody. Suddenly and unexpectedly she asks: "Why not go and discover the source of the Nile?" (W, 129)--a proposal that accurately summarizes the difference between the two

sisters. Just as Dora's injured foot represents the incapacitating restrictions that bind and circumscribe girls; the journey to discover the source of the Nile stands for a rejection of those barriers, and the striving towards a free and active life that is associated with Alice. In addition, her imaginative idea substantiates the kind of person she appears to be in The Treasure Seekers, and shows movement towards the kind of individual she becomes in the New Treasure Seekers. On the other hand, as we have indicated already, Dora shows movement in the opposite direction, and she is adversely assisted by Daisy in this gradual decline into "ladyhood." And so, at the last minute, the pair show up "with their arms around each other's necks ... like a picture in a grocer's almanac" (W, 131), and refuse to go.

In addition to the problems with Dora and Daisy, it is a "blazing hot day," and the discomfort is worsened by "differences of opinion among the explorers" (W, 131) about the kind of food to be taken. Eventually, the band of travellers set out, and, like most children, soon camp by the "Nile" for lunch. While they are eating, Denny notices the clay-like composition of the banks; then he recalls that "some people in a book called Foul Play" (W, 132) made sun-dried platters and bowls from material like this. The group is soon busy re-living the story, an occupation described by Oswald in the following terms:

It is impossible to go on being cross when your feet are in cold water; and there is something in the smooth messiness of clay, and not minding how dirty you get, that would soothe the savagest breast that ever beat. (W, 133)

This excerpt initiates the second stage in the perception of Alice as the antithesis of Dora and Daisy, and as a new girl explorer who chooses to test life for herself--a view that is given pictorial form by the Cecil Leslie drawing that accompanies it. Standing knee-deep in water, the girl is the focal point of the sketch. The boys are occupied along the banks, well in the background, two of them being so crudely drawn that they are just recognizable as human forms. Alice has the front of her dress pulled up and tucked into her waist belt, thus exposing her bare legs in a casual, unselfconscious fashion. She is too busy to care about her appearance, for she is looking down at the piece of mud, held between both hands, as if it is a piece of life she is about to shape to her own purpose. Actually, she is trying to form the lump into a pot, a messy task, and one which accounts for the lines of mud and water dripping down the front of her clothes. While the drawing of Alice is simple--the face is made with a few lines--the impression given is one of total concentration and contentment. And a less definable impression exists. This fleeting visual sensation seems to say that Alice is surrounded by an invisible creative aura; and, in this secure, transparent space, she is far from the compelling pressures of the conventional world. And yet, despite this effect, the Leslie picture and the statement of the narrator, quoted above, do not furnish

sufficient reason to set Alice apart from the other girls. Dora may have done exactly as Alice is doing when she was the age of her younger sister; and she may do so in the future. What makes the girl's adventure unusual--what makes it stand out--is the juxtaposition in time and space and in its social implications, alongside the conformist activities of Dora and Daisy. While these clean and passive children are at home learning to be young ladies, and moving ever closer to that fate, Alice, the rebel, is out of doors where she is learning to be a grown-up who knows how to play. As an explorer of life, she may well develop into a woman who is not confined by the ideas and conventions of the past, and the clay-making scene is an affirmation of this prediction.

The third book in the trilogy, New Treasure Seekers, was written approximately one and a half years by Bastable time after The Treasure Seekers. It deals more profoundly with a wider variety of social issues than the other two stories, and, in that respect, is the natural antecedent to the highly political Psammead fantasies. The children's adventures are more complex and incidents and statements pertaining to Alice and Oswald indicate that discrete personality changes are taking place; that the two youngsters have matured since the first book was written. Alice is more independent; Oswald is more openly ambivalent; but the changes are not clear-cut and may be no more than impressions obtained from a biased critical reading. Be that as it may, Alice certainly remains as determined as she was

at the time of the coiners' incident a year and half earlier, and as determined as she was at the time of the exploration of the Nile, to be involved in all of the activities that include Dicky and Oswald. An episode in the book which is pivotal to a further evaluation of Alice and the other girls is the "Chinese" hunt described in Chapter Four. She insists upon joining Dicky and Oswald in the search for their lost dog, Pincher, although pressed by them to stay behind with Dora and the other children.

So they left their coats, and, with Alice, who would come though told not to, they climbed the steps, and went along a narrow passage and started boldly on the Chinese hunt. (NTS, 64)

As it turns out, the events of the chase can be seen as another crucially significant illustration of Alice as a "new girl," antithesis to Dora and Daisy, and as a potential "new woman." And the events of the chase can be seen as a further significant exposure of the behaviour of her sister. As in the expedition to discover the source of the Nile, Dora is conspicuous by her absence, so nothing can be said about her role in this adventure. But "nothing" is a form of appraisal. It is a kind of statement, it can be argued, that reveals character as fully as any criticism based on her presence in the search; and Dora's absence means that full attention can be given to Alice and her response to the challenges that arise during the hunt.

The main incident centers on a racist brawl which parallels the sexist ambience of the adventure. In the slum where they have gone to look for their dog, the three Bastables stumble

upon a "wrinkled, old" (NTS, 66) Chinese man who is being attacked by five white "outcasts from decent conduct" (NTS, 67). The children are horrified by the unequal match, an inequality increased by the frailty of the old fellow, who tries to keep them off with "wrinkled and trembly" hands. Just as Oswald and Dicky raise their fists "into the position required by the noble art of self-defence," and prepare to enter battle; a surprise intervention takes place. It comes from Alice, and "no one could have expected . . . [her] to do what she did." Before Oswald can strike the first blow, she slaps "the largest boy in the face" as hard as she can and she takes "the second-sized boy" and shakes him. Although Oswald later feels compelled to point out that he "cannot approve of my sister being in a street fight," he confesses that "she was very quick and useful in pulling ears and twisting arms and slapping and pinching" (NTS, 67), even though she did forget his lesson on the way "to hit out from the shoulder" (NTS, 68). Lack of skill notwithstanding, Alice often turns the tide with "a well-timed shove or nip" until the victim's son appears and sends "the five loathsome and youthful aggressors . . . bolting down the passage." Dicky and Oswald are relieved--and exhausted. Alice's response to the fight is tears. She bursts out "crying and . . . howling as though she would never stop," a reaction promptly condemned by her brother.

That is the worst of girls--they never can keep anything up. Any brave act they may suddenly do, when for a moment they forget that they have not the honour to be boys, is almost instantly made into

contemptibility by a sudden attack of cry-babyishness. But I will say no more: for she did strike the first blow, after all, and it did turn out that the boys had scratched her wrist and kicked her shins. These things make girls cry. (NTS, 68)

But Oswald's opinion of his sister is not fully realized in these remarks. He has yet to round out his appraisal of the girl--a summation that is prompted by a gift from the grateful Chinese family. They give Alice a parrot which she offers to share with Dicky and Oswald, and this "noble" gesture inspires her brother to resume his original supportive praise with increased vigour.

She is tremendously straight. I often wonder why she was made a girl. She's a jolly sight more of a gentleman than half the boys at our school. (NTS, 73)

Now, it is necessary to see exactly what is happening here. In order to do so, Oswald's manifest ambivalence with regard to his sister must be reconsidered in the light of this new information. If the earlier "that is the worst of" section is looked at more closely, it will be seen that the youth is excessively and uncharacteristically harsh with her--and all girls. In order to get the most out of this attack, he uses a method employed in The Treasure Seekers when describing their "Being Detectives" investigation, that is, he generalizes and writes to include all females, as well as the specific individual he has singled out. In this way, he hopes to prove, with a minimum of explanation, that his pronouncements are based

on a broad range of evidence and, therefore, reliable. With this in mind, one can examine his first postulate: the conviction that girls have no physical or spiritual fortitude.

Females act bravely by impulse--before they have time to reflect upon perils too dangerous to be challenged. Like Selina in Dream Days, they act bravely only when they suffer a "weird seizure" and fall into a disharmonious state of mind and boy wherein they forget that "they have not the honour to be boys." Oswald heightens the derogatory nature of this designation by framing it in the most negative terms possible. Thus, the misfortune is not girlhood alone; it consists of something far worse: denial of the privilege to be male except vicariously, or during flashes of hallucinatory insight. As soon as the illusion breaks at the end of the fight, and she is thrust back to a world where she forgets that she forgot that she was only a girl, an hysterical reaction takes place. And this attack of emotional behaviour is not simply sad or unfortunate or even plausible, as it was in the case of "Being Detectives." Instead, it is denoted with one of the most degrading words to be found in English. Fewer expressions are as hard or hurtful as contemptible or "contemptibility." By using it to describe his sister's condition, the narrator, who has conveniently forgotten his own attacks of cowardice, expels her from the ranks of his brave army into the role of a "howling" outcast. But Oswald is nothing if not guileless and candid; and, so, contrary to what grown-ups might do, he does not prolong this heedless assault upon the girl. He pauses--draws back--and

softens his insults with a measure of faint praise. He decides to "say no more" against a sister over whom he has total narratorial power; for, even he must admit, "she did strike the first blow." Significantly, Oswald is also forced to concede that the hoodlums had "scratched her wrist and kicked her shins," oddly enough, a form of torment that only makes girls cry. *they are trained to endure this sort of assault - men are*

Oswald's critique of his sister's contribution to the fight is but one aspect of a full and just assessment of this scene. It is important to see, as well, what effect the narrator's declarations have on his sister. Since this vain young braggart is most unlikely to keep his opinions to himself, he undoubtedly tells her to stop howling, just as he probably condescends to vocalize his appreciation for her "gentlemanly" open-handedness over the matter of the parrot (NTS, 73). Unfortunately, this negative/positive criticism--the "downers" and "uppers" of Oswald's chauvinism--can exert a pernicious influence upon Alice. She may become confused and uncertain when she finds herself perpetually on the defensive in a seemingly no-win situation. And this is exactly what happens to her. Although she does not understand it, this process is subsequently identified by the girl when she comments on her suggestion to form a "Would-be-Boys" society.

"No; I meant us all to be in it--only you boys are not to keep saying we're only girls, and let us do everything the same as you boys do." (NTS, 108)

For Alice, another problem which has not been confronted satisfactorily can be deduced from this outburst and from the incidents in the Chinese hunt. It originates in the innocence of both children, and concerns the inability to fully comprehend their own gender predicament or that of each other. Because they are only children who live in a rigidly controlled community with regard to class and sex, Alice does not realize that Oswald is really a socially-conditioned sexist, and Oswald does not know that Alice is a socially-conditioned crybaby. And, above all, both youngsters do not recognize or understand the ambivalence they feel towards each other and their siblings. To be more specific, when the narrator writes his "that is the worst of girls" epithet, he does not know that society--and that includes himself--taught Alice to act the way she does during the hunt. He knows that she is supposed to be passive during a street fight; that she should stand at the sidelines, ^(W) ring her hands and run away, but he does not understand why; he only knows intuitively, as it were, that girls "have their nature, the same as bull-dogs have." (W, 109) And the only time this biological truth can be reversed is during periods of self-forgetfulness when Alice is unmindful that she has not the "honour" to be a boy--when, with great difficulty, she passes into another state of mind and body. During this period of momentary self-transcendence, normal rules of conduct are waived and she is permitted to act like a male. When the skirmish is over, Alice becomes herself again; and, since she is not practiced in self-defense, and not trained to deal with pain and

fear in the same way as her brothers, she succumbs to an "attack of crybabyishness"--the normal response of a girl who has returned to normal existence.

Yet another element in Oswald's problematical portrayal of Alice can be deduced from this adventure. During all of the hunt scene, Oswald is functioning within the domain of accepted male activities; conversely, Alice engages in an act which belongs outside the sphere of female autonomy. For most people, any conduct in opposition to social expectations is highly disturbing; but such distress is especially to be expected of females whose education emphasizes the Victorian code of conformity and submission. And this truth holds for Alice, even though she has greater freedom than most girls, and despite the fact that her inherent vitality acts as a defense against perfect deference to conventions looked upon as more or less permanent. Therefore, the period after the fight, and after that intense, timeless moment of escape from her female body, must again be scrutinized for a deeper meaning than the one Oswald attaches to it. To say she cries from bodily hurt is true, but these injuries have a psychological content, just as Dora's did. They are symbols for the psychic distress and confusion that is neither seen nor understood by her brother. Nor can Alice properly see or understand her dilemma. She suffers a spiritual assault of greater dimension than the physical blows, but she cannot grasp the source or the meaning of her mental state: and because the child does not have a clear understanding of her situation, she is more susceptible to the

risks faced by females who transgress the strictures of Victorian society, and less able to combat them than girls from a more permissive community and epoch would be.

To recapitulate, the impasse facing Alice and Oswald grows from a situation whereby both children are constrained and circumscribed by their immaturity and innocence, and therefore are unable to understand each other or the social order which moulds their code of conduct. They can only transcend their culture with pain and difficulty, and only by means of episodic gestures that defy, but do not alter, the basic structure of English society. Of course, no irreversible guarantee exists that Alice and Oswald will grow up to be "feminist" adults who will have the power to do more than make gestures; but, at least as grown-ups, they will have the experience and the sophistication to try and investigate broader areas of revolt than they can do as children.

In scenes like the Chinese hunt, where the spoken and unspoken social content provides a counterpoint to the main adventure, Oswald is never alone. Nesbit, the politician, is with him at all times--as the ultimate authority, the person who controls the setting and the issues that are highlighted by her narrator. With this power she positions ideas and events in this episode so that they stimulate readers to move in her direction. With her socialist background, this course is towards greater human freedom in a non-sexist, non-racist

environment. And yet, to return to a point made earlier, even in this scene she never overtly propagandizes or preaches to her public. Her narrator nudges readers in a predetermined direction, and the rest is out of her hands and up to them.

Alice's role as a kind of new girl of the nineties can be enlarged upon further if she and Dora are compared with the two grown-up sisters who appear in New Treasure Seekers. Not surprisingly, Miss Sandal is an adult version of Dora; and her sister, Mrs. Bax, is an image of Alice. Miss Sandal is described by Oswald, upon their first encounter, in the following way: "She had a soft, drab dress and a long thin neck, and her hair was drab too, and it was screwed up tight" (NTS, 139). In keeping with the appearance of the long-necked lady, her house is also cold--and bare--"like a workhouse or a hospital" (NTS, 140); both, coincidentally, tokens of confinement. Dora likes the atmosphere, the others do not; nor do they care for it any better when the puzzle of the all-white rooms is explained by the owner: "the motto of our little household is 'Plain living and high thinking'" (NTS, 140). This maxim is borne out during the children's stay in the house, by the lady, and her home: "she was kind, but rather like her house--there was something bare and bald about her inside mind" (NTS, p.141). It is further proven by the woman's choice of books, a selection which restates the connection between Daisy's bad reading habits and those likely to be pursued later in life, and the link between books and the least--or the most effective--mode of living. Oswald

knew every book in the house. The backs of them were beautiful--leather and gold--but inside they were like whited sepulchres, full of poetry and improving reading. (NTS, 173)

On the other hand, Miss Sandal's sister, Mrs. Bax, a thinly disguised imitation of Nesbit herself, is also a "blissful dream of perfect A.I.-ness," after her "true nature" (NTS, 206) is discovered, that is. Before this happens, the Bastables receive the impression from their father that the visitor from Australia wants rest and quiet. With great difficulty, they comply, even though poor Mrs. Bax keeps babbling eagerly about "Pincher, and trains and Australia" (NTS, 192). In despair, the visitor goes off to the White House for the day, but she accidentally meets the youngsters there when they are arrested for peddling without a licence and brought to see the owner who is the local magistrate. The truth about the six prisoners is revealed when Alice tears across the lawn to a guest who comes to their defense. The Bastable behaviour is observed from the sidelines by Mrs. Bax. She is astounded and pleased by what she sees and can remain silent no longer.

"Is it possible . . . that these are the Sunday-school children I've been living with these three long days? . . . Chloe, you seem to be a witch. How have you galvanized my six rag dolls into life like this? . . . Oh, my dears! you don't know how glad I am that you're really alive! (NTS, 204)

Thenceforth, Mrs. Bax and the youngsters are friends. As Oswald later reports: "we had discovered her true nature but

three days ago, and already she had taken us out in a sailing-boat and in a motor car, had given us sweets every day" (NTS, 206). And, on the day when this praise is written, she allows them to bathe in the ocean, although the weather is really too cold for such matters; and then she suggests a picnic. The children are enchanted by this woman who, unlike their sister, knows how to play. But the story of Miss Sandal is not complete: the narrator discloses that she may not always have been a bare and bald-minded woman. In all likelihood, she may have been much like Mrs. Bax, but unknown experiences had changed her and forced a retreat into the still white isolation of her home. Evidence for such a possibility is discovered during a search for materials to create costumes in order to dress up as Gypsy fortune tellers. The children investigate "the cupboards and drawers in Miss Sandal's room," but "the plain living . . . [shows] in all her clothes." They are "almost in despair" (NTS, 175) when they find a trunk full of clothes in the attic. Beneath the top garment, "a scarlet thing, . . . embroidered with gold" that appears to be a Chinese man's coat, they find

cloaks and dresses and skirts and scarves, of all the colours of a well-chosen rainbow, and all made of the most beautiful silks and stuffs, with things worked on them with silk, as well as chains of beads and many lovely ornaments. (NTS, 176)

Oswald comments on this inventory with the telling observation: "we think Miss Sandal must have been very fond of pretty things when she was young, or when she was better off" (NTS, 176).

What he really means is: the woman was once able to enjoy life, and, for Oswald, that means she must have been able to play, to test life for herself dressed in the brilliant Chinese coat--a metaphor for the new and the unknown, just as the Chinese hunt was for Alice. With the symbolic power invested in this garment, she could have resisted opinions and habits that were looked upon as fixed and lasting aspects of Victorian society. Unfortunately, Miss Sandal retreats into the female component of "plain living and high thinking," a mental and physical ambience that is the secular counterpart to religious conformism. Mary Clifford and Margaret May are never permitted to play before they die: they are nothing more than agents meant to "minister to others' good" (Avery, 91). The adult Miss Sandal sacrifices her memory of play to similar goals, no less potent simply because they are grounded in what Oswald's father calls "Primitive" highmindedness (NTS, 136).

CONCLUSION

The narrator's rote-learned imitation of the sexist ideology of the adult world can be evidenced in the above analysis of Alice and from many other statements made about girls. Yet Oswald supports his male supremacist point of view inconsistently. He is malleable--open-minded--and subject to fits of serious admiration for his sister, even though they are proclaimed within a rather shaky male chauvinist frame of reference. But, still, something is missing from the preceding overview of the child. As well as the positive traits discussed in Chapter Two, he also possesses another dimension: Oswald is a charming boy, and the word "charming" is purposely used here just as it was in the earlier part of the paper. This epithet is usually seen as a female term of flattery, and, therefore, ill-chosen; but it suits him, for the youth does have qualities deemed natural to girls. He is kind, affectionate, genial, somewhat fastidious (at least about his writing), highly self-conscious, and often rather cowardly--a list of traits that tend to separate him from many nineteenth century "masculine" boys. In truth, he has what can be called for lack of a better word, a "mixed personality"; that is, he displays rudimentary, pan-human characteristics that transcend historical influences. What is more, his symptoms indicate that these qualities are likely to take root in Oswald's "inside soul" (NTS, 136) and flourish. Because he is a product of the nineties, and, as such, is willing to challenge outmoded conventions, this transformation may occur despite powerful external sexist pressures.

While the preceding discussion concentrated on Oswald's male chauvinism, in Alice's case, they stressed her function as the focal point of Nesbit's feminism and, therefore, her ability to rise above narrow, socially-conditioned female behaviour patterns and act in a boyishly independent manner. In so doing, an important component of her personality was also ignored--that which is an expression of her charming attributes. Alice's amiable and ingenuous female nature is identified by her brother in New Treasure Seekers where, in his customary tactless manner, he points out: "everybody is always wanting to kiss Alice. I can't think why" (NTS, 66). But Oswald does know why, and the answer to this conjecture has already been suggested in The Treasure Seekers:

It was H.O. that upset his [ginger wine] over Alice's green silk dress, and she never even rowed him. Brothers ought not to have favourites, and Oswald would never be so mean as to have a favourite sister, or, if he had, wild horses should not make him tell who it was. (TS, 207)

Like her brother, then, Alice possesses masculine and feminine characteristics, the mixed personality that is pan-human, that transcends historical influences, that may well grow and flourish despite pressures to the contrary; for she, too, is a product of the nineties.

The study of Alice and Oswald Bastable cannot be terminated without stating, one more time, that the trilogy is an expression of Edith Nesbit's feminist sensibility, rather than

an assertion of doctrinaire feminism. This implicit voice of the new woman is always articulated through the language and activities of children, but in such a way that all participants in the process are constrained to confront the issue of sexism. Only through an awareness of the ironic interplay between Oswald's childish explicit story and the grown-up text beneath, can Nesbit's feminist sensibility be discovered. If critics fail to perceive the transfer of meaning from one level to the other--and this scarcely seems credible--or, more importantly, refuse to accept this interpretation of her intentions, one cannot deny their critical right to make such erroneous judgments. But these readings mean that they take the books "straight"; accept Oswald's sexism as seriously intended; and, therefore, miss the remarkable political dimension of this writer's work. Certainly, this seems to be the rather naive position taken by Barbara Smith when she claims:

If Oswald is E. Nesbit's vehicle for expressing dissatisfaction with women's position in late Victorian society, his anti-female declarations are so similar in tone to those made by actual male supremacists that few readers would realize that she was not supporting the status quo. 44

If "few readers" are able to recognize her pro-female bias, the failure of the rest does not negate Nesbit's feminism; it simply means that Smith may assume her irony to be too subtle for a public that is often largely uneducated when it comes to social questions and politics. But, in making this assumption, Smith underestimates the intelligence of the average reader. As

the introduction pointed out, Nesbit is, above all, a politician; therefore, if her books are to be fully understood and appreciated by adults, her challenge of the "conservative moral and political bias"⁴⁵ of Victorian society must be recognized. Otherwise, they read as children--a reading that is bound to fail; for grown-ups cannot live in both time schemes simultaneously. Nor can they pretend to be children again.

NOTES

1 E. Nesbit, New Treasure Seekers, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982. First published 1904), p.88. Subsequent references indicated by NTS and page number in brackets after the quotation.

2 Doris Langley Moore, E. Nesbit A Biography, (2nd. ed., rev.; New York: Chilton Books, 1966). See pages 50 and 168. Subsequent references indicated by Moore and page number in brackets after the quotation.

3 Webster's dictionary says that the term "fin de siècle" was "formerly used to refer to progressive ideas and customs, but now generally used to indicate decadence" (David B. Guralnik, ed., Webster's New World Dictionary, [Toronto: Nelson, Foster & Scott Ltd., 1976], p.523). Had the editors of this dictionary read Holbrook Jackson's book, The Eighteen Nineties, in all probability they would have altered their definition of the term. For him, this catch phrase cannot be defined in as clear-cut a manner; for, while it often seemed to be synonymous with decadence, it also had an obverse and what might be described as a progressive side. According to Jackson, a prominent name of the nineties linked to the degenerative and retrogressive aspect of fin de siècle is that of Max Nordau, a critic who writes, "'The disposition of the times is curiously confused, . . . a compound of feverish restlessness and blunted discouragement, of fearful presage and hang-dog renunciation'" (19). If one were to sum up the views embodied in Nordau's outlook in one word, the most appropriate choice might be that of "cynicism." While Jackson admits that a special kind of skepticism did prevail in the nineties, he also stresses the dialectical nature of this social phenomenon.

The Eighteen Nineties, however, were not entirely decadent and hopeless; and even their decadence was often decadence only in name, for much of the genius denounced by Max Nordau as degeneration was a sane and healthy expression of a vitality which, as it is not difficult to show, would have been better named regeneration. (19)

Furthermore, since the phrase by its very wording presumably applies to all of life existing at that time, a legitimate part of this network of phenomena and philosophies is the antithesis of decadence; that is, the "Transcendental View of Social Life" (29) which came to the fore during that time of "changes and struggles," (21) and which often had a didactic message. One of the best examples of the cynical and transcendental dialectic of the nineties can be seen in the person of Oscar Wilde, a man capable of writing the ultimate in decadent cynicism, The Picture of Dorian Gray as well as the regenerative essay, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (29).

4 Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century, (London: Grant Richards Ltd., 1913), p.12. Subsequent references indicated by Jackson and page number in brackets after the quotation.

5 Of the Blands' commitment to this ideology Moore writes:

Hubert Bland was deeply and sincerely interested in social questions, especially as they touched the welfare of the neglected labouring classes, and he never lost an opportunity of discussing such topics with acquaintances of a congenial turn of mind. He succeeded, with very little difficulty, in communicating this enthusiasm to his wife, and by a natural magnetism they attracted about them many people who shared their views. These views were then regarded as little less than seditious: one needed as much moral courage to confess to them as one might need today to confess to an out-and-out belief in the most extreme form of Communism. The outrageous young Blands were Socialists!

Moreover, they were active, indefatigable, and influential Socialists. Their names were among the first dozen or so to be registered on the membership roll of the Fabian Society, to which they belonged all their lives from the day of its foundation. Hubert Bland took the chair at the very first meeting the Society as such ever held, acted as treasurer and a member of the Executive for twenty-six years, was one of the famous Fabian Essayists, and in short played a very important part in the history of that organization. (73)

6 Alison Lurie, "Riding the Wave of the Future," The New York Review, Oct. 25/84, p.19.

7 The word "decadent" to describe one aspect of Edith Nesbit's private inclinations is used within the frame of reference applied by Holbrook Jackson. He says that the chief characteristics of this approach to behaviour and to art are "Perversity . . . Artificiality . . . Egoism and . . . Curiosity," (76) characteristics that are not necessarily retrogressive, just as fin de siècle tendencies as a whole were not necessarily so. He points out that "all so-called decadence is civilisation rejecting, through certain specialized persons, the accumulated experiences and sensations of the race. It is a demand for wider ranges, new emotional and spiritual territories, fresh woods and pastures new for the soul" (77). Certainly this description can underwrite Nesbit's zest for life. However, for Jackson, "true decadence" was "degeneration arising not out of senility, . . . but out of a surfeit, out of the ease with which life was maintained and desires satisfied. To kill a desire . . . by satisfying it, is to create a new

desire" (77). While Nesbit may have demanded "wider ranges" of experience, she was not a true decadent by Jackson's standards; her demand for adventure arose not out of a surfeit, but out of a genuine interest in new modes of living and new modes of relating to others.

8 In order to place this praise in full perspective, I must add Moore's observation: "His train of satellites was longer than his wife's, and it is generally admitted that he eclipsed her as a personality just as, considered in perspective of time, she eclipsed him as an artist" (207).

9 Moore frequently comments on this aspect of Nesbit's character. For example, she states that Edith's taste in clothes was consistent with the "inconsistency" seen "in every aspect of her personality" (196). And on another occasion, Moore stresses: "Capricious as she was in practice, and quickly as one enthusiasm was supplanted by another and then revived again, I have not yet come upon any instance of her wavering in a single one of her more serious beliefs" (245).

10 E. Nesbit, The Story of the Amulet, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981. First published 1906), p.117.

11 E. Nesbit, The Last of the Dragons and Some Others, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982.) This story first published in Five of Us--and Madeline (1925), p.10.

12 To be specific, my view is extracted from Marx and Engels' materialist conception of history, a portion of which states: "The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness" (Karl Marx, Preface to Critique of Political Economy, quoted by Ralph Fox in "The Relation of Literature to Dialectical Materialism," Aspects of Dialectical Materialism, [London: Watts & Co., 1934], p.59). For Marx and Engels the economic foundations of society provide the motive force of history, and when these foundations are transformed by far-reaching and revolutionary changes, for example, the displacement of feudalism by capitalism, the economic superstructure is also altered accordingly. Marx explains,

In considering such transformations the distinction should always be between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic, or philosophic--in short ideological forms--in which men become conscious of the conflict and fight it out. (Marx, Critique of Political Economy, quoted by Ralph Fox, 59)

Like most significant and influential ideas, historical materialism had to be explained again and again--in order to defend the concept, in order to instruct those who misunderstood it. The following excerpt from one such defense by Engels is included here because it amplifies Marx's views quoted above.

According to the materialist conception of history the determining element in history is ultimately the production and reproduction of real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. If therefore somebody twists this into the statement that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms it into a meaningless, abstract and absurd phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure -- consequences, constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc. -- forms of law -- and then even the reflexes of all these struggles in the brains of the combatants: political, legal, philosophical theories, religious ideas and their further development into systems of dogma -- also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form . . . (The Correspondence of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, [New York: International Publishers], pp.475-77. Quoted in "Editor's Preface" to The Materialist Conception of History, George Plekhanov, [New York: International Publishers, 1940], p.7.

If we further pursue this concept, we find another transcription of its basic premise in George Plekhanov's commentary on Essays on the Materialist Conception of History by Antonio Labriola.

Thus, man makes history in striving to satisfy his needs . . . [and] the productive forces at man's disposal determine all his social relations. . . . The development of productive forces divides society into classes, whose interests are not only different, but in many--and, moreover, essential--aspects are diametrically antagonistic. This antagonism of interests gives rise to conflicts, to a struggle among the social classes. . . . Lastly, social relations, determined by the given state of productive forces, give rise to common morality, the morality, that is, that guides people in their common, everyday life.

Thus the law, the state system and the morality of any given people are determined directly and immediately by its characteristic economic relations. These economic relations also determine--but indirectly and mediately--all the creations of the

mind and imagination: art, science, etc. (Plekhanov, 23)

The last statement brings us back to literature as an indirect, mediated reflection of economic relations. In the essay referred to earlier, "The Relation of Literature to Dialectical Materialism," Fox verifies the roundabout, reflective path followed by art in its relationship with society.

Between the mode of production, the union of man and the means of production, and those spiritual processes which are at the very summit of society's superstructure, the distance is great and the path hard to trace, and the more class society develops, the more tremendous the growth in the material forces of society, the more tenuous the connection appears. . . . Between that and the finished product of the imagination there is a great distance, so that at first glance it often appears impossible to trace any connection between, for example, an ode of Keats and the storms of the French Revolution and the transition to industrialism in England. Did we not know from Keats's own life how profoundly he was affected spiritually by these events, we might be persuaded to abandon the search altogether. (60)

But, since art is "a means . . . by which man grapples with and assimilates reality . . . his whole work of creation is a battle with life, the reality, which is reflected in his own consciousness" (61). And so back to Edith Nesbit in order to point out that "life" for her was also the bourgeois society in which she lived, where the treatment of women had been given an ideological content that also reflected capitalist economic relations.

13 As I have pointed out, Edith Nesbit was not a "devout feminist," but such a political position does not prohibit an essentially feminist analysis of nineteenth century English culture. Therefore, I use this word as the only feasible one to accurately characterize her approach in the trilogy.

14 See again footnote number 12, above.

15 Gillian Avery, Nineteenth Century Children Heroes and Heroines in English Children's Stories 1780-1900, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965), p.11. Much of the information in the first part of the paper is based on Avery's valuable book. I have followed her outline of historical periods and trends, but the theoretical analysis is my own. Subsequent references to this book will be indicated by Avery and the page number in brackets after the quotation.

16 When I refer to the "middle class" in this paper, I mean all those elements of English society who have some power in controlling the economy. Therefore, the term includes, by

implication, "upper class" or aristocratic" people who have become involved in the capitalist process. In this regard Engels talks about the historical commonality of interests between the middle and upper class which resulted in

a compromise between the rising middle class and the ex-feudal landowners. The latter, though called, as now, the aristocracy, had been long since on the way which led them to become what Louis Philippe in France became at a much later period, 'the first bourgeois of the kingdom.' Fortunately for England, the old feudal barons had killed one another during the Wars of the Roses. Their successors, though mostly scions of the old families, had been so much out of the direct line of descent that they constituted quite a new body, with habits and tendencies far more bourgeois than feudal. They fully understood the value of money, and at once began to increase their rents by turning hundreds of small farmers out and replacing them by sheep. (Frederick Engels, On Historical Materialism, [New York: International Publishers, 1940], p.17).

17 Sir Robert Peel, the elder, (1750-1830) was a Lancashire factory owner who supported the original Factory Act of 1802 which "limited child labour to twelve hours a day without night work" (David Thomson, England in the Nineteenth Century, [Pelican History of England: 8], p.47). Despite his advocacy of this reform, Peel was not unlike other entrepreneurs of his day. He was primarily concerned with efficiency and the maximization of profits; thus, he wrote in 1787, "'I have left most of my works in Lancashire under the management of Methodists, and they serve me excellently well'" (E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, [Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1982], p.390). See also footnote nineteen of this paper.

Sir Richard Arkwright (1732-1792) was the inventor of a cotton spinning machine. This device and other machines helped manufacturers to break the will of intractable, self-assertive workers and force them to submit to factory discipline or leave. In their place, children and women could then be hired--powerless individuals who were willing and able to carry out the light, mindless functions associated with the factory equipment and who were less likely to revolt against the inhuman pressures of the industrial regime.

18 E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1982. First published 1963), p.61. Subsequent references to this book will be indicated by Thompson and the page number in brackets after the quotation.

19 Hannah More, Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education With a View of the Principles and Conduct Prevalent Among Women of Rank and Fortune, Vol. I (of two volumes), (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1974. First published 1799),

p.57. Subsequent references to this book will be indicated by More and the page number and volume number in brackets after the quotation. More's repressive rules for children of all ranks coincide, in many respects, with the Methodist scheme for the education of the young. The classrooms of this religion of "love" were actually houses of hatred, permeated by a doctrine which held strictly to the "aboriginal sinfulness of the child." Indeed, John Wesley expressed this view "with a force which might have made some Jesuits blench."

Break their wills betimes. Begin this work before they can run alone, before they can speak plain, perhaps before than can speak at all. Whatever pains it costs, break the will if you would not damn the child. Let a child from a year old be taught to fear the rod and cry softly; from that age make him do as he is bid, if you whip him ten times running to effect it. . . . Break his will now, and his soul shall live, and he will probably bless you to all eternity. (Thompson, 412)

But the "psychological atrocities" designed to break the wills of children were "terribly real to them" (Thompson, 414), and were often far worse and less forgettable than physical abuse--a fact verified by "the little girl" who testified to "one of the Commissioners on Child Labour in the Mines,"

if I died a good girl I should go to heaven--if I were bad I should have to be burned in brimstone and fire: they told me that at school yesterday, I did not know it before. (Thompson, 415)

20 Maria Edgeworth was another important writer of the Georgian didactic school whose popular book, The Parent's Assistant or Stories for Children (1797) repeated ad nauseam the importance of work and work related values. In fact, her manner was so openly moralistic that Archbishop Whately was driven to complain in a review that her tales were "too improving, too didactic" (Edgeworth, Parent's Assistant, [London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1897. Reprint of 1797 ed.], p.xii). The story called "The Orphans" is illustrative of the source of the Archbishop's complaints. It tells about the struggle of a twelve year old girl named Mary to raise her younger brother and two sisters after their mother dies by diligently working herself to death as a cotton spinner. Aided by their neighbours who like and pity the youngsters because "their mother was known to have been all her life honest and industrious," (8) all four children work in order to prevent starvation. Mary's invention of a pair of shoes suitable for her brother, Edmund, to wear in "service" leads to the establishment of a shoe manufactory at home. Historians and sociologists would call this arrangement sweated labour, but Edgeworth claims the work was so interesting that it attracted the neighbourhood boys and girls--to watch--and to work: "and all who could get employment were pleased, for the idle ones were shoved out of the way" (14). Eventually, it

became a "custom" for them to work at shoemaking during their "play hours," and, as a result, "it was surprising to see how much was done by ten or twelve of them, each doing but a little at a time" (14). After a series of disasters affecting the honour of the family, the diligence and honesty of the orphans is rewarded by the gift of a proper house to live in, "rent-free," so long as the three sisters are willing to "carry on in it any useful business." Naturally, "they were not envied for their prosperity; because everybody saw that it was the reward of their good conduct" (25).

21 Avery, Nineteenth Century Children, p.64. See also Chapters 3, 4, 5 for further discussion with regard to the religious youngster.

22 In 1835 Dr. Andrew Ure wrote a book called Philosophy of Manufacturers, and, as its name implies, it promoted the interests of the new industrialists. The inhuman philosophy advanced by this apologist for capitalist exploitation can be seen in the following definition of the term "Factory":

[It] involves the idea of a vast automaton, composed of various mechanical and intellectual organs, acting in uninterrupted concert for the production of a common object, all of them being subordinated to a self-regulating moving force. (Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, 395)

Ure's work is also important because it, too, advocated religion as a means of control over the working class. In fact, this disciplinary device was so important to the man that he devoted a section of his book to "the 'Moral Economy of the Factory System', and a special chapter to religion" (Thompson, 396).

23 Stretton "helped found the London Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, and so no doubt drew on experience rather than fancy in her writing" (Avery, 94).

24 Sarah Smith (Hesba Stretton), Jessica's First Prayer in Victorian Fiction Novels of Faith and Doubt, (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1976. First published 1867), p.9. With regard to this novel, it is interesting to note Edith Nesbit's reaction, stated in a letter to Miss Ida Breakell where she notes, "I've just been reading 'Jessica's First Prayer' to my maid . . . and I felt my eyes smart and my throat lumpy towards the finish" (Moore, 78). One feels compelled to point out, as Moore does, that this is a rather "incongruous" attitude to this story by a woman who is a Fabian Socialist and quite uninterested in Christian charity of the Stretton variety.

25 Sarah Smith (Hesba Stretton), Little Meg's Children in Victorian Fiction Novels of Faith and Doubt, p.56.

26 E. Nesbit, The Wouldbegoods, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981. First published 1901), p.190. Subsequent references to this book indicated by W and the page number in brackets after the quotation.

27 Charlotte Yonge, The Daisy Chain, (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1977. First published 1868), p.210. Subsequent references to this book indicated by DCh and the page number in brackets after the quotation.

28 Ethel must learn Greek and Latin from Norman since the subjects are not included in her very limited opportunities for education. Of course this discrimination is endorsed by Yonge, and, if The Daisy Chain does not make this clear another novel, published in 1865, does so. With a title that immediately established Yonge's point of departure, The Clever Woman of the Family shows what happens to its intellectual heroine, Rachel, when she tries to function outside the "strict feminine bounds" prescribed by this author (Gail Cunningham, The New Woman and the Victorian Novel, [London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1978], p.37). Rachel's unorthodox interest in self-education, a career and social reform results in a scandal and a tragedy. The children in the school she helps to set up to retrain them in alternative skills to lace-making are maliciously and secretly exploited by her partner, Mr. Mauleverer, a "professional con-man" (Cunningham, 38). The youngsters for whom he is responsible are "starved and beaten" and one girl dies as a result of these conditions. Rachel is indirectly implicated in the child's death, but her misfortune proves to be a blessing in disguise, for it is the means whereby her rehabilitation into true womanhood is accomplished. She "redeems herself in all eyes but her own by fainting away in the witness-box" (Cunningham, 39), and from that feminine gesture is but a short distance to marriage and a family.

With few exceptions, the views of Charlotte Yonge on the education of females were expressed in concrete social policy during the nineteenth century. Even in the relatively unskilled area of clerking, Cunningham notes that the census returns of 1861 and 1871 show no record of any woman working, in this field. It was not until 1891 that a noticeable number--17,859--were enumerated (4). While the "New Woman" of the nineties was in the vanguard of both formal and informal educational reform (see Cunningham, p.47, for new woman reading habits), many men of that period also supported their demands. Even so, their support may not always have been given for purely altruistic motives, an assumption verified in a letter written by George Gissing.

My demand for female 'equality' simply means that I am convinced there will be no social peace until women are intellectually trained very much as men are. More than half the misery of life is due to the ignorance and childishness of women. The average pretty woman pretty closely resembles, in all

intellectual considerations, the average male idiot-- I speak medically. That state of things is traceable to the lack of education, in all senses of the word. . . . I am driven frantic by the crass imbecility of the typical woman. That type must disappear, or at all events become altogether subordinate. And I believe that the only way of effecting this is to go through a period of what many people will call sexual anarchy. (Letter to Eduard Bertz, 2 June 1893, A.C. Young ed., Letters of George Gissing to Eduard Bertz [London, 1961], p.171). Cunningham, 132.

29 And associated with the creation of other books that immediately preceded and followed Alice; for example, Mrs. Gaskell's "Curious if True" (1860); Thomas Hood's Petsetilla's Posy (1870); Edward Knatchbull-Hugessen's books of fairy tales, including Stories for my Children (1869); and Frances Browne's Granny's Wonderful Chair (1857); to name but a few. And it is also associated with Jessica's First Prayer and Charles Kingsley's fantasy about "goodness," The Water Babies, and The Daisy Chain. While this last observation may seem to contradict the relationship between the content of children's books and the historic periods designated in this paper, the apparent discrepancy can be explained. New approaches to literature do not spring to life overnight, nor do old forms pass away just as suddenly. Rather, they exist side by side, in a parallel development, with the earlier genre remaining viable so long as it reflects the overall attitudes and reading tastes of youngsters and their parents. By the same token, if we take the analogy one step further, new forms also appear before books like Jessica's First Prayer, The Water Babies, The Daisy Chain, or Alice in Wonderland fall out of favour; a fact verified by the work of Nesbit, Grahame, and F. Anstey who wrote a parody of Jessica's First Prayer and Ministering Children called The Good Little Girl (1890) at a time when the former authors were still popular.

30 Beatrice Webb, My Apprenticeship, (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1926), p.174. "The consciousness of sin was a collective or class consciousness; a growing uneasiness, amounting to conviction, that the industrial organization, which had yielded rent, interest and profits on a stupendous scale, had failed to provide a decent livelihood and tolerable conditions for a majority of the inhabitants of Great Britain." A more strongly worded twentieth century perspective of this evil is expressed by Ralph Fox: "Capitalist society, limited by its class basis, is unable to control the monster to which it has given birth. Machinery, instead of creating a new and wider life for man, flings him into the streets to starve, or rends him to pieces in the horror of war, while the owners of the machines, divorced from their use, decay in abject futility or obscene horror" ("The Relation of Literature to Dialectical Materialism," p.69).

31 George Macdonald, The Princess and Curdie, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971. First published 1882), p.219. Subsequent references indicated by the page number after the quotation.

32 Juliana Horatia Ewing, Six to Sixteen, (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1976. First published 1876), p.141. Subsequent references to this book indicated by SS and the page number in brackets after the quotation.

33 David Thomson, England in the Nineteenth Century, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975. First published 1950), p.203. Subsequent references to this book indicated by Thomson and the page number in brackets after the quotation.

34 Gail Cunningham, The New Woman and the Victorian Novel, (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1978), p.1. Subsequent references to this book indicated by Cunningham and the page number in brackets after the quotation.

35 According to Cunningham, the "New Woman" in fiction-- and real life--only "genuinely" new if her "conflict with social convention was on a matter of principle,"--if her "radical stance was taken on matters of personal choice." For Cunningham, the latter definition meant refusal to participate in "any recognizable movement or organization," but these parameters are too narrow, and she indirectly admits such to be the case from the evidence in her study. Indeed, the New Woman was certainly a "joiner," a person who organized collectivist opposition to all injustice, as well as a person who simply expressed revolt in a personal way. In addition, if the New Woman was identified by a tendency to be "intelligent, individualist and principled," she was also identifiable by her "essentially middle-class" background. This critic sees "the problems of working-class women" as "entirely different from those of the middle-classes," and, therefore, they received "very little attention from writers on the New Woman" (Cunningham, 10-11).

36 Kenneth Grahame, The Golden Age, (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1976. First published 1900), p.3. Subsequent references to this book indicated by GA and the page number in brackets after the quotation.

37 Kenneth Grahame, Dream Days, (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1976. First published 1902), p.118. Subsequent references to this book indicated by DD and the page number in brackets after the quotation.

38. Of Nesbit's connection with Kenneth Grahame, her biographer had this to say:

It was occasionally said by those critics whose pleasure lies in tracing every literary work to its supposed sources, that E. Nesbit had drawn her

inspiration [for The Treasure Seekers] from Kenneth Grahame's Golden Age, which made its first appearance two or three years before. No blame could attach to her if this assumption were true, yet it is just to state that it was false--so false, indeed, that E. Nesbit herself, who detested plagiarism and thought it a stigma to be accused of it, never felt it worth while to defend herself on a charge so groundless. (Moore, 148)

But, this statement notwithstanding, Nesbit does have a "direct literary link" with her predecessor, occasioned by the period in which they both wrote and the fact that this decade stimulated new attitudes to social life that were shared by many intellectuals.

39 But she is not always as subtle in the Psammead trilogy--Five Children and It, The Pheonix and the Carpet and The Story of the Amulet. Her utopian socialist frame of reference and her strong awareness of class differences sometimes intrudes upon the form of the stories. Even so, she still gets away with such intrusions, perhaps, in part, because they are fantasies where anything is possible.

40 Nesbit sets the boy up so that she can expose him, just as the Boy and St. George are set up in "The Reluctant Dragon" so that Grahame can make known and undermine their prejudices. But Oswald does not have a dragon to tell him that his crudely formulated outlook is nothing more than "conventionality" and "popular thickheadedness." Instead, as we have already stated, criticism is contained within his own behaviour.

41 E. Nesbit, The Story of the Treasure Seekers, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982. First published 1899), p.15. Subsequent references to this book indicated by TS and page number in brackets after the quotation. Obviously Nesbit is also making a wry comment about herself, since she was a heavy smoker, a habit which unfortunately led to her death from lung cancer at the age of sixty-six.

42 In fact, Oswald is keenly sensitive to the requirements for a readable story--a strength made clear in a significant digression at the beginning of Chapter Two of The Treasure Seekers.

I am afraid the last chapter was rather dull. It is always dull in books when people talk and talk, and don't do anything, but I was obliged to put it in, or else you wouldn't have understood all the rest. The best part of books is when things are happening. That is the best part of real things too. This is why I shall not tell you in this story about all the days when nothing happened. You will not catch me saying, 'thus the sad days passed slowly by'--or 'the years rolled on their weary course'--or

'time went on'--because it is silly; of course time goes on--whether you say so or not. So I shall just tell you the nice, interesting parts. (TS, 24)

And he is sensitive to the fact that he is a novice: on "Being Detectives"--"I shall try to write it as like a real book as I can" (TS, 33); about a sentence he just wrote--"That sentence looks wrong somehow" (TS, 101); about technique--"I must not anticipate (that means telling the end of the story before the beginning)" (W, 10); about detail--"I have not numerated Noel's birthday presents because I wish to leave something to the imagination of my young readers. (The best authors always do this.)" (W, 87).

43 And criticize Denny for wanting to have more goodness than anyone else, obviously a wish that is less desirable for a boy than for Dora.

44 Barbara Smith, "The Expression of Social Values in the Writing of E. Nesbit," Children's Literature, 3 (1974), p.157.

45 Alison Lurie, "Riding the Wave of the Future," The New York Review, October 25, 1984, p.19.

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