

The Female Subordinate: Restoring Patriarchal Order in the World of Pooh

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Winnie-the-Pooh: Chapter 8... in which Christopher Robin leads an expedition to the north pole

Rabbit, I suppose you don't know, What does the North Pole look like?"

"Well," said Rabbit, stroking his whiskers. "Now you're asking me."

"I did know once, only I've sort of forgotten," said Christopher Robin carelessly.

"It's a funny thing," said Rabbit, "but I've sort of forgotten too, although I did know once."

"I suppose it's just a pole stuck in the ground?"

"Sure to be a pole," said Rabbit, "because of calling it a pole, and if it's a pole, well, I should think it would be sticking in the ground, shouldn't you, because there'd be nowhere else to stick it."

"Yes, that's what I thought."

"The only thing," said Rabbit, "is, where is it sticking?"

"That's what we're looking for," said Christopher Robin.

They went back to the others. Piglet was lying on his back, sleeping peacefully. Roo was washing his face and paws in the stream, while Kanga explained to everybody proudly that this was the first time he had ever washed his face himself, and Owl was telling Kanga an Interesting Anecdote full of long words like Encyclopedia and Rhododendron to which Kanga wasn't listening.

"I don't hold with all this washing," grumbled Eeyore. "This modern Behind-the-ears nonsense. What do you think, Pooh?"

"Well, said Pooh, "I think -- "

But we shall never know what Pooh thought, for there came a sudden squeak from Roo, a splash, and a loud cry of alarm from Kanga.

"So much for washing," said Eeyore.

"Roo's fallen in!" cried Rabbit, and he and Christopher Robin came rushing down to the rescue.

"Look at me swimming!" squeaked Roo from the middle of his pool, and was hurried down a waterfall into the next pool.

"Are you all right, Roo dear?" called Kanga anxiously.

"Yes!" said Roo. "Look at me sw -- " and down he went over the next waterfall into another pool.

Everybody was doing something to help. Piglet, wide awake suddenly, was jumping up and down and making "Oo, I say" noises; Owl was explaining that in a case of Sudden and Temporary Immersion the Important Thing was to keep the Head Above Water; Kanga was jumping along the bank, saying "Are you sure you're all right, Roo dear?" to which Roo, from whatever pool he was in at the moment, was answering "Look at me swimming!" Eeyore had turned round and hung his tail over the first pool into which Roo fell, and with his back to the accident was grumbling quietly to himself, and saying, "All this washing; but catch on to my tail, little Roo, and you'll be all right"; and, Christopher Robin and Rabbit came hurrying past Eeyore, and were calling out to the others in front of them. "All right, Roo, I'm coming," called Christopher Robin.

"Get something across the stream lower down, some of you fellows," called Rabbit.

But Pooh was getting something. Two pools below Roo he was standing with a long pole in his paws, and Kanga came up and took one end of it, and between them they held it across the lower part of the pool; and Roo, still bubbling proudly, "Look at me swimming," drifted up against it, and climbed out.

"Did you see me swimming?" squeaked Roo excitedly, while Kanga scolded him and rubbed him down. "Pooh, did you see me swimming? That's called swimming, what I was doing. Rabbit, did you see what I was doing?"

Swimming. Hallo, Piglet! I say, Piglet! What do you think I was doing! Swimming! Christopher Robin, did you see me -- "

But Christopher Robin wasn't listening. He was looking at Pooh.

"Pooh," he said, "where did you find that pole?"

Pooh looked at the pole in his hands.

"I just found it," he said. "I thought it ought to be useful. I just picked it up."

"Pooh," said Christopher Robin solemnly, "the Expedition is over. You have found the North Pole!"

Feminism is, as outlined by Freedman, 'not one unitary concept, but a [...] multifaceted grouping of ideas, and indeed actions'.¹ In fact, Freedman argues that there are so many different strands of Feminism (frequently in opposition to each other), that perhaps it would be more appropriate to term the theory *Feminisms*. In attempting to define, at least in part, the undefinable, Freedman concludes that we should begin with the assertion that the unifying aim amongst all feminisms is to combat discrimination against women. Taking in to account this unitary plight we must consider the culprits of such discriminations. Simone De Beauvoir argues in her 1949 manifesto, *The Second Sex*, that discrimination against women is present socially, politically and culturally. De Beauvoir explains further how this has resulted in an internalized ideology amongst men and women alike. If we assume then, that this conditioning begins during childhood, Children's Literature carries a certain amount of responsibility for its perpetuation of representations of women.

The popularity of Children's Literature rose significantly during The Golden Age. Thus, many of the publications of the era are considered within contemporary society as the classics. Naturally, one would assume that in being labelled as a classic, A.A Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926) was, and continues to be significantly influential to both its audiences, and to the endless appearance of children's novels that have emerged post Pooh. Milne's depiction of gender stereotypes, although ostensibly within the framework of inter-animal relationships, serves merely to reinforce roles that could be interpreted as 'traditional'. In almost all representations of Pooh, including its visual stimuli, Christopher Robin is shown to be wearing wellies. The hunter-gatherer stereotype that he embodies sits in stark contrast to Kanga (the only female character that is present within the text). From her first appearance within the text, Kanga is defined by her outward facing uterus when Rabbit refers to her as, 'a strange animal'² who, 'carries her family about with her in her pocket'³. Thus, from the offset, the female anatomy renders her 'the other'.

Throughout the adventures of Pooh bear and his friends Kangas sole function is maternal. Any deviation from the nurturing role causes an immediate conflict, resolved only by the reinstatement of the patriarchal order. For example, the extract provided begins with the male characters discussing their search for the 'North Pole', a conquest that one could easily interpret as the phallic symbol. During this discussion Kangas presence is merely peripheral. She becomes further isolated when Roo begins to exhibit signs of his growing independence, deeming her (if only temporarily) without purpose. Milne overtly details the dangers of such an otherness by projecting the scene into disarray. When Roo falls into the stream Kanga very quickly resumes her mothering role by giving 'a

¹ Freedman, Jane, *Feminism*, 1st edn (Buckingham [Pa.]: Open University Press, 2001), p. 1.

² Alan Alexander Milne, *Winnie-The-Pooh And All, All, All*, 1st edn, ch. 7 <http://lib.ru/MILN/pooh.txt_with-bigpictures.html> [accessed 15 November 2016].

³ Ibid, ch. 7.

loud cry of alarm⁴. Interestingly, though Kanga is the first character to witness that Roo is in danger, it is Rabbit and Christopher Robin that assert their masculinity by ‘coming to the rescue’. Conclusively, Kanga is overshadowed by the more able-minded male characters and thus, is given the role of feeble, passive spectator in her sons rescuing.

As the male characters seek out a way in which to save Roo from the river, Kanga is seen to be jumping along the bank repeating, ‘are you alright Roo dear?’⁵ a discourse that Catheter refers to as ‘motherese’⁶. Building on the writings of both De Beauvoir and Kristeva, Catheter concurs that under the repressive weight of her male surroundings, Kanga is forced to either ‘chirpily mimic the master discourse’⁷ or be accused of speaking what Toril Moi deems Woman’s ‘incomprehensible babble’⁸. Similarly, in *The Same Sex* (1949) De Beauvoir highlights how women are ‘the other’, ‘and no doubt it is more comfortable to commit to a blind enslavement than to work for liberation’⁹. This theory suggests that for Kanga as a female, to accept and to adapt to this ideology is much easier than to question it.

Milnes representation of women is at its best, restrictive. His characterisation of Kanga is manufactured on limiting gender roles encouraged by a society that was built upon patriarchal dominance. Judith Butler argues, like many before her, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity* (1990) that gender is a social construct. However, her theoretical standpoint is somewhat revolutionary in the way that it poses the same questions regarding the anatomy. This is interesting if we consider that Kangas outward facing uterus is perhaps one of the most noticeable signifiers of her sexual origin. Butler goes on to discuss how both sex and gender are a result of cultural order. In agreeance with De Beauvoir, she concludes that to alter such ideologies would prove more than difficult given that they are ingrained in to both political and social institutions. Thus, Kanga is ‘female’ not because of her anatomy, or her ‘maternal’ instinct, but because she is *told* to be.

To further decode the notions of performativity, Butler traces its beginning to childhood, when, ‘the little boy learns that crying is not masculine [...] The little girl learns [...] to dress to the part of femininity.’¹⁰ Butler adds, that by consistency, these ‘performative’ acts become second nature, and so, collectively, this process is experienced as identity formation.

This brings us back then, to the issues of Winnie-the-Pooh being a children’s text, and the importance of Children’s Literature within secondary socialisation. If Kanga, the only female that is present within arguably, the most wellknown children’s text of the twentieth century, embodies the ideologies of ‘femininity’ then is Children’s Literature not partly responsible for the difficulties that surround resignification?

Ultimately, it is the male characters within the story that rescue Roo from the grips of the river. Rabbit dictates, whilst Poo locates the ‘North Pole’. To assist in Roos recovery Kanga is forced to grasp the phallic symbol and succumb to the ideologies that it represents. Conclusively, she resumes her ‘rightful’ place as female subordinate restoring patriarchal order to the world of Pooh.

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⁴ Ibid, ch. 8.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Frederick C Crews, *Postmodern Pooh*, 1st edn (New York: North Point Press, 2001), p. 53.

⁷ Ibid, p. 54.

⁸ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 1st edn (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 135.

⁹ Vincent B Leitch, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 1st edn (New York: Norton, 2001), p. 1414. ¹⁰ Ibid, p. 2486.

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