

**WHAT IS THE APPEAL OF POETRY  
WRITTEN FOR CHILDREN *FOR*  
CHILDREN?**

**A study of children's relationship with poetry**

**BY**

**ANDREW LAMBIRTH**

**INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON  
DOCTOR IN EDUCATION**

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# **DECLARATION**

**I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own work.**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the appeal that a sample of children's poetry has for a group of thirty children in their final year of primary school in the United Kingdom. It examines this appeal within a socio-historical context that perceives literature written for children as playing an important role within a 'developmental state' (Lee, 2001) – a State where children are seen as sites of investment and as 'human becomings'. The thesis argues that the literature written for children forms part of the discourse that has historically attempted to define, manage and maintain contemporary conceptualisations of childhood. Within this context of adult society's ideological claim over literature written for children – including poetry - the study explores the nature of the appeal the texts generate for a class of 11-year-olds. Through the use of a triangulation of case studies, the enquiry investigates how this appeal reflects children's own understanding of their childness (Hollindale, 1997). It will argue that although children's literature continues to be written for a variety of adult purposes, children are able to manage the messages and meanings found within the poetry and create their own pleasures from the texts with which they engage, rejecting those that they individually dislike.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## **The Appeal of Poetry Written for Children *for* Children and Understanding the Relationship between Child, Text and Society**

This chapter intends to introduce readers to the rationale and focus of the enquiry. It will set out the reasons for the research within my own professional context and will state its aims and expected outcomes. In addition, it will also declare how the project intends to contribute to the field in which it is academically and professionally situated. The whole report has been submitted as the Final Thesis to the Institute of Education, University of London Doctor in Education Degree. I registered for the course before the year 2000 and therefore the thesis length is to be between 25,000 and 40,000 words. The size of this study does impose constraints upon the dimensions and depth of any enquiry of this, however, the enquiry has been designed to fit the stipulations.

### **The Professional and Personal Context of the Study**

This study came to fruition as part of my response to reading Jack Zipes' (2001) book *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*. In it, Zipes contends that children's literature, or the literature of children does not exist, if the possessive apostrophe suggests children's ownership of this form of writing. Most strikingly, Zipes suggests that there is: "*nothing definitive about a text or a book that automatically demands that it be classified as a children's book*" (2001, p.65).

His view is that there are no texts that have an essential 'childishness' about them or that have something that is especially appropriate for children. In addition, as adults are the main consumers of 'children's literature,' Zipes says much of their appeal in the publishing market has to be for adults. This appeal, he contends, is focussed on the ideological messages found in books for children that contribute to a process of socialisation that young people necessarily endure within modern western societies. It was Zipes' work that made me look again at the relationship between children, texts and society.

I am currently a Principal Lecturer in Education at a Higher Education College in Southeast England. As part of my work I contribute to undergraduate and postgraduate courses that lead into teaching. I also teach on Masters level courses for practitioners. My work specialises in the field of teaching English in the primary phase. Much of what I do is concerned with the research into effective methods of teaching English and into encouraging children to read by using a wide range of literature written for them - so this enquiry is extremely relevant to my work.

My own influences upon the perspectives for teaching English include the work of James Britton (1970), Frank Smith (1978) and Margaret Meek (1988), as well as academics from Cambridge University who have highlighted the significance of children's literature and poetry as an art form. These include Judith Graham (1989), Eve Bearne, Morag Styles and Victor Watson (1996). These writers consistently critically support the intellectual power and aesthetic beauty of children's literature and have encouraged my strong belief in its role in the pedagogy of reading and writing. Alongside these scholars, advocates of 'Reader Response' theory (Iser, 1978, Rosenblatt, 1978, Benton et al, 1988, Dias & Hayhoe, 1988) have also been influential. The notion of 'response' as including children's

engagement and involvement (Purves & Rippere, 1968), their liking and disliking of poetry written for them, is certainly what I am concerned with in this study – the appeal of poetry written for children. My approach has been greatly influenced by Reader Response perspectives. These scholar-educationalists have been concerned with encouraging subjective response from children to literature and poetry, and with finding ways to teach children to interpret and construct meanings for themselves. Their approach was in contrast to the work of I. A. Richards (1929) or the ideas behind New Criticism and Liberal Humanism that looked for objective meanings, rather than those subjectively constructed. I have put more of an emphasis on the link between the texts written for children, the society that produced them, and the consequent response in the form of appeal they evoke. I wanted my enquiry to critically examine the concept of ‘children’s literature’ and then look for how these texts appeal, given the wraith of ideological and societal motivations and intentions that writers like Zipes contend are present. I looked at the response in terms of the children’s personal enjoyment of these specific texts and examined how this comes about given the depth of adult intention that the history of children’s literature indicates.

As a consequence, I found my own role as a professional challenged by the questions I was asking. I began to detect a possible professional naivety about the way I had conceptualised the relationship between the child and the book. A child’s relationship with the literature they are given is very different from the relationship that exists between an adult and the books s/he chooses. The discourse between the literature and the two audiences is distinct to each other.

Before I embarked on this study, the questions I was asking myself included: who is it that likes these books the most - children or adults? Children’s books appealed to me and my

colleagues. The teachers that we work with personally enjoy children's books too. They buy them themselves and give them to children in their schools to read. Significantly many children appear to enjoy them, actively engaging in constructing meaning from them. Yet, what is the appeal to children of a literature written, produced, distributed and read by adults? This is a literature, which according to Zipes (2001), has a possible covert and sometimes overt agenda in socialising children into a culture. This had to be a special kind of appeal. It may be distinct from the appeal that children find in other texts. Children's choice of what to watch or read on the television, the computer console or in magazines or comics would probably reflect a different appeal. This appeal is linked to the choices they are able to make with these texts, and is framed by the leisure-time contexts within which these choices can be made. In addition, we know that children enjoy adult texts for television and cinema. They find texts aimed at adults appealing. For example, the children in this study stated that their favourite television programmes were the soap *Eastenders* and the 'reality' show *Big Brother*.

The appeal that forms the centre of this study, is the appeal of a set of texts in the control of adults but distributed specifically to children through a number of adult institutions including publishers, schools and colleges. These texts are aimed to appeal to a child, a child conceptualised by the adults, and of course this may not match how children conceptualise themselves. If there is a disjunction between these two conceptualisations of identity, I wanted to investigate how children would respond to the texts that reflect this disjunction.

Although Zipes' work had acted as a catalyst to my questions, I suspected his conclusions were too reductive and that children's engagement with the texts given to them was far



more active than Zipes suggests. It was this that formed the basis of the empirical study: the appeal of texts written for children *for* children.

### **The Poetry Focus – Cultural Capital**

The focus on poetry sharpens this unusual relationship between texts for children and the children themselves. Poetry, in its canonical form, carries upon it the heavy robes of literary tradition. It often stands as an example of the pinnacle of human aesthetic achievement, yet has only a relatively tiny readership in comparison with other texts. As a consequence of having a minority readership it arguably has generated a halo of righteousness and elitism. For example, in a discussion of poetry, the Liberal-Humanist critic F.R. Leavis comments: *“The potentialities of human experience in any age are realised only by a tiny minority, and the important poet is important because he belongs to this (and has also, of course, the power to communicate).... And poetry can communicate the actual quality of experience with a subtlety and precision unapproachable by any other means”* (1932, p.15-16). Some poetry carries with it a tradition of power and greatness and an indelible link to high-culture, often conceived in opposition to other forms of text from more popular traditions. So, not only is poetry that is written for children adult produced, controlled and distributed, it also forms part of an unfortunate legacy of elitism that is juxtaposed to popular texts and activities that modern children inevitably engage with (Kenway & Bullen, 2001).

As a consequence of this image of elitism that poetry evokes, being familiar with poetry and understanding its powerful place in the literary canon becomes part of a cultural capital (Ball, 2003). This feeds what has been called ‘social capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986b) - a

sociability that enables some within society to maintain and improve their social positions. Zipes (2001, p.64) cites Bourdieu when he writes: “*Out of necessity, we must learn to position ourselves and internalise sets of tastes, codes, and values if we want to assume a particular role or function in a social institution, class or group.*” For those who clamber to maintain or find power in society, poetry becomes a player in the processes of social reproduction. Knowing poetry becomes a form of accomplishment and knowledge is required to successfully fulfil these ambitions, therefore it becomes an essential requirement of education for many, and so poetry takes its place in school as an indicator of social status. As a result, ways to encourage children to read and write poetry have become a preoccupation for educational policy-makers, teachers and poets. Some teaching methods, and even some poems themselves, are devised to persuade children of poetry’s positive effects. Examples of this are shown later in this study. These factors for me sharpened the interest in the empirical possibilities of this study. What *can* appeal to children in these texts given its use and control by adults for all these ideological and pedagogical reasons that I have given?

### **Human Becomings – Society’s Children**

Working in education means one has a professional contact with young minds. My role in educating potential teachers means that I can influence them in the kinds of texts that they use with children in classrooms. According to Zipes (2001) and others, these texts, written, produced and distributed by adults, have a role in mirroring contemporary conceptions of children. Historical studies into the texts written for children over the last two hundred years (Styles, 1998) show this and indicate that there are a myriad of adult intentions behind the production of poetry and fiction written for young people. If Zipes and others

are right, ideological perspectives, reflecting today's society, pepper the pages of these texts. From this perspective it would be simply naïve to suppose that my job was only about introducing children to good quality, entertaining literature that will encourage independent choice and readership now and in the future. I have a role in an acculturation process that needs to guide children to become part of society.

Yet all this assumes a rather passive role for the child. My own experience of working with children, alongside my reading of the work of the Reader Response theorists, leads me to question the completeness of Zipes' position. Although offering a startling perspective on the relationship between adult, text and child, he might be accused of taking a too reductivist position on how children engage with the texts that they are given. This perspective and others form part of the conceptual background to the study. Empirically I set out to study the appeal that a group of eleven-year-olds find in an adult controlled, ideologically driven text. In doing so I hoped to explore this appeal as it exists amongst a backdrop of society pressures and an arguably state conceptualisation of children as being 'human becomings' rather than human beings.

It was Talcott Parsons (1956, p.17) that described a process of socialisation as: "*the internalisation of the culture of the society into which the child is born*". For Parsons, children are born ignorant of the moral values that adult members of society use to make judgements about right and wrong. They are unaware of the conventions that define normal everyday conduct within a specific culture. Children are slowly informed about the social conventions necessary for acceptance in the given society. Without this knowledge, not only will they be unable to function effectively within society, but also society will not be able to function if these persons do not find a conventional place within it. In addition, they

will not be recognised as truly 'human' in the society within which they find themselves. For Parsons: "*Adulthood and full humanity is the achievement of independence, confidence and certainty through the acquisition of knowledge of one's place in society*" (Lee, 2001, p.39). Parsons' view has been called part of the 'dominant framework' (James & Prout, 1997) and has been criticised for its failure to recognise children as being human beings, but instead as 'human becomings'. Parsons' views are about bringing and maintaining order to society. But James and Prout are suspicious of how this view of childhood attempts to provide a complete account of what it means to be a child growing into an adult. What it fails to do for James and Prout, is to recognise that children can be individuals and human in their own right and ignores children's intentions, desires and opinions. The child is stereotyped as only being a recipient of supplementation (Lee, 2001).

Zipes' position might also have that accusation put to it. Although offering a challenge to naïve, unquestioning assumptions about the relationship between children and the texts produced for them, it may also be attributing a passivity to children that could be unjustified. In an argument that reflects Talcott Parsons' position Zipes states: "*It was and still is the need of the socio-economic order that dictates how children will be formed and what forms are not acceptable*" (2001, p.46). Large conglomerates within a culture industry, manipulated by market forces and integral to a capitalist economy, control children's literature and its content. This content is saturated by the meanings that help develop a potential 'false-consciousness' in its readers that helps maintain the status quo. Zipes' views are reminiscent of the position of the Marxist Frankfurt School (Lowenthal, 1961, Marcuse, 1968, Horkheimer, 1978). This form of meta-narrative is a rigorous and indeed, an arguably refreshing change from some of the sterile and impotent positions of

post-modern social theory, yet it does not give enough credence to the individual reader's ability to read against ideology. It seemed to me that Zipes' position constructs readers, and in this case - child readers, as too passive. The socialisation of children may be the intention of a developmental state (Lee, 2001), but it may not be completely successful - or at least this could be too much of a reductionist myth. Zipes displays his view of children's passivity when he states:

*"On the other hand, children from two to sixteen tend to be indiscriminate readers. This is not to slight their intelligence or taste, but they rarely voice complaints. They read and view what they like, and unless prompted or forced, they are reluctant to state their critical views except to say they like or dislike something because it's cool or uncool" (2001, p.57).*

It is hard to see this comment as anything other than a slight on children's intelligence and this is where I find myself wanting to investigate whether young children are much more active and critical readers than Zipes contends. Although Zipes introduces an insightful position on adult control of children's literature and the importance of understanding their socio-historical positioned readings, I was not at all sure this sociological account is adequately characterised by Zipes. This too was an important part of this enquiry.

The literature review of this study will explore how children's books and children's poetry have mirrored dominant framework perspectives in their conceptualisation of the child and their overt and, sometimes, covert intentions behind the messages within the narratives they offer. Zipes' place within this argument will be further explored. The empirical work in this study wants to explore how children respond to a range of poetry that is part of a

long tradition of adult controlled texts. It wishes to investigate to what extent children reject, embrace or subvert the intentions of the adult world that has sanctioned this material for their consumption.

### **Expected Outcomes**

From my experience of teaching primary school children it has always been clear to me that children enjoy much of the literature written for them. The Zipes perspective, although offering intriguing insights, represented for me an oversimplification of the interaction between book, child, adult and society. From my own personal observations, children interacted with books in a much more active way than Zipes seems to suggest. Poetry written for children did seem to have an appeal and it was the nature of this appeal that I wanted to explore. From the outset of this project I wanted to explore my suspicions that this appeal has as its source four main areas:

- 1) There is something intrinsic to poetry as a form of writing that will appeal to children, regardless of the ideological and pedagogical intentions of the poets and publishers and other adults involved in its production. As will be discussed in the review of the literature, even the poetry produced by the Puritans in the 17<sup>th</sup> century that had an overt intention of teaching about ethics and pious religious belief was enjoyed by much of its readership for its poetical structures and style. Was it possible that the intrinsic qualities of poetry will appeal to a person's natural affinity to these qualities?
- 2) I believe that, contrary to the beliefs of those touched on earlier in this chapter, children are individual human beings who, as the next chapter will explore, are capable

of constructing their own meanings from a whole range of texts. These texts may be those specifically prepared for them, but equally it can mean other texts whose primary target audience may be those other than children. I wanted to examine if children are capable of subverting the intended meanings of the writers and publishers and developing their own meanings based on their own experiences of the world and their own conception of themselves as children. When the children meet the poems written for them, will they draw on an appeal based upon their understanding of the world and their position within it? This will include drawing on their sense of humour.

- 3) Just as children can enjoy poetry written for them individually, either enjoying its intrinsic qualities or making their own meanings, equally children will also enjoy the recognition of their being acculturated and weaned into society. It is the appeal of knowing that attention is upon their welfare and that they are being cared for which is an important factor. Here, I suspected that the data I collect would suggest the appeal that Barthes (1975) describes as *plaisir* – the pleasure of conformity. If children's literature is part of an acculturation process, would the children engage with it in a critical way?
  
- 4) The way the discourse within literature written for children is constructed and formalised will be the key factor in its power to appeal to children. The children may well be intuitive enough to detect, what Hollindale (1998) calls, the feelings of 'childness' that is conveyed from within the discourse. As a consequence, this 'childness', the sense of what it is to be a child, will be measured against the children's own sense of 'childness' and assessed accordingly. If this were to be the case, then

Zipes' (2001) contention that there is nothing 'child-like' about a book would be challenged.

By empirically exploring children's opinion of the appeal children's poetry has for them, the enquiry explores a complex relationship that exists between the child, the text and society. This form of exploration looks explicitly at what the children are saying about the appeal, but will also need to make an analysis of their comments within the context of an adult patrolled environment. The context will always need to be considered as an important variable and is discussed further in the methodology chapter of this thesis. This conceptualisation of children and society forms an important backdrop to the study and powers the empirical work.

### **Contribution of the Project – Professionally and Academically**

This small-scale research project is an exploration of the articulated thoughts of a class of children finishing the primary stage of their education. The study uses a number of specific cases from which to draw the empirical data. As the methodology chapter will describe, it studies a particular group of children in a particular school and makes no claim to be able to generalise or to generate theory. However, the exploratory nature of the study means that it can potentially contribute to a broadening of the understanding of the relationship between texts and children for those involved in interacting with young people in similar educational settings.



From my own professional perspective, as someone who attempts to disseminate effective ways to teach children to read texts critically and with interest, understanding the broader societal context of what I do and the role of the texts with which I teach, is crucial for a professionally more informed perspective. The empirical enquiry will provide data about a group of children who are very similar to the children towards whom my work is ultimately aimed. For myself and for others involved in education it may contribute in the additional following ways.

- a) For teachers of every kind who wish to introduce poetry to children, the thesis should contribute to their understanding of the nature and extent that some of the poetry written for children is able to intrinsically appeal *as* poetry. Obviously, this can only be for the specific children in this study, but nonetheless, they are an example of a group of year 6 children in a British school. Searching for an appeal unique to poetry may help teachers contemplate its function in modern classrooms as a form of writing.
- b) This enquiry should enable teachers to contrast the appeal of poetry articulated by the children with some of the documented ideological and pedagogical motivations for producing and teaching poetry for children by adults. Much of the material produced for teachers to advise on the best practice for teaching poetry stems from a conceptualisation of how children respond to poetry and what motivates them to read it. In other words, this enquiry has the potential to make a contribution to the knowledge about good pedagogy in the teaching of poetry.
- c) The children in this study can provide insight into the nature of the poetry that they most enjoy - the themes, subjects and structures that they most appreciate. In addition it

may also assist in informing adults about the different intentions of poets writing for children and how children can respond to them. Being more informed about these authorial intentions could put those charged with purchasing poetry for their school or other educational institution into a more informed position to be able to do so.

This chapter has attempted to conceptualise the study. In addition, it has demonstrated the rationale for my interests in the research and provided a background and a context for the work reported ahead. The next chapter will examine the theoretical perspectives behind my approach to this enquiry, studying approaches to defining children, the literature written for them and how these two concepts have been intrinsically linked. It will also examine perspectives of individual pleasures found from texts both subversive and conformist.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Being, Knowing and Making Children in Texts

This chapter will lay the theoretical foundations that underpin this research project. The ‘appeal’ of a literature written by adults for children is a complex notion. Being a child in contemporary western society, one is both an individual and a member of a unique group ferociously monitored and nurtured by all. This nurture – fetishism, this concern for the future, a future personified by the young, is articulated within the discourse that surrounds childhood. Examination of these areas will demonstrate that what at first sight appears a simple idea - the appeal of poetry written for children - is a great deal more complex than it seems. This is an enquiry into the appeal of texts written children *for* children, so inevitably a major part of this chapter will be concerned with constructs of the concept of childhood. What it means to *be* a child for a child will of course influence how texts appeal *to* the child, but equally, how the producers of these texts conceive childhood will influence how they are intended to appeal.

This chapter will review the literature that discusses the general and specific discourses that surround the conceptualisation of childhood. It will study the discourse active between adult and adult which defines, maintains and categorises childhood within a given society and influences the nature of the texts made for children. Children’s literature will be theorised as part of the latter discourse - the discourse that exists primarily between adult and child - by doing so it will study the motivations behind literature for children that seek to impact on both child and society. In addition, it will attempt to understand how these texts can appeal to children and how this appeal can exist within a framework built by

adults who appear to have a myriad of ideological intentions and motivations. However, firstly it will provide a short discussion of some of the work that has come before this study in terms of studying children's response to poetry. Whilst acknowledging the similarities between this study and previous work in the area of response, it will attempt to show how this enquiry is distinct in being less concerned with literary critical theory (although acknowledging it cannot help but be affected by it). It is far more concerned with cultural contexts and the responses to poetry of those who live within them.

In terms of this cultural context, it will go on to discuss how the concept of childhood has historically been in a state of flux. Its changing nature has been reflected in literature both for and about children. Examples of this literature will be given and briefly analysed as the chapter progresses and compared to conceptualisations of childhood popular at the time. This chapter's brief historical examination will begin in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and end with postmodernist literature and contemporary theorising of childhood. The role of poetry as a form of writing, with its particular qualities, will be highlighted and examined as a fundamental source of appeal to young people, whilst carrying adult cultural messages. The examination of adult intentions based on conceptualisations of childhood will be balanced by a discussion of how texts can appeal to individual children and how they can both 'read with' or 'against' texts in order to find this appeal. The chapter will end with a discussion of the work of children's literature scholars who have attempted to explain the intrinsic qualities of texts written for children that appeal to young people.

## 1. Re-reading Reading

### Response as 'Appeal'

There has been a good deal of work that has attempted to study how children respond to literature and poetry (Rosenblatt, 1978, Tarleton, 1983, Benton, 1984, Benton et al, 1988, Dias & Hathoe, 1988, Pike, 2000). Many of the researchers and reporters (Benton, 1984, O'Brian, 1985, Dias & Hayhoe, 1988, OFSTED, 1993, QCA, 1998) working in this field discovered a general antipathy towards poetry from the children they spoke to in their respective studies. For most of the scholars their objective was to find a means of teaching poetry to children that would prevent this negative response. In order to do this they drew on current critical theory to inform their teaching. One of the most influential of these theorists concerning responding to poetry was Louise Rosenblatt (1978). She contended that readers respond to poetry in an aesthetic or efferent way. The former described how a reader 'lives' the experience that the poem offers, drawing on "*the web of feelings, sensations, images and ideas that he weaves between himself and the text*" (1978, p.134). This is a response that cannot be transformed and articulated in words. However, the efferent response is more technical and rational. It is a form of self-criticism which "*includes setting up hypothetical frameworks, entertaining expectations, selecting from alternative responses*" (1978, p.134). With this kind of response readers can resort to the medium of words to assist in this process of introspection.

Rosenblatt was originally writing as early as 1938 when the meaning of a text was thought to reside purely within the text itself and it was the role of the reader to determine the meaning. The notion of multiple readings from a text drawn from readers' subjective interpretations was alien to critical theory. This was the formalist approach of the New

Criticism school, which dominated literary study from the 1930s until the 1960s. Unlike Rosenblatt's views, it took little account of the reader's role in the making of meaning. The text was sacred and contained a potentially objectively identified meaning. A reader's personal response did not count. In the classroom, formalist positions have been seen as creating "*a tendency for teachers to avert to the authority of the text and to discount the experiences evoked in readers by the poem...the teacher is in charge of the meaning that evolves*" (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988, p.6-7).

Approaches to reading poetry have since shifted from this position of reading the text as an entity in its own right - assuming that its meaning is unchanging, universal and uncontradictory. Reader Response theory sees reading as a meaning-making process that happens between the reader and the text. Meanings are socially and culturally produced and happen within the context of where, or by whom, the book is being read. Rosenblatt writes: "*The premise of this book is that a text, once it leaves its author's hands, is simply paper and ink until a reader evokes from it a literary work – sometimes, even a literary work of art*" (1978, p.9). If reading is viewed this way, the appeal of a text does not sit within the text itself, but is a response to it by the reader who actively makes meaning within a cultural context. That is not to say that the children's writer does not attempt to make a text appeal to children. The writer, as will be discussed later, has a conceptualisation of what it means to be a child and how s/he wants a child to be – there is an implied reader (Iser, 1978) constructed by the text. Yet, for Reader Response theorists, children can be active enough in the reading to either accept or reject this construction and therefore find the text appealing or not. It is argued, that by allowing children to make these kinds of judgements in school and explaining to children about the individuality of a

response and the active process involved, children will begin to see reading as a meaning making process to which they can actively contribute.

The leaders in the field of the study of response (Benton, 1984, Dias & Hayhoe, 1988) saw the views of Rosenblatt and Iser as being closer to the ways young people actually read literature. Pike (2000) in his study, is equally convinced that a form of Reader Response theory applied within the classroom, indeed explicitly explained to the children, will encourage the more positive and helpful response. It will help counter the negative opinions given by children when confronting poetry using other forms of critical theory as a guide.

The scholars mentioned above, who sought to encourage children to respond to poetry, drawing on their own experiences and constructing subjective interpretations, wanted poetry to appeal to children. Through being able to understand 'how' to read poems, children could derive pleasure from their intellectual engagement with the text. There are strong connections between my own academic and professional interests and those of the writers I have mentioned. In my study I am interested in the elements of response that they hope to invoke from young readers of poetry. Dias and Hayhoe (1988) cite Purves and Rippere's (1968) description of the categories of response. These are the following:

1. *Engagement – involvement*: this is the way the reader indicates signs of their involvement in the texts. This will include statements indicating their like or dislike for the work.
2. *Perception*: here the reader indicates the ways of looking at the work as being distinct from oneself.

3. *Interpretation*: this is where a reader attempts to find meaning in the work through generalisation and inference.

4. *Evaluation*: here the reader will be able to say why she finds the work good or bad. This can be a personal or an objective criticism.

Conceived this way, this study asks the children for a response that encompasses all of these elements – with an emphasis on point (1) and (4). Appeal has particular relevance to engagement and evaluation, but it will also be induced by the means children perceive the poem and how they interpret it. By asking children about the appeal of poetry written for them, I hoped to receive their subjective view that mirrors Reader Response conceptions of reading texts. Yet, my emphasis was not on this response alone, but the response to a particular kind of text that seems to be saturated in adult motivations and intentions and linked intrinsically with the society from whence it has come. The scholars discussed (Benton, 1994, 1988, Dias and Hayhoe, 1988, Pike, 2000) put less emphasis upon the relationship between text, society and the conception of childhood reflected in the text itself, when they study the children's response. The children's responses are not examined in terms of their connection to the socialising role of the texts. Indeed, the texts used were chosen for a secondary school audience and so do not distinctly fall into the category of 'children's literature'. This study's essential interest is the unique responses to a literature written *for children by adults* – the socio-historical context of the responses is always at the forefront of the analysis.

When Dias and Hayhoe (1988) ask the teenage children in their study for their response to Ted Hughes' *The Thought Fox* they do not ask their subjects to evaluate purely in terms of likes and dislikes. The children quickly begin to interpret the poem, describing how they



come to particular meanings. Benton et. al. (1988) in their seminal study are, like Dias and Hayhoe, interested to observe how the children respond as individuals. The children do remark why they like the poems they are shown, but do so as older critical readers, finding pleasure from poems by intellectually acute readings that Benton and his colleagues have encouraged. The emphasis of their observations is on the response to a chosen text, but the text is not part of Benton's analysis in terms of its relationship to the readers and how it forms part of the discourse surrounding cultural conceptions of childhood – those who are reading the text. The texts do not carry the same significance as those in this study. The response examined here is one set within a cultural context that needs to be explored before an analysis can even begin, as I now propose to do.

## **2. Historicising and Denaturalising Childhood – Recent Discussions**

### **Children – Who Are They?**

This study is interested in the appeal poetry written for children has to its readership – its power to attract, to please, to stimulate, or to interest. However, the group of recipients called 'children' that these texts claim as their primary audience, will firstly need to be clarified in terms of definition and, it will be necessary to understand appeal in terms of conceptions of the nature of this 'period' in life. Conceptions of childhood, children's relationships with each other, adults and institutions, have changed across time and these conceptions of childhood continue to be in flux. Inevitably, any discussion of the research and writing into conceptions of children will lead to a discussion of adults and of human nature in general and this present discussion will be no different.

Accounts of what childhood is will be central to an understanding and definition of the literature often referred to as ‘children’s literature’- or the literature written for children. The stability of conceptions of childhood will inevitably affect the stability of our understanding of ‘children’s literature’ (Hunt, 1996). However, perhaps more importantly and also directly linked, conceptions of childhood will influence relations between the world of adults and the world of children and the institutions and practices that function as arbiters and create the transition between these two groups. Adults, arguably, need to find the poetry written for their children appealing too, in order to sanction these texts for the reading diet of their children. Indeed Zipes’ (2001) perspective outlined in the previous chapter makes the appeal to adults crucial. The appeal of poetry to adults will be intrinsically linked to the adults’ view of children and childhood. The appeal that this writing has for children will of course be central to this debate too, as the term ‘children’s literature’ suggests an appeal of some kind to the said audience. The connection between the nature of the appeal to adults and the appeal to children is important and will be seen in the empirical evidence presented later in this report.

In terms of age, the children this study is interested in is the group of people between the age range of 0 – 18. To be more specific, the children in the research are 11 years old. They attend primary school in the United Kingdom. The method of defining ‘childhood’ here is one that categorises by the stage the person has reached within a scheme of education. Jenks argues that: “ *The child status has its boundaries maintained through the crystallisation of conventions into institutional forms like families, nurseries, clinics and schools, all agencies specifically designed to process the status as a uniform entity*” (1982, p.11). Jenks’ contention is that ‘childhood’ is not a natural phenomenon, but a social categorisation of a group of people made by a particular society at a certain time. For

example, he argues that the physical difference between adult and child does not singularly signify distinction between the two groups. The change from childhood status to adulthood status is as much a social transformation as a physical one. Any definition of childhood will be “*concretely descriptive*” (Jenks, 1982, p.11) of that individual community, in other words, childhood is a social construction. Already, the notion of an appeal of a text written for ‘children,’ is challenged by the notion that a child is a construct rather than an objective reality. It follows that texts for this construct are defined by the nature of the construct itself and will, therefore, have no objective categorisation as ‘children’s texts’.

Aries (1962), who was one of the original advocators of this theory of social construction applied to childhood, was convinced that a distinct category called ‘childhood’ did not exist in certain times in the history of Western Europe. Later on, Postman (1983) even goes so far as to contend that childhood was invented with the introduction of the printing press.

The period of time print literate society calls childhood, is the period of apprenticeship that needs to be spent learning to read. This view has been challenged, (Buckingham, 2000).

But the view reflects social construction theories that suggest that ideological, philosophical positions, as well as technological developments, determine attitudes towards the concept of childhood: “*Our images of children are social constructions which, whether we are aware of it or not, serve particular purposes*” (Aubrey et al, 2000, p.22).

How adults wish children’s books to appeal to children and consequently, how they are constructed will help define the genre itself. Argued this way, the social construction of childhood also constructs the texts that are written for them.

## Discourses of Childhood

The view of childhood as a construction is given weight by historical events. In western cultures, during the second half of the nineteenth century children were gradually segregated from the adult world and given their own category (Buckingham, 2000). Before this time, children were integrated into adult activities, including the world of work. For this newly distinguished group, new laws to protect children from adult exploitation were introduced and social institutions and agencies were established – school being one of them. In effect, this could be seen as the birth of childhood as a distinct and unique stage of human development and along with this, the discourse around the notion of childhood changed.

Buckingham argues that:

*“...the definition and maintenance of the category of childhood depends on the production of two main kinds of discourses. Firstly, there are discourses about childhood, produced by adults primarily for adults.....second, there are discourses produced by adults for children, in the forms of children’s literature, television and other media” (2000, p.8).*

In every age, cultural representations, in the form of literature - and in contemporary society, films and televisual texts - assist in cementing perceptions and conceptions of childhood and children. These representations, both then and now, contribute to the general discourses around childhood, both for the children and the adults. The texts produced for children will reflect adult conceptions of children, their place in society, expected modes of behaviour, their pleasures, fears, relationships with other children and adults and so on across the given culture.

In the previous chapter I introduced the work of Talcott Parsons (1956) who described the process of internalisation of a culture - socialisation - that children have to undertake. This process, James and Prout (1997) argue, is not just an introduction to a culture but also a means to the achievement of full humanity. The 'dominant framework' that James and Prout observe, perceives children as 'human becomings' rather than human beings, unable to claim individuality and independence until adulthood and a recognised position in society is realised. The discourses manifested in children's literature that this enquiry is interested in, are part of this process of socialisation. In order to be successful, they also need to appeal to their audience as well as imbue cultural values. This is not an easy task and the history of children's literature is a testament to the ways authors have grappled with this problem. The answer for many, as I will show, has been through the medium of poetry; it has been the poetry that has been the original 'engine room' of appeal.

### **The Appeal of Feeling a 'Childness'**

Peter Hollindale's (1997) position on conceptualising childhood takes a slightly different approach. He introduces the concept of 'childness' as a critical term. This is central to an understanding of appeal. For a child, he argues, 'childness' is the sense of self development as a result of the interaction with 'images' of childhood encountered in adult discourse that contribute to the formation of a society's conceptualisation of childhood – including the literature the child is given. It is the child's acceptance and knowledge of being a child. For Hollindale, an adult can have 'childness' too:

*For the adult, childness is composed of the grown up's memories of childhood, of meaningful continuity between child and adult self, of the varied behaviours associated with being a child, and the sense of what is appropriate behaviour for a given age, of behavioural standards, ideals, expectations and hopes invested in the child as a child." (1997, p.49)*

Hollindale looks for childness in the books written for children as a measure of their success and for the quality of the reading events that they evoke. The connection that can be made between the adult author's childness reflected in the text and a child's childness will influence the success of the text and the reading. Here the appeal to a child's sense of 'childness' is the crucial measure of success. The appeal a book has for a child will derive, for Hollindale, from his/her concept of 'childness'. It therefore makes this a central part of the present thesis. Hollindale's contribution to the discussion of a definition of childhood is that he makes childhood a subjective state of being rather than an objective category. There will be more of Hollindale's work later when I discuss his perspectives on definitions of children's literature.

### **Cultural Differences of Children**

When discussing the concept of 'the child' or of 'childhood' it is easy to slip into crass over-generalisations about a seemingly homogenous group. Within any given society a range of cultures exist. It can be argued that there are certain physical and intellectual features of children that might be said to be transcultural. Tucker (1981) attempts to describe a number of them: their capacity for spontaneous play, their receptiveness to the prevailing culture; physical differences in size, strength and sexual maturity; their propensity to attach themselves easily to more mature figures around them; a smaller concentration span and their incapability for abstract thought. However, different groups

within one society can have different social practices - rich and poor, able and disabled, black and white, Christian and Muslim and so on. Children in these groups will also have distinct ways of behaving and interacting with others in the world.

These differences need to be taken into consideration when discussing the concept of childhood:

*“The World’s construction of the child is no homogenous model even within a given society, for differences of social class, race and sex, often entail differences in opportunity, freedom and expectations...The child comes to be socialised as the child of that particular historical world” (Wartofsky, 1983, p.188).*

Discourses for and about these different groups of children will also differ. Hunt gives the example of discourse aimed at a particular class: *“books for the working class child seem to be a good deal more authoritarian and harsh than those for the sheltered middle classes; indeed they scarcely seem to be children’s books at all”* (1996, p.13). The issues around conceptions of childhood are further problematised by these cultural distinctions within a group defined as ‘children’. Inevitably the appeal found from texts will also not be homogenous and this raises problems with a literature classed as ‘children’s’ – one undifferentiated group. How could one group of literature, conceptualising children in the same way appeal to all cultures? This is a question that this enquiry cannot answer, but needs to be acknowledged within the field within which this project sits.

The next section examines a construction of childhood that, as will be shown, has resonance in contemporary government policy and in other discourses around childhood and child-care.

### **3. Some Perspectives on Appealing to the Evil, Innocent – Pre-Sociological Child**

If children are socially constructed groups that have changed over time and culture, then the conception of the essential nature of children will also have changed. Adults writing for children would surely attempt to appeal to the children as they conceptualise them. This section will discuss constructions of childhood that conceptualise children as potentially anti-social, or even 'evil'. The literature for the constructed 'evil' child would need to be instructional in extremely didactic ways. It would need to offer warnings of dire consequences for those who choose to behave anti-socially. As will be shown, much of the literature written for children in the 17<sup>th</sup> century adopted this position, sweetening the message, by offering it wrapped in attractive poetic forms.

A human being's potential to behave in seemingly destructive ways, damaging to a society, has been detected and analysed by all the writers in this section. However, as I will describe, there has been a group of writers (Bakhtin, 1984, Barthes, 1975) who while recognising how humans can behave in anti-social ways, also detected the source and reason for our sometimes irrational and reckless conduct. This source was not Adamic original sin or dark primordial forces, but instead, arose from the rigours and constraints that rational society offers. In addition, some responses to texts can trigger subversive pleasures that provide relief from the everyday need to behave in orderly ways. Here I examine the views of a selection of writers who have attempted to capture the nature of the young as being potentially disruptive. These views of childhood have inevitably influenced the production of literature for children across history and in each stage of society's development the residue of one conception of childhood echoes into the next. The notion of the 'second life', propounded by Bakhtin, is described as an alternative way to explain irrational behaviour. I go on to discuss how the appeal of texts can manifest itself in



subversive thoughts and humour, offering 'time-out' from the everyday officialdom of life. Here to, writers have recognised how their readers respond to subversion and have exploited this in books for a variety of audiences including children.

Conceptions of children which precede sociological studies of childhood come from the realms of 'common sense' and classical philosophy (Jenks, A., Jenks, C. & Prout, A. 1998). The evil child is one such conception. From this point of view, the child enters the world full of wilful material energy, powered by dark forces and programmed to wreak havoc upon the world. This has a mythological foundation and is based on the doctrine of Adamic original sin. The adult's role, charged with supervision as parent, carer or teacher, is to guide the child away from this devilry, unintentional as it may be, and to tutor it in righteousness and the rule of law. Theorised in this way, adults must exert control in the same way Thomas Hobbes suggests in the *Leviathan* of 1651 - with the energy of an absolute monarch. This would include the galvanisation of methods to promote fear of a wrathful God, happy to punish all those who follow paths away from the rigours of Puritan discipline and strict practices of worship. The discourse between adult and child through texts written for these kinds of children would need however, to appeal to them. The method often used by the more successful texts, as I will describe later, was to position the message within poetic texts with all the intrinsic qualities that, as my research will show, seem to appeal to children.

### **Power from Instinctual Life**

The sustained view of children as Dionysian (Jenks, 1982), anarchic and evil has been seen to extend into contemporary society. This may partly derive from Puritan tradition but also

from the modern influences of psychoanalysis and the work of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), amongst others. Freud contended that within all individuals is the unconscious instinctive need to gratify primordial desires, which have ultimately the power to topple the fruits of reason, which include stable civilisations. These instincts bring forth sexually motivated barbarous behaviours, ultimately damaging to both the individual and the society in which the person lives. It follows that all human actions are an imperfect balance between warring forces within us. Children, with their developing and insufficient powers of reason are in danger of being 'swallowed' by these darker, basic instinctive urges and need to be guided to more social and civilised behaviour: "*Freud appears to teach that repression is bad, but civilisation for its survival does need something like the repression of instincts, because, unchecked, they would surely destroy it*" (Trigg, 1988, p.143).

The use of fairy tales as part of a child's literary diet was praised and utilised by the neo-Freudian: Bettelheim, (1976) because of the deep layers of meaning accumulated over years of retelling and for their ability to speak to the unconscious in the minds of young people. Bettelheim (1976) claims that these texts have a therapeutic effect upon their readers, especially for those who are suffering with a serious psychosis. For Bettelheim, like Freud, texts like these are a healthy way to control the deep and hidden desires and instinctive forces controlling the behaviours of all. Appeal to the readers here, is an unconscious phenomenon that springs from a child's need to satisfy innate desires. Children are not conscious of the 'real' reasons why they enjoy fairy stories, but just that they must have them - a 'bibliotherapy,' (Fader & McNeil, 1969, Manning & Casbergue, 1988).

The notion of children's susceptibility to irrational behaviour, arguably, has been sustained in modern society and is reflected in the discourses around childhood. Repressive measures aimed at children reflect this view. Presdee (2000) gives examples of modern society's measures to avoid children's instinct-driven behaviours: the Millennium Dome National Exhibition banned all young people under the age of 16, unless accompanied by an adult, presumably fearing that they would run riot. As another example of this, Presdee cites the abolition of 'doli incapax' at the age of 10 that stated that a child is incapable of telling the difference between serious wrong and simple naughtiness. Presdee argues that these are indicators of the extent that contemporary governments believe a child to be 'innocent' in nature: "*The new millennium carries on where the old left off with the continuing of the demonisation of young people.....the state's view seems to be that to discipline and control 'youth' is to care for youth,*" (Presdee, 2000, p.108 - 109). The sustained belief in children's potential for mischief and wrong-doing gives reason for contention that discourses created for children by adults in the form of literature may still reflect these fears.

### **The Appeal of Reading the World as a Carnival**

The view that humans, both adult and child, can potentially be bestial and unruly in their behaviour can be intrinsically related to the different forms of pleasure that humans derive from their interaction with the world. When these desires become reality, Bakhtin (1984) calls this the 'second life of the people'. The 'primary life' is one of adherence to the rules and norms of society, the rules of the state and of institutions like school and the work place. The second life is expressed through the world of excess, obscenity and degradation.

Here, humans can express their concealed feelings, where the irrational spurns the rational and the constancy of a world based around scientific modernity:

*“...the second life is characterised by freedom, equality and abundance,”*  
(Bakhtin, 1984, p.9).

*“It is a world where the ‘fart’ rather than the ‘thought’ is of more importance”*  
(Presdee, 2000, p9).

Linked to the ‘second life’, are the spaces and the times where this can be expressed - Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque. Historically, a carnival-type festival licences transgression and openly defies or mocks the values of society within which it takes place. The world is ‘turned upside down’: slaves become masters, fools can be kings, the young take on the guise of the old and the private functions of the body are exposed to public ridicule or laughter. Here is the domain of the ‘second life’: *“Thus carnival is the people’s second life, organised on the basis of laughter. It is a festive life,”* (Bakhtin, 1984 p.198).

In history, periods of carnival helped to revive the spirits of those living in the oppressive dark and the cold of winter or during other times of hardship and dismay. The rituals and festivals of magic that instigated wild pleasures and were accompanied with violence, existed in cultures across Europe. As the mono-deism of Christianity emerged there were attempts to incorporate these festivals into its own structures of ritual and worship. By the Middle Ages carnival had found its way into the church calendar, ridding it of any of the original excesses, but demonstrating altruistic levels of tolerance from the church to all. Today the residues of these original carnivals still exist. However, modern studies in cultural criminology (Presdee, 2000) have suggested that it is no longer sufficient for people to have condoned periods of carnival: *“under the ‘unbearable’ rationality of modern life, acts of carnival can be taken as an explanatory cosmology for”* (Presdee,

2000, p.33) various acts of contemporary crime. For example, the illegal burning of cars today mirrors the bonfires of yesterday's festivals and carnivals. It is argued that for many, the official life or primary life is a life surrounded by oppression, inequality and poverty; the second life of pleasure and carnival begins to take on the life of the every day and a life of crime becomes the desired pleasure of carnival.

It would follow from these observations and arguments that children too will be susceptible to these excesses, living in the same world as the adults that fall prey to these carnivalesque pleasures. Adults charged with the care of children, whether they are parents or teachers, would arguably avoid experiences that excite this way of life and this would include certain texts. However, some writers for children have seen how they can appeal to young readers by exploiting the children's need to escape the confines of the official life while they are engaged in reading a book. These texts offer the child a 'time-out' (Stephens, 1992) from everyday life. There is poetry and prose for children that push at the boundaries of adult tastes and exploit children's delight in a 'second life'. These are the texts that laugh at adult controlled society and highlight and ridicule human bodily functions and the grosser side of existence. The 'Potty Poets' are a contemporary group of poets writing for children who attempt to appeal to a child's sense of carnival. They have recognised that children do enjoy the laughter generated from scatological subjects and have made their poems reflect this. This group of poets will be discussed later. As will be shown, the carnival appeal that they exploit arguably hides a far more formal and traditional educational motive.

Another example of modern writers appealing to the 'second life' in children is 'The Mole Who Knew it was None of his Business' by Werner Holzwarth and Wolf Erlbruch (1989).

This picture book offers a story of a mole that on surfacing from the earth is defecated upon. The story, a 'who-dunnit' with a difference, focuses upon the mole's quest to find the perpetrator of this deed. As part of his enquiries he questions other animals, who graphically demonstrate that they could not have been responsible. It could be argued that this is a text of the 'second life' and carnival. It laughs and revels in bodily functions and the subjects that it highlights produce a tension in schools charged with the responsibility of modelling 'civilised' good taste in the texts that they choose for the children.

Children, or possibly their parents, enjoy 'The Story of the Little Mole' – it was Amazon Book Retailers children's best seller. However, teachers are often repelled by the story and strongly disinclined to read it to classes, fearing its effects and questioning its appropriateness in school (Lambirth, 1998). The tension between what genuinely seems to appeal to children and the conceptualisation of children manifested in school environments has led to the suppression of texts designed to have this appeal. Appeal based upon 'carnival' instincts, a break from the official life, is an individual response that can be collectively experienced in classrooms. This is clearly a subversive appeal that some official environments discourage, yet some writers for children exploit. This form of appeal will appear within the empirical evidence that this thesis will report. How the different poets use it will be seen to differ in significant ways.

### **Pleasures of the Text**

The conception of the pleasures of carnival and the arousal of 'the second life' can be allied to the work of Roland Barthes (1975) and his view of the pleasures that texts can

offer. The concern of this thesis is poetic texts written for children and Barthes' work is vital when discussing their appeal. Barthes writes of two kinds of pleasure experienced through interaction with certain texts: *jouissance* and *plaisir* - roughly translated as bliss and pleasure (Miller, 1975). The former is the pleasure of non-conformity (Kristeva, 1982), it is an unbound delight, a pleasure that is not rationalised and difficult to capture in words. This sort of pleasure can be found from texts that Barthes calls 'writerly' ones. These texts are more 'open' to interpretation by the reader, than more 'readerly' ones, and allow the reader to explore paths of meaning that are unorthodox or unexpected. They permit readers to go beyond 'normal' reaction. Barthes' (1975) *plaisir* is the pleasure and enjoyment found in conforming, recognising genres and with them their constraints: "*Plaisir represents conscious enjoyment and is capable of being expressed in language. It is more conservative, accommodating and conformist than jouissance...plaisir produces the pleasures of relating to the social order; jouissance produces the pleasures of evading it,*" (Grace and Tobin, 1997, p.177).

When investigating the appeal of poetry written for children it will be important to identify a poem's potential for generating these certain forms of pleasure. Like the 'carnival' pleasures found in some texts, *jouissance* is an individual and subversive appeal, which accommodates a sensation of escape from a dominant culture. This and *plaisir* will be sought in the responses from the sample of children in this enquiry as a way to look at appeal generated from poetic texts written for children.

Conceptions of childhood that characterise children as potentially unruly or even evil have influenced the texts produced for them and as cultural criminology (Presdee, 2000) has shown, they still have an echo in modern discourses on childhood. In searching for a

source of bad behaviour Bakhtin has shown a desire in humans to escape from officialdom by sporadically engaging in irrational and antisocial conduct. The second life manifests itself in destructive and extreme behaviours - a reaction to living in a controlled world of officialdom. Its source is not original sin, or instinctual forces, but the rational control of an organised world. For Barthes, texts can enable their readers to either reject or embrace this officialdom. In attempting to control society, discourse in the form of texts has attempted to intervene and influence human behaviours. The work of Barthes has shown that writerly texts can offer readers opportunities to experience pleasure through non-conformity. 'Time-out' from official life, far from offering long-term dangers for society, simply offers momentary relief from a life under control. Arguably, writerly texts have a greater chance of facilitating harmony in society than pious religious diatribes, as they recognise the human need to escape momentarily from normal controlled life. These kinds of pleasures are central to the findings of this research that looks for appeal from a sample of poetry offered to 11 year olds.

#### **4. Literature for Evil and Bestial Children**

How children were conceptualised heavily influenced the discourses offered to children about childhood. As conceptions of childhood changed, so did the literature written for them. This section of the chapter offers a brief outline of the influential forces in the development of children's literature – a literature drenched in notions of childhood.

Up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Puritan tradition was reflected in much of the work written for children (Styles, 1998). Some of the earliest interest in children as a distinct group in



England began with the Puritans, who studied the nature of young people and how they should be treated in society (Sommerville, 1992). Puritanism represented the initial manifestation of the new ruling 'middle class' in literature written for children (Leeson, 1977). It was this group who began to show an awareness of the problems involved in communicating with young people, and indeed Puritans wrote a good deal of the poetry for children that reflected this concern. Abraham Chear (d. 1668) promised punishment to those children who were not prepared to mend their ways:

My pretty Child, remember well,  
You must your ways amend;  
For wicked Children go to Hell,  
That way their courses tend.

But despite this harsh message, the Puritans, Sommerville (1992) reminds us, were originally a radical group of thinkers concerned for the welfare of the family. Their tough approach was married with a genuine care for young people and as Styles (1998) points out, there are many accounts of rowdy, ill-behaved children at the time. Thought was needed about how to deal with them justly.

There is little literature for children today that directly attempts, so explicitly, to frighten them into good behaviour as there was in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. However, as we will see, it can be argued that forms of 'socialisation' are now carried out with more subtlety, yet with familiar messages.

## **Instructional to Recreational – Finding Appeal in Poetry**

Much of the literature for children written before the 19th Century had to compete against the popularity of Chapbooks of the time, yet still the work of such Puritan writers and poets as James Janeway, Bunyan and Chear sold well. Styles (1998) points out that this could be because these writers attempted to include playful language and playful themes amongst their Puritan message and that this created appeal for children. Styles disagrees with the standard critical line on writing for children in this period, that it: *“was instructional and that it was inflexible, harsh, and lacking in literary merit. Consequently, it offered little in the way of diversion,”* (Styles, 1998, p.6). Close readings of the literature written for children at this time, she argues, show recognition from poets and writers that they need to entertain their readership as well as instruct. The need for readers to find appeal in their works was crucial. Alongside the heavy moralising there are many references in the literature to toys and children’s desire to play.

Following on from this general playfulness of language, intrinsic to some poetry, it can also be argued that the structures, rhythms and rhymes of poetry itself make it an effective vehicle for a message. Poetry has been recognised by propagandists, evangelists, advertisers and educationalists as having intrinsic qualities that can make readings and recitations appealing. It can carry any message upon its rhythms and rhymes, distracting or diluting serious meanings as children ‘catch’ memorable verses on their tongues and tap out the rhythms with their feet. Indeed contemporary television advertising seems to be aware of these qualities and is evidenced in many advertising campaigns. An example of this is the latest advertisement for the ‘juice’ drink Ribena, that attempts to popularise a new bottle and dispenser. It asks children: *“Are you a Ribena, Pulla, Squeeza Geeza?”*

This slogan plays with language rhythmically in arguably poetic ways and appeals to children's love of this form of language. In some cases the power of the rhythm dominates the appeal of the recitation, making the reader consciously oblivious to the message.

*"Children consider rhyme to be clever in itself"* (Opie, 2001, p.570) as can be evidenced in the appeal of adverts and of the relative linguistic sophistication of playground rhymes that often carry messages. Indeed, some of these messages have no validity unless in the context of the rhyme, (*"Mrs White had a fright in the middle of the night"*) others are to do with game playing – picking the person who is 'it' - others to do with juvenile legislation or simple deceptions (Opie, 2001). Some however have more sinister messages, containing racist or sexist sentiment that children may be only partly aware of - the rhythm being the most important feature of appeal. It is these inherent and intrinsic qualities of poetry that have been seen to offer appeal and these will be investigated in the empirical work of this study.

### **The Appeal of Belonging**

In addition to these inner qualities that poetry possesses and that the Puritans and others exploited, it can also be argued that it was the conformity of the texts and their attempts to control their readers that also invoked a pleasure and appeal. Arguably, in addition to the moral themes and meanings they contain, the control that the texts exude derives from a number of textual features they have. These include clear generic structures and reference to similar texts from the culture and in the case of Puritan poetry - Biblical associations and reference to church practices, including prayer and sermons. Pleasure from texts, as has

been discussed earlier, takes different forms and the amusement and pleasure of these texts resemble what Barthes (1975) has called *plaisir* – a pleasure taken from recognition of the culture and the associated textual and social conventions which it promotes. Here, readers enjoy the reassurance and comfort of understanding their place within the social world and recognise the rules and conventions, not just of civilised society, but of the official social, semiotic systems of literature.

This is another aspect of appeal that the empirical part of this enquiry will investigate. Plausibly, children of today will still need the reassurance of knowing and understanding their place in society as children and their position in terms of their relations with the adult world. It has been argued, (Zipes, 2001) that these socialising messages add to an acculturation process that readers willingly participate in, and add to the appeal of the texts.

### **Romantic Visions of Innocence**

The Romantic Movement in the histories of literature heralded a more liberal discourse around childhood from adult to adult, and adult to child. The poets Wordsworth and Blake are often seen as significant figures in this literary movement, a movement that inevitably affected the literature written for children. This literature, like the literature for children before, was part of the discourse that reflected the changing conceptions of childhood. The view began to develop that children were a part of the natural world. They are born innocent and it is society that is the corrupting force. This turned earlier views of children – that they are innately imbued with the evils of original sin - on their head. The adult

world was seen as having the potential to corrupt the innocence of the natural world and its children. Whilst children and nature were one of the same thing, adulthood was deprived of this association. The adult can only look back on the world of childhood and mourn the decline into adulthood:

*There was time when meadow, grove, and stream,*

*The earth, and every common sight,*

*To me did seem*

*Apparelled in celestial light,*

*The glory, and the freshness of a dream.*

*It is not now as it hath been of yore;-*

*Turn whereso'er I may,*

*By night and day,*

*The things which I have seen I now see no more*

Wordsworth (1804)

The child, for the Romantic Poets is gifted with a freshness of vision and a communion with nature that is quickly lost with the development of adulthood and the initiation into society. The child is imbued with an innate purity and a goodness that springs from an affinity with other natural living things. For many writers of this period, the child was used to demonstrate the destructive forces of a new industrialisation within society.

This society was indeed a changed one. It had seen the confirmation of the Middle Classes as the 'ruling class' and the industrial revolution had created new wealth and new scientific advances. Up until this time, the view of childhood as a protected developmental stage had

not been possible due to high mortality rates and stark poverty. The 19<sup>th</sup> century literature framed the child as: “*a symbol of hope and a means of exposing adult guilt and hypocrisy*” (Buckingham, 2000 p.9). Echoes of this conception of childhood reverberate now, just as the more negative views continue to be subsumed into modern discourse.

### **The New Recreational Appeal**

The poetry and literature written for children of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century began to reflect the need to nurture the gentler side of children. There were attempts to acknowledge that children need to experience innocent pleasures and amusement, and the literature written for them during this period attempted this. The poetry anthologies of the time, for example, began to include the words ‘amusement’, ‘happy’ and ‘pleasure’ in the title. Plumb writes: “*Children, in a sense, had become luxury objects upon which their mothers and fathers were willing to spend larger and larger sums of money, not only for their education, but also for their entertainment and amusement*” (1982, p.310). This century saw an enormous growth in the literature written for children that gave pleasure. It presented nature as its central theme and this association has been a consistent one ever since. Nursery rhymes were popular and nonsense verse, that played with language and parodied other more traditional forms of verse, made champions out of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear:

*“Increasing middle class social stability, the lengthening of childhood in middle class families, the growth of the literature itself which stimulated the search for new forms reflected itself in a growing tendency and ability to ‘mix the whimsical, the witty and the moral’, an ability to relax into nonsense and fantasy”*(Leeson, 1977, p.29).

In addition to including amusement and pleasure for their readers as their main intention, writers confirmed the existence of childhood with texts that were often written from a child's perspective:

*When I was sick and lay a-bed,  
I had two pillows at my head,  
And all my toys beside me lay  
To keep me happy all the day*

Robert Louis Stevenson (1885)

Robert Louis Stevenson's work is just one example of many that took the experience of childhood as a reality and wanted children to relate to the themes and events in their poems and narratives. The notions of 'childness' were changing. In a review of Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verse* in 1885 the anonymous reviewer writes: "*He not only knows what the children like, but he likes it along with them. His verse is full of surprises which children themselves constantly give us in their odd mixture of fantasy and realism*" (The Guardian, 2003). The world from a child's perspective is also seen in Carroll's children's novel: 'Alice in Wonderland'. Barbara Wall writes:

*Alice's became the first child-mind, in the history of children's fiction, to occupy the centre....No narrator of a story for children had stood so close to a child protagonist, observing nothing except the child, describing, never criticizing, showing only what the child saw." (Wall, 1991, p.98)*

It should not be assumed from this that morals and values were *not* promoted in these texts written for children; indeed this thesis will argue that this *is* common in many texts written

for children. These poems and narratives contributed to the changing discourse around children and indicated that: firstly, children existed and secondly their experience was both unique and valuable. However, one important trait of texts written for children during this period remained the same as in earlier periods: the adult conception of children dominated the subjects and themes of all the writing. Perspectives within the texts may have changed, but adults and their will to see children in certain ways, contrived an appeal that the texts reflected. The literature conceptualised childhood as a distinct period of life, but was still unwilling to admit and disclose children's 'unofficial' individual humour, subversion and desires that later works for children began to reflect.

### **Post-Modern Perspectives**

Much of what has been written in this chapter reflects the influence of post-modernism on conceptions of childhood and the literature written for them. It does so because it raises the possibility of the relative nature of knowledge and the seeming incredulity of what Lyotard calls 'metanarratives' (1979) - totalizing conceptual frameworks or universalist stories. Jean-Francois Lyotard was a key writer in this area in the 1970s and his major work *The Post-Modern Condition*, (1979) contends that the status of knowledge is in crisis. The 'metanarratives' of, for example, Marxism or Christianity, or in the arts - liberal humanism or modernism – intellectual frameworks that attempt to make meaning of the world – have lost all credibility and have collapsed as a means to accessing 'truth'. Storey describes it thus: *"Postmodernism is said to signal the collapse of all universalist narratives with the privileged truth to tell, and to witness instead the increasing sound of a plurality of voices from the margins, with their insistence on difference, on cultural diversity, and the claims*



*for heterogeneity over homogeneity*" (2001, p.150). It follows from this stance, that concepts of childhood must also be questioned and examined. As Buckingham comments: "*Our contemporary notion of childhood could be seen as part of the Enlightenment project, with its emphasis on the development of rationality as a means to ensure the stability of the social order*" (2000, p.33). Many of the arguments about the 'death' of clear unitary notions of 'a childhood' are a symptom of a 'post-modern condition'.

The influence of post-modern theorists such as Habermas, (1978) Lyotard (1979) and Baudrillard (1988) touches the literature written for children too. Debates around definitions of 'children's literature' are allied to the problems of defining childhood and literature within a post-modern condition. Without essential definitions of 'childhood' and 'literature' there can be no conclusive definition of 'children's literature'. The fragmentation of generic structures in different texts, celebrated by post-modernism, has allowed writers for children to experiment with what have been accepted ways of writing. This has been manifested in the mixing of literary genres; the foregrounding of 'intertextual elements', including parody and pastiche: the ironic revisiting of past texts; the challenge to concepts of high and low culture in written work - between what is thought 'popular' and what is considered the 'elite.' In addition to this, texts marketed as children's books have challenged notions of what is appropriate for young people.

In the world of poetry written for children, all the elements of Post-Modernism can be observed. Conventional structures, normally associated with children's poetry are ignored. The free verse of Michael Rosen's work is a good example of this trend, challenging and poking fun at those who wish to 'define' poetry. Rosen's work is written with the natural cadence of speech, the language is of everyday, it is often informal and direct, inviting

identification with his readers (Styles, 1998). Rosen writes about the everyday events that affect children and he invites children to laugh at themselves by relating hilarious incidents at eating times and other domestic situations. There is nothing ‘elevated’ about his work, in its form, use of language and its subjects. At times he returns to nursery rhymes - the traditional texts of childhood - to parody and poke fun, using the language he knows his young readers will adore:

*This little pig went to market,*

*This little pig ate some ants,*

*This little pig went to Sainsbury’s*

*This little pig went up in a lift,*

*And this little pig*

*Went wee, wee, wee, wee, wee, wee,*

*Oh no, I’ve wet my pants*

Michael Rosen (1985)

Rosen’s poems encourage an appeal based on subversion and a unique communion between the adult world and that of the child. Not only does his work challenge canonical literary forms, but also his themes and subjects view the world from ‘inside’ the child - and all is not innocent and ‘wide-eyed.’ This is not the world of a child imported from the consciousness of adult aspirations of childhood, Rosen: “*for the first time in children’s poetry, tried to write not just from the point of view of the child, but in the voice of the child, using the speech rhythms and thought patterns of the contemporary urban child, usually a boy*” (Lockwood, 2001, p.615). From my own professional experience, Rosen’s poetry books are very popular in schools and the poem used in this enquiry, as will be

shown, was greeted positively by the children to whom it was shown. The manifestation of 'childness' (Hollindale, 1997) that Rosen's work reveals, was new when it started to be published in the 1970s. There seems to be almost a unique collusion between adult and child, where no importation of values or any kind of pedagogy or moralising is perceptible. The everyday domestic settings that it describes - the irritations of parents and other adults; the desires; the fights, the gluttonous binges on chocolate cake and other foods - described a childhood that is not part of a life that was 'becoming', but a life that is about 'being'. As this enquiry shows, the appeal that this way of writing generates is also unique.

This section has demonstrated that the literature produced for children forms part of the discourse surrounding conceptualisations of children. It has not attempted to provide a comprehensive history of the development of children's literature, but has offered a selection of some of the powerful movements in this form of literature that have reflected the conceptualisation of its target audience. From Puritanism to Post-Modernism, children's literature has been influenced by a dominant theoretical position, all the way through, children have been forced to engage and interact with its meanings.

## **5. Contemporary Issues: Present Concerns**

### **No 'Children's Literature' – Ideological Intentions and the Appeal of Individual Response.**

The Post-Modernist production of children's literature challenged its previous forms in the way it was written and in how it demonstrated conceptualisations of childhood. Rosen's work, as discussed above, is marketed as 'children's literature' and its approach to this

form is unique in its formation of a 'childness'. Yet, is there an essence of 'children's literature' that runs through all these different texts offered to children? This section looks at the work of those who challenge the very notion of children's literature and critique it for its ideological motivations. The ideology found in texts written for children will be examined as well as highlighting the work of researchers who have shown how children intellectually manage ideology when it is encountered. This section also introduces the notion that children's literature is a subjective entity, activated by the event. This view contends that despite what adult writers and publishers throughout history have claimed to produce, children's literature actually only exists when it is read and engaged with by a child. In presenting this view I will also draw on work that shows children are discerning and critical readers who are active meaning makers finding appeal and pleasures through their intellectual engagement with the texts they are offered. Finally, in contrast to these notions, but whilst still pursuing the essence of children's literature, I will look for features in these texts that contemporary critics have highlighted as being common to most texts written for children and, are said to add to their appeal.

Rod McGillis has remarked:

*"What we call children's literature is an invention of adults who need...something to help them construct a vision of the way things are and ought to be so that the present generation and more importantly, the next generation will behave according to standards those adults who write children's books and publish them feel comfortable with" (1996, p.202)*

In a study about the appeal of literature written for children, the above contention needs to be taken seriously, for it highlights the extent that children's literature is ideologically controlled. It also mirrors the work of Zipes (2000) that I discussed in chapter 1. Like McGillis, Jack Zipes (2001) also believes that 'children's literature' is a misnomer:

*"I am not being coy – children's literature does not exist. If we take the genitive case literally and seriously, and if we assume ownership and possession are involved when we say "children's literature" or the literature of children, then there is no such thing as children's literature" (2001, p.39-40)*

The question that powers this enquiry is 'what can be left to appeal to children, when all these adult intentions and motivations exist within these texts?' My contention, which I have explored in this enquiry, is that there is an appeal. Because children are active readers, capable of individual response, they can make meanings for themselves from the texts that they are given to read. The empirical part of this project wants to investigate what a sample of children say about the appeal of these, arguably, ideologically saturated texts.

### **Adult Ideology**

From what has been discussed so far, historically within the production of children's literature the appeal seems centred upon that of adults. Indeed adults read it and enjoy it too. This could be for a number of reasons. It might be because it is adults who write it, and these writers, in satisfying their own artistic instincts by making representations of the world, appeal to the experiences of their adult readers (Zipes, 2001), in other words the 'childness' (Hollindale, 1997) is the childness of adults. Adults in libraries, schools and universities enjoy them, perhaps because of this identification with the authors' and poets' themes, but also because of a professional interest in their literary merit and in the critical comparison with others. Universities offer courses in children's literature with busy academic discourse surrounding this writing, providing work for professors and lecturers alike. But 'children's literature', as has been shown earlier has an ideological appeal to the

adults who are carers, mentors, parents and politicians, those who are stake-holders in the future. The Liberal Humanist view that reading can do a person 'good' by spreading certain values about society and how we should live as citizens is alive in the discourse surrounding children's literature. The Leavisite critic, Fred Inglis makes this clear when he writes: "*only a monster would not want to give a child books she will delight in and which will teach her to be good. It is the ancient and proper justification of reading and teaching literature that it helps you to live well*" (1981, p.4). Inglis renders these values, 'this good', as natural values, the 'good' of common sense; but buried under this naturalisation is inevitably a hidden discourse and an ideology. Often the values that literature carries are not neutral, but are in fact the values of the powerful social class - the middle class. The books and poems recommended by institutions like schools and colleges, arguably run by the middle class, will inevitably contain these same moral values and therefore form part of the process of socialisation that takes place within class-lines – a social reproduction (Ball, 2003).

The ideology discussed here, means as Sarland (1999) describes it: "*all espousal, assumption, consideration and discussion of social and cultural values, whether overt or covert*" (p.41). It has been relatively recently that critics of children's literature have begun to unveil adult ideological influences upon texts for children. The ideology within these texts was the more covert manifestation, different to the blatant dogmas found starkly within Puritan writing of the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Trease (1949) exposed a conservative bias towards much of the historical fiction written for children. Dixon (1974) attacked prolific children's authors, including Enid Blyton for her white middle class perspective on life. Zimet (1976) saw exclusion of ethnic minorities and women in the work written for children. These critics attempted to expose the ideological influences of an adult run

society determined to perpetuate values associated with the powerful class, race and gender of that society. Leeson comments that: “*surveying children’s books in general, one can see underlying them the preoccupations and values of the middle class*” (1977, p.11). For these critics, those who own the means of producing texts for children, also control the values represented within them. These critics position the ‘adult’ that these texts appeal to within a socially defined group or class of adults, not a homogeneous group. The appeal was to a middle class audience of adults within a process of social-reproduction (Ball, 2003). The ideology present in the texts that were being critiqued hoped to be able to reproduce the values of a contemporary class of people in the new generation - their children.

### **Ideological Influence and Making Children’s Literature**

Hollindale (1988) identifies three levels of ideology found in literature. The first is the overt. This is the ideology found in the early didacticism of the Puritanical poetry of the 17<sup>th</sup> century; it makes no real attempt to cover the values it supports. Sarland (1999) cites Kemp’s (1977) *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tyler* as an example of this “proselytising” (Sarland, 1999, p.47) type of children’s literature in contemporary society. The second form of ideology is the passive kind; here, main characters voice values and views of the world and readers are invited to identify with protagonists’ opinions. Thirdly, ideology can be found in an ‘underlying climate of belief’, which Hollindale describes as being inscribed into the basic material of the fiction. This would be the most subtle of the three, as readers ‘enter a world’ of fixed values that are never questioned or contradicted, the life of the book is naturalised.

The subtlety, underlined by Hollindale and others is further highlighted by Jacqueline Rose (1984) and others (Macherey, 1977, Stephens, 1992) who draw on the work of Wolfgang Iser (1978) and his view that texts have an implied reader. Iser's contention was that texts have a cultural repertoire that needs to be matched by their readers. By textual devices, the subtle use of characterisation and by this 'underlying climate of belief' (Hollindale, 1988), readers are constructed as they interact and identify with the action.

Not all the research in this area supports these views. The assumption that readers identify with characters in the texts and take on values expounded by them has been challenged. Fox, (1979) and Protherough, (1983), both found when questioning young readers that they take up a range of positions that vary in terms of their involvement with the views and beliefs of the characters. Barthes' (1975) contention that texts operate a plurality of codes, which make them open to a plurality of readings, supports this view. Eco (1981) contends that readers interact with ideology in a number of ways: they can simply assume the ideology of the text; miss or ignore the ideology, often importing their own; or they can interrogate the text to disclose the ideology. Sarland's research (1991) supports the view that children will import their own values into texts. Cherland and Edelsky (1993) also showed how 'aberrant' readings come from texts that seemingly promote conservative values, such as - in Cherland and Edelsky's case - traditional feminine roles. Young women reading the *Baby Sitter Club* books revealed how they saw the babysitters as making money to achieve their own ends and as shaping their own actions, rather than conforming to ideological stereotypes that would suggest the babysitters are fulfilling the 'natural' role of womanhood – the caring for the young. The views of Zipes (2001) and others seem to neglect this kind of perspective that highlights how children are not always manipulated by the ideological intentions of the producers of texts that are given to them.



The research cited above indicates that children are capable of 'reading against' the intended messages of the texts and are not always duped into consuming their ideology.

### **Not Children's but a 'Child's Literature'.**

The young readers in these last examples shape their readings of texts to generate appeal for themselves. The appeal is on an individual level and the intended ideology is ignored. It confirms that reading can be a dynamic active process - the reader creating his/her own meanings from these texts and building in his/her own values. The readers find part of the appeal in these texts by appropriating the meaning for themselves. Perhaps it is only at this point, in the whole production of a 'children's literature,' that appeal eventually becomes a reality in the truest form. In order for these texts to generate this pleasure there must be an implicit subversive interaction between reader and texts, that manages to corrupt any ideological intentions and miraculously enables the readers to claim ownership of these texts at last. If this is how 'children's literature' is created, then Jack Zipes may be correct when he contends that any text that children read can be thought of as 'children's literature.' These texts are appropriated by the reader and made their own. The ownership of texts is a private appropriation that takes place at the point of reading. So it may be as Hollindale contends, that texts that are enjoyed by individual child readers may not be 'children's literature,' but "a child's literature" (1997, p.84). 'Children's literature' is seen here as a 'reading event' rather than simply a text:

*“Outside the critic’s compass lies the actual reading event, where children’s literature shifts from text to experience. Since every twelve year old reader will bring his or her own childness into dialogue and negotiation with that presented in books, and since every child’s childness is necessarily unique, a multiplicity of readings will be generated. Some of them will give major educational opportunities to the parent and the teacher, but in the ideal situation of busy and varied reading activity, most will be rightly the child’s business.”* (Hollindale, 1997, p.86)

Attempts to classify a literature as ‘children’s literature’ by reference to its textual or thematic features would appear to be in vain if Hollindale’s contention is true - that its essence lies in a reader’s subjective engagement with the text. Yet, to assist this enquiry, it may be worthwhile examining what others have seen as features common to literature written for children.

### **Text Appeal**

As has been seen, the idea that there are unique and intrinsic qualities of texts written for children is a contested area. Those who extol the view that children’s literature has particular features unique to it run counter to the contention described above. Children’s literature is a subjective and active phenomenon, actualised by the event rather than an objective reality. Its appeal lies in the individual experience of the reader. However, as a marketed product, with an intended audience, critics have looked for common features that identify it and its attempts to appeal to its readership (Tucker, 1981, Hunt, 1994). It would follow that these features should appeal to the child readers and therefore become integral to an enquiry of this kind.

They include some of the following:

- The fresh ways of writing about characters and situations that develop a child's thinking about the world;
- Conversely, books that provides confirmation of characters and situations.
- Stories with a simplified version of reality, easy to understand for young minds;
- Stories with satisfying endings and that children can relate to;
- Writing that deals with concrete events rather than abstract discussion, where action is emphasised rather than introspection.
- A lack of ambiguity in story line, plot, characterisation and moral dilemma;
- Positive approaches to life in story lines and in characters.
- Plain, direct English, but that shows sensitivity to sound and overtones of words.
- There will be limits to the emotions portrayed in books for children; experiences portrayed will be those capable of being felt by children;
- There will often be children in the stories.

The problem with all these generic features is that many of them can be applied to other textual genres. Looking down this list it is interesting to apply these features to adult televisual texts like so called 'Soap Operas', 'Eastenders' (BBC) for example, or to shows with ambiguous target audiences like 'Neighbours' (Grundy, BBC). These common features can not be identified as defining characteristics, but just typical ones.

## Poetry Appeal

The appeals of contemporary poetry written for children are similar to aspects of the general appeal of children's literature described above. Many modern poets writing for children (Rosen, McGough, and Patten) tend to use a certain authenticity of language; they use the words and grammars of everyday life in a genre traditionally assumed to elevate language. Their poems often portray domestic scenes from urban life that children can relate with. In addition the poems do not shy away from appealing to children's *jouissance* by making reference to more scatological humour. Brian Morse (1996) describes how much modern 'children's poetry' attempts to put children in touch with themselves – laughing at 'childish' behaviours and the everyday interaction with modern life. This is the 'childness' that Hollindale (1997) describes. Hunt (1994) believes that poetry written for children is essentially rhythmic or narrative, rather than static and contemplative. It has an accessibility that comes from being close to children's own writing, Hunt calls poetry written for children as being 'interactive' (1994, p.65) in the way it invites children to join in, to sing along, to move to its rhythms and ultimately to compose in a similar way.

Styles (1998) and Meek (1996) point out that some of poetry's appeal is from its potential for attracting children to the delights of poetry. Styles contends modern poetry helps adults and children lose their fear of poetry and Meek describes how today's poetry written for children can endow "*children with poetry potential*" (cited in Styles, 1998, p.265). This view looks at poetry for children as part of a process within childhood of 'becoming' rather than being. This has been discussed earlier in this chapter and is clearly relevant here. These perceptions of the appeal of generic features of children's literature will be used as part of a framework of analysis in chapter 4.

This chapter has grappled with complex notions of appeal of texts written for children... for children. It has set out to show that in children's literature and poetry, what at first sight appears a simple idea - literature that is written to appeal to children – is a vastly more complicated concept. The intended appeal it has for its audience needs to be sought within a jungle of ideological, political and personal motives of those who produce them. Equally the appeal of texts has been argued to lie outside the text and sometimes running counter to the intended appeal. In its search, this chapter has examined notions of childhood and how these conceptualisations have historically been fundamental in the production of 'children's literature'. It has shown that each historical period develops a particular culture and that this has affected children's literature by moving it from the instructional to the recreational, but how residues from the previous era still linger between the lines. It has discussed how children's literature as a concept has been seen to exist subjectively rather than objectively and how appeal can be generated by individual readers, sometimes against the intentions of the writers and producers. Lastly it has examined some of the typical features of the marketed product called 'children's' literature. The next chapter describes the empirical research of this project and will include how a framework for analysis was constructed to study the data from the three cases that were examined.

# CHAPTER THREE

## Methodology

### Looking for Appeal

This chapter will describe and justify the research methodology, strategy and data collection techniques that were employed to make this enquiry. It will restate the original research question and will classify the purpose of the research. A brief description and justification of the overall research paradigm that this study has embraced will also be given. The chapter will go on to explore the special challenges involved in generating data from children, but how the process involved benefits the nature of the questions that this study asks. It will name and discuss the research strategy used; this will include a discussion and justification of the use of multiple case studies. The chapter will list the research questions generated for the case studies and clarify how a sample of cases was selected. It will also discuss the data-collection techniques that were employed.

#### **1. Classification of Purpose and Paradigms**

The purpose of the research was exploratory. The enquiry asked the question: ‘what is the appeal of poetry written for children for children?’ It wished to find out the views of a class of thirty children in Year 6 concerning poetry’s appeal. In doing so it sought new insights into relations between poetry and children and into the inevitable influence of the wider social network in which they exist.

This small-scale research project was rooted firmly in interpretative traditions of research. It did not seek any objective reality, but was only interested in definitions of phenomena made by interpreting individuals. Its purpose, like many forms of social science research, was to attempt to understand social reality as different people articulate it and to examine how their views influence the action which they take within this reality. The study wanted to know the subjective interpretations of the appeal of poetry made by a group of children. In doing so, it looked for patterns and correlations amongst the views of these individuals, using specific analytic frameworks. But at no time did it set out to generalise or generate theory. It simply hoped to explore and discuss. In doing so, it sought insights into a particular context and hoped to relate this to theoretical perspectives found by others working within related fields of social science. The size of the research report that this enquiry needed to generate formed one constraint, limiting the wider and significant insights that a larger project working with a larger sample of children might generate. However, it may potentially suggest new research in the future and stimulate debate in its own right.

## **Studying Children**

### **Children on Children**

Asking children questions about themselves and their own beliefs creates a number of issues for researchers to ponder when generating and studying data from them. Graue and Walsh have said: "*asking children why they are doing things, explanations they do not give in their normal interactions, is like asking fish about water.*" (1998, p.43) However the goal of interpretative research is to attempt to understand the meanings that children

create within certain situations. In doing so, their utterances have to be understood within a context. Like the work of anthropologists, social scientists working with children sometimes needs to establish indirectly the meanings and motives of those being studied. The tacit motives of social actors under scrutiny are sometimes not accessible consciously to the actors themselves. Interpretative research is all about making meaning from this category of data. This research both acknowledges these issues and has generated and analysed the data with this clearly in mind.

### **Children in Contexts**

Geertz (1973) contends that human thinking is consummately social in character. Its origins, functions and applications, are in effect, a public activity. What the children may say today about poetry in the context of the classroom may well be different to what they may say in the playground or the family living room. Each site could generate different data. Children are almost certainly more context-driven and vulnerable than adults. This has to be conceded, but is also welcomed as part of the learning the enquiry hopes to provide. It is interested in children's views within the context of official learning environments. From the start, it was hoped to examine how the appeal the children found in poetry can be correlated to the context the children find themselves in.



## Conceptions of Childhood

Those who do research with children also need to declare their own conceptions of childhood as this will influence the nature of the methodology. This enquiry works upon a premise, described in the literature review of this study, that a 'child' is "*historical, social and cultural (and lives) under particular social and historical conditions.*" (Minick, 1989, p.162) Conceptions of childhood by adults are based upon an adult's own culturally produced and motivated views of 'childness' – what it means to be a child (Hollindale, 1997). Equally, a child's understanding of childhood is also based upon her own feeling of childness. Both adults, and children's sense of childness is created by the discourses surrounding and embedded within childcare, pedagogy and other related fields. In addition, Mayall (1994) has argued that childhood is not experienced as one set of relationships – context free - but is defined by adults' conception of these specific times and places in which these relationships exist. The amount of power that children have, she contends, is premised by these site-specific conceptualisations. So a sense of childness will differ from setting to setting. This enquiry would embrace this view and acknowledges that the children and adults in this study experience childness in these multiple ways, influenced by their changing environments.

The research carried out in this project has tried to demonstrate to all involved, both adults and children, that it respects children as intelligent people capable of managing the world which they inhabit. The children in this enquiry are concerned to have a good life and their intentions are focussed upon this. I did not attempt to treat them like adults, but I have attempted to speak to them in ways that adults within official contexts may not do normally (Graue & Walsh, 1998). For example, the children were informed of their power

in affecting the results of this enquiry. It was made clear to the children that they can provide unique insights into the world of childhood, specifically their interaction with children's literature. After all, there is no one else who can provide this kind of data and for that, the adult academic world has to be grateful for any co-operation and time that they are prepared to give. The children were made to feel powerfully unique and respected.

## **2. Research Strategy**

The research strategy that was used in the enquiry was case study. Robson (1993) describes a case as "*the situation, individual, group, organisation or whatever it is that we are interested in*" (1993, p.51). With the intention of the research being exploration this strategy seemed best suited for the task. The three cases helped to maximise the variation and assist validity. In this enquiry the three types of case were the following:

- A class of thirty Year 6 children in a Junior School in Southeast England
- A group of 5 children from this main class – each one an individual case, but due to the perceived problems of interviewing individual children (Graue & Walsh, 1998) it was decided to take the group as one case
- The class teacher for the Year 6 class

The case study strategy has been shown to be useful for small-scale research enquiry for a number of important reasons (Robson, 1993). It is clearly empirical because it relies on the collection of evidence about what is happening in the world, but is distinctive by being concerned with the particular rather than the general – it studies particular cases. The

phenomena that case studies examine are always within a particular context. It was clear that this strategy would be an effective means of gathering the class of data that was sought.

The dangers of case studies include the risk that researchers may become tempted to ignore the context within which the case operates (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 1996, Brown & Dowling, 1998). Indeed Brown and Dowling (1998) contend that in research terms there can be no such thing as an individual case because: "*Even a single actor participates in a multiplicity of research sites....to assert that each potential research site is independent of each others is to constitute a radically schizoid subject.*" (1998, p.166) However, as has already been stated in this enquiry I was interested in the context, surrounding social systems and other sites that will undoubtedly influence the case in question. There was no wish to study this surrounding system specifically, but to acknowledge it and to simply observe some of the ways it intervenes in the responses of the specific cases. These influences are discussed in the previous chapter in terms of the adult ideological interventions through children's access to their reading matter and the children's own attitude and response to the literature in question. The sampling strategy will be discussed later in the chapter.

## Research Questions

The questions are first of all interested in the direct appeal of the poems offered to the children, but then progressively focus upon outside influences on appeal and consequently, any subversive reaction to awareness of control.

- What are the sources of the poetry that the children read or have read to them?
- Do the children say they like poetry?
- What is the nature of the appeal?
- If the appeal is related to humour and laughter, does this humour have subversive qualities?
- From a sample of five poems, which do they like the most and the least, and why?
- What is the nature of the appeal of these poems?
- Are the children aware of adult control of the literature they read? Do they know what parents want to appeal to them?
- Can feelings of 'childness' be detected in the appeal they identify?

### **3. Sampling Strategies**

#### **The School**

The class of thirty Year 6 children that the research concentrates on are pupils in a Church of England Voluntary Aided Junior School in a seaside town in Southeast England. The school has 190 pupils on roll, which is relatively smaller than other schools of the same kind. Only one pupil in the school speaks English as a second language. Less than 1 per cent of the pupils are from ethnic minority backgrounds. Approximately 14 per cent of the pupils have free school meals, which is below average. There are no children who have a statement for educational needs, although 85 children are on the special educational needs register. Only a small percentage of pupils enter or leave the school at times other than those of normal entry or transfer to secondary schools.

The school was chosen for a number of reasons, some of them practical, others directly related to the nature and purpose of the research. Firstly and from a practical position, the school could be accessed easily by the researcher as it was near to my home. I knew the school because it is part of the partnership for Initial Teacher Education courses run by the University College at which I am a member of staff.

Primary age children were the focus of the study because it is this age in which I have special interest. This has already been acknowledged in the introduction to this study. Year 6 are the oldest within the primary phase of education in the United Kingdom and have, therefore the most experience of children's literature and poetry. The enquiry wanted to talk to children who were accomplished readers, who made choices about the material they read and were able and interested in giving their views on traditional forms of texts.

Obviously, I wanted to speak to those who were experienced readers of poetry and were aware of the appeal that poems written for children might have. The language co-ordinator of the school was confident that the children in Year 6 would have this kind of experience and background.

### **Social Class**

The majority of the children in the class will be classified in this enquiry as coming from middle class backgrounds. Their parents are what have been called the ‘saliarent’ or service class (Goldthorpe, 1995, Ball, 2003), many of them holding professional positions like teachers, medical doctors, solicitors and so on. Most parents had some degree of professional autonomy or managerial authority as part of their responsibilities at work (Ball, 2003). The children come from middle class backgrounds. A notion of social class is a notoriously contested area and defining social class is by no means easy (Pakulski & Waters, 1996). This study conceives class as Ball (2003) has described it - as something that happens within human relationships:

*“Class, in this sense, is productive and reactive. It is an identity based upon modes of being and becoming or escape and forms of distinction that are realised and reproduced in specific social locations. Certain locations are sought out, others are avoided. We think and are thought by class. It is about being something and not being something else.”* (Ball, 2003, p.6)

People ‘do class’ (Connell 1983). It is a dynamic process and entity that is realised and struggled for in everyone’s daily life. For Ball (2003), the process is manifested starkly within educational settings where choices that are made by parents have defining social consequences for the children concerned. The middle classes, he argues have become adept

in securing the resources and the environments needed to promote social reproduction and advantage. The parents of the children in this study were likely to have the kind of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986a) that Ball describes which helps define them as a class in this dynamic. In endeavouring to look for the appeal of poetry written for children, the enquiry sought to explore how the appeal, that the children describe, has a resonance from this active power struggle that exists within the sites of education. It is for this reason that the study focuses on children from this social background.

### **The Class of Children**

The class was chosen because the teacher was the language co-ordinator (the subject leader within the school) who had a particular interest in teaching literacy. Thirty children seemed a large enough sample to be able to explore their perception of the appeal of poetry written for them.

The teachers in all the classes use the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) (DFEE, 1998) as the basis for their planning for the teaching of literacy. The NLS was brought in by the New Labour government as part of a high-profile project of non-statutory guidance for the purpose of raising standards in literacy teaching and learning in primary schools in 1998. Schools in England adopted it as a guide to the planning and teaching of literacy on a daily basis. The NLS documentation suggests an hour every day should be given to the teaching of literacy. The hour was to be divided in to three sections concentrating on text, sentence and word level teaching objectives. Teachers were expected to follow its suggestions for introducing the text types it prescribes, including poetry. By the time children reach Year 6 they should have been exposed to a variety of forms of poetry. These include: nursery

rhymes, chants, poems from a range of cultures, riddles, tongue twisters and humorous verse, shape poems, puzzles, puns, haiku, cinquain, couplets, lists, thin poems, conversations, prayers, epitaphs, songs, free verse and classic poems. Criticised for its perceived over-prescriptive nature (Carter, 1999, Bielby, 1999), teachers have adapted it over the years to suit the needs of the children in their class (Ofsted, 2001). The children in this class had been studying a range of poetry within the academic year that this enquiry was carried out.

### **The Group of Five**

This group was selected as a result of initial scrutiny of the questionnaires that were completed by the whole class. The five children (child A – E) consisted of three girls and two boys. Each appeared to have been interested by the enquiry's purpose and had written in relatively more detail and length than others in the class. They were all very willing to take part in the interviews. Gender was not a perceived issue for this research, but a mixture of girls and boys seemed to cover any different perspectives the two genders may articulate.

### **The Class Teacher**

The teacher was an experienced practitioner and was the language co-ordinator at the school. She qualified in 1976 but has only taught full-time for four years. Bringing up a family, she had been working two days a week for many years. She was particularly interested in the teaching of literacy and children's literature. She expressed an interest in poetry written for children and had enjoyed teaching it to this class in the academic year of



this study. I was aware that this was an extremely hard-working teacher, who generously took time to talk to me. She was aware of the reasons for the research and expressed genuine interest in being part of it.

### **Triangulation**

With three cases to examine, as stated above, it was thought this might form some kind of triangulation when assessing the different sources of data. The class of thirty was asked about their views of a sample of poetry, their answers providing a broad perspective and contributing to a sense of the collective 'voice' of this age range of children who were completing the primary phase of their education. Interviewing the group of five provided a much more intimate environment. This allowed me to access the opinions of children motivated by the enquiry and who wished to give their own individual views, away from the class collective consciousness that might be generated when they were questioned together. It also enabled me to probe more deeply into the data given by the class of thirty. Lastly, the class teacher provided an adult controlling perspective and allowed me to ask her about poetry, poetry teaching and her opinion of what the children had been providing in terms of data. What the children would be responding to, in terms of their conception and perception of poetry's appeal, would be partly influenced by the teacher's approach. It was therefore important to understand the teacher's methods of teaching poetry and also her own opinion of poetry herself. The teacher's response to the children's views would be useful in two ways. Firstly, it would assist me in gauging the accuracy and honesty of the children's responses from someone who knows them much better than I. Secondly, the teacher's response to what the children say will provide data for interpretation that comes from someone who is in a position of adult power and, arguably, charged with the

responsibility of preparing children for society. This has been discussed in some detail in chapter 2 and is highlighted as crucial for this enquiry.

#### **4. Data Collection Techniques**

All the data was collected over two visits to the school in May 2003. The class teacher had agreed that ethically it was acceptable to use the official school day to collect the data. The children had been learning about poetry and she felt that they would benefit educationally by exploring their feelings and opinions about poetry. I presented the questionnaires to the children in the morning with the whole class. The class teacher was present throughout, with the exception of during the interviews. As mentioned earlier, I gave a detailed explanation to why I was doing the research and described the importance of their responses. The order of the data collection was thus: 1) Questionnaire (a), 2) Responding to R. L. Stevenson's *The Land of Counterpane* with a partner, 3) Readings of all five poems – the children discussed their opinion briefly with their partner between poems, 4) Questionnaires (b) and 5) (c). The interviews were held after morning breaks.

On the first morning of my two visits the children were anticipating my contribution to the normal day. The class teacher had given them some indication about the purpose of my visit, but I wanted to explain in more detail. With the whole class, I told them that I was involved in research into children's views about poetry. I said I was aware that they had been looking at poetry in their literacy lessons and that this would be a great help. I described what I wanted to do that morning – I wanted them to talk and write about their views of poetry generally, but I also had some poems to show them, their opinions of which I wished to gather. I was certain the children were not approaching the poetry I

offered 'cold'. Their teacher had organised a unit of work on a wide range of poetry with an emphasis on Nonsense Rhyme stretching over a two week period. They had recently given a performance of a number of poems in a school assembly to close this unit.

The first questionnaire was given out to the class and I explained what I wanted them to write – to state, drawing from their experience, if they enjoyed poetry or not and to try to explain their answer. I made some suggestions as to why they may like or dislike poetry – particular poets, types of poetry, experiences when they have met it and so on. I was aware that no definition of poetry had been given to the children and they were left to decide for themselves what I meant by 'poetry'. I would imagine that due to my comments about 'poetry in school' earlier, and given also the environment that I was asking the questions within and who I was, they would assume that 'poetry' was the writing presented to them in books at school and possibly at home. It would be canonical, linked to school curriculum and more formal. I understood that informal forms of poetry would probably be discounted by the children, but this study was most interested in the children's views of the poetry they had met through the medium of children's literature, the field with which this study was primarily concerned.

The children appeared delighted to help me and seemed motivated by my obvious enthusiasm and interest in their unique opinions. There was a buzz of interest and industry as they wrote and shared their opinions with neighbours.

I then read the Stevenson poem after introducing it as an example of an older form of poetry written for children. In pairs, the children worked on what they liked and disliked about the poem, marking the copy with their jointly formed written opinions. They clearly

had become used to reading a range of poetry prior to my visit and took on this task with some ease and relaxation. The written medium may have reduced the possibilities of expression, relative to what they might have offered orally, but I was happy that the children were active in asking assistance from adults in the room when they needed it and that they were very articulate writers.

Approaches to offering children poetry are wide ranging (Lambirth, 2002). Creating opportunities for oral readings in various ways and with different groupings, creative dramatic work and other active interactions with poetry, often can enable children to engage with more challenging or unusual forms. It could be usefully argued that merely reading this poem and the others in the sample simply did not give enough opportunity for the children to actively engage with them as much as they could. I concur with this view, yet my objective was not to attempt to find ways to generate appeal in the poetry – the objective of many of the reader response theorists (Benton, et al, 1988, Dias and Hayhoe 1987) mentioned earlier. I wanted to study if the poems appealed to the children after an ordinary, or at least, fairly lively, reading.

The rest of the sample was read by me in the same way. After each reading I asked the children to discuss the poems in pairs and with the children around them. There were some poems that clearly generated more interest than others. The children spontaneously joined in with the rap chorus and I was asked to repeat it. The Rosen poem made many of the children laugh and imitate the voices of the characters. The more sombre examples, perhaps expectedly, were received with less active responses.

Arguably, the children may have had a more positive attitude to the Prelutsky poem, for example, if there had been a greater opportunity to explore its themes and discuss its meanings in a variety of ways over an extended period of time – yet this was not the nature of this study. I had also thought carefully about my own presentation of the poetry and how it could be possible to present a biased reading. However, I personally enjoy all the poems I offered and tried to ensure that my readings were led by the intrinsic aural textures that the poems offered.

The children were then asked to record which their favourites were and which ones they liked the least, and to give as clear an explanation as they could. Again, this was not completed in silence; instead the children shared their views, asked for assistance from the adults and generally engaged with the task in a social way.

The children went out to play. With the teacher, I then discussed the children's responses and chose the group of five that I would interview. The interview lasted for approximately 30 minutes away from the rest of the class and the class teacher. The samples of poems were available and I conducted a semi-structured interview. This was repeated on my second visit after initial scrutiny of the data.

The different layers of data collection, the questionnaires, interviews, *The Land of Counterpane* activity and the responses to the poetry samples, gave the collected information different textures. The questionnaires allowed the children to respond individually to direct questions. The interviews enabled me to talk and get to know the children and probe deeper than the questionnaire could go. The interviews gave more of a voice of a group of 11-year-old children rather than to isolated individuals and enabled

them to listen to others before voicing their own opinions. The interchanges between me and the children and the children with each other added a welcome vibrancy to the data collection. Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Land of Counterpane* poem asked pairs of children to discuss a 'classic' poem. The dynamics of paired work provided a different dimension to when the children were responding as a class to the samples of poetry being read, discussed as pairs and then answering the questionnaires individually. The whole-class work provided a school classroom context and allowed the poetry to 'come alive' and off the page and be performed in dynamic ways. All the different methods enabled the children to express their views of the poems in terms of appeal and created the potential for the coding and analysis to move across the layers.

### **Questionnaires**

The group of thirty were given three questionnaires (Appendix B). The first asked them if they liked poetry – yes or no – and then asked them to explain their answer the best they could. The next two questionnaires were given after hearing and reading the five chosen poems. They were first asked to name the poem they liked the best and asked to give reasons. To assist the children, there were three categories to write about: the subject of the poem, its structure and the effect upon the reader. It also gave the children the opportunity to comment further on the poem in any way they chose. The second was for the poem they did not like and asked exactly the same questions with identical categories. The categories were chosen because of the ways response to poems has been identified and encouraged by writers in the field (Benton & Fox, 1985, Benton & Benton, 1986, Lambirth, 2002) of teaching poetry to children. Both of the questionnaires that asked specifically about the poems had a question about the hypothetical source of the two poems they chose. A menu

of three sources – teacher, parent or school friends – was given for them to decide a likely source for their introduction to a poem like this.

The questionnaires, as has been described, contained a mixture of both open ended and closed questions. The latter form of questions needed to be very straightforward and clear – I simply needed to know if the children liked poetry. The more open questions that asked them for their reasons for liking or disliking a poem potentially could have caused problems of ambiguity and misunderstanding (Robson, 1993, Scott & Usher, 1999). For children these problems are potentially exacerbated. However, I was on hand to assist the children when they came across any questions they found too complex or imprecise. This happened on a number of occasions, as words needed to be defined and meanings explained. In the more open kind of questions, the children were offered forms of ‘simple closed opinion’ questions. *“Here coding has taken place before the fieldwork and respondents are offered a number of different options that are presumed to cover most eventualities”* (Scott & Usher, 1999, p.68) and ‘open opinion’ questions that are post-coded. Obviously, a researcher can not assume all eventualities have been covered in constructing ‘simple closed’ questions. However, it was felt that the children needed a framework to assist them to negotiate their response even at the risk of limiting the range of answers that could be offered. The interview gave an opportunity to ask more searching questions and the chance for the children to provide freer answers.

## **Semi-Structured Interviews**

### **The Five Children**

Two interviews were carried out on two separate occasions with the same group of children. This was because I needed conversations with the children when I could probe more deeply into the issues I was concerned with. An interview's flexibility seemed to be particularly useful when working with children, when clarification can be made of some of the concepts about which I was asking. During the interviews, which each took place in an empty classroom and lasted for thirty minutes, the questioning attempted to collect further data concerning the children's own choice of reading, their ownership of poetry books and how they acquired them. In addition, there were discussions about the extent to which their parents would approve or disapprove of some of the poems read to them for the enquiry and whether they were aware of any reading material they owned that they knew their parents would disapprove of their reading. These were sensitive issues that probed the children's relationship with their parents. The interviewer as a member of the adult world and probably perceived as a part of the school environment would mean that there was a danger that their answers might be guarded and consequently unreliable. This is an issue that needs to be accepted as an inevitable result of these power relations. The researcher needs to be aware of these issues when making an analysis of the data and, as discussed earlier in this chapter, has to recognise the need for informed interpretation of the children's responses. In addition, it was also important to take into account the context where the interview took place. The environment can influence both children's and adult's conception of being a child (Mayall, 1994) – feelings of 'childness' and therefore responses within this environment are context led.



## **Semi-Structured Interview**

### **The Class Teacher**

This interview was carried out after school in the teacher's classroom and it again lasted for thirty minutes. As has been discussed earlier in this chapter, I was keen to talk to the teacher about the data that I had collected earlier from the children. In particular, the interviews focused on their preferences for certain poems, the kinds of poetry that had been taught in school that year and the influence of parents and other adults in the selection of literature the children received from home and at school. As with the children, the context of the interview can affect the responses from the interviewee. This must be accepted again, but as it is for the children, the context is an important variable and the nature of the answers within this context is important to assist in answering some of the research questions.

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### **'The Land of Counterpane' Activity**

The children in the class of thirty were asked to work in pairs and discuss this poem by Robert Louis Stevenson. This was an activity to start the children thinking about poetry with the assistance of a partner. It acted as a kind of 'warm-up' activity. They were asked to debate and to identify by annotation what they liked and disliked about this poem. The poem is an example of a historical moment in the history of children's literature. The poet was one of the first 'children's poets' to represent the world from a child's perspective and I was interested to see how contemporary children would perceive it. It also offered children the opportunity to examine what the National Literacy Curriculum would describe as 'classic poetry' and to be able to measure its appeal to them.

## Poetry and the Sample of Poems

Reading poetry can often involve unrecognised assumptions and conceptualisations about what poetry is (Furniss & Bath, 1996). Attempts to conceptualise poetry, which I discussed in detail in my *Institution Focused Study* (Unpublished, 2001), often concentrate on its distinctiveness from other written forms. This includes its special use of language in comparison with so called ordinary everyday use (Scannell, 1987, Reeves, 1965); its effect upon the reader and the need to bestow upon it special kinds of attention (Britton, 1958); as well as its pattern and layout upon the page (Andrews, 1991). Post-modern perspectives that contend poetry is never one thing but many, have increasingly challenged metanarratives that attempt to formalise definitions of poetry. Auden and Garret's (1935) definition of poetry as 'memorable speech' centres conceptualisations of poetry within the individual reader and therefore makes poetry a subjective phenomenon, as opposed to having any objective existence. These views have both affected the work of poets and have also influenced the poetry that is now valued and the ways of reading that critics have adopted (Furniss & Bath, 1996).

This study is interested in the appeal that published children's poetry has for its readers because it is interested in the complex relationship that exists between those who control the production and distribution of poems for children and their intended audience. When it asks children if they like 'poetry' it assumes, that for most of the thirty children, they understand it to mean the poetry that they are exposed to in school and possibly at home that comes from these corporate sources. I have chosen a sample of poems by the most popular and biggest selling children's poets and anthologies. In doing so, I have presented a range of poetic styles and structures that explore different subjects and themes. The

poems begin historically from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century onwards. I include Robert Louis Stevenson as a token ‘classic poem’ and then use contemporary verse in a variety of styles, including the more post-modern themes and structures of Michael Rosen’s writing. However, most of all I wanted the children to give their opinion of the appeal of poetry that they confront in modern primary schools today. All the poems fall into the categories of poetry suggested for teaching in the National Literacy Strategy Framework for teaching (DfEE, 1998).

### **The Poems**

*What Happens to the Colours?* by Jack Prelutsky (b.1940)

Prelutsky is an American poet from New York. He is well-known for his many anthologies of children’s verse as well as his own written collections. His poem *What Happens to the Colours?* was found in *A Century of Children’s Poems* (2002) chosen by John Foster who is himself a poet for children. The poem was chosen for this study because of its subject and its more traditional layout upon the page. It’s questioning of what happens to the colours of things in the night, as well as encouraging scientific investigative thought about the effects of the sun’s white light, hints at deep and philosophical speculation about human perceptions of the world. Its main subject is nature and encourages feelings of awe and wonder. These thoughtful themes are presented in a gentle and ‘quiet’ way and offer a comparison to the others in the sample that have a livelier and more openly rhythmic disposition. This poem looks like a poem in the traditional sense, having three clear verses, each having a consistent rhyming pattern.

*'Eddie and the Nappy'* by Michael Rosen (b. 1946)

This poem represents the less traditional and more post-modern approach to writing poetry. Rosen has written over a hundred books for children and his poems have been classified as 'Urchin Verse' (Rowe Townsend, 1974/1987). This is the verse that gets away from grass and meadows and flowers (Styles, 1998) and concentrates on a less romanticised view of childhood. *'Eddie and the Nappy'* is typical of many of his poems in the subject matter that deals with everyday domestic issues and uses mostly free verse. The poem was taken from his book *Quick, Let's Get Out of Here* (1983).

*Arthur Wrigglesbottom* by Andrew Collett

Andrew Collett is one of a group of poets self-named the 'Potty Poets' who include Gez Walsh and Chris White. *Arthur Wrigglesbottom* is from Andrew Collett's collection of poems called *Always Eat Your Bogies*. Published by The King's England Press, these poets are overt in their objective in writing poetry, which is to use humorous verse to encourage reading and writing. Their poetry was chosen because of the poets' conviction that these poems are written in the styles and with subjects that they feel will appeal to children. All of the 'Potty Poets' books contain poems that have a scatological base to their humour.

*Dear Mum* by Brian Patten (b.1946)

Patten was born in Liverpool and during the 1960s was known as one of the Liverpool Poets. He has published many titles of poetry for children. The poem *Dear Mum* was taken from *The New Faber Book of Children's Verse* (2001) edited by the children's poet Matthew Sweeney. Patten is another popular poet in primary schools and represents a more structured poetry than Rosen's, which concentrates on contemporary subjects that challenge traditional conceptions of poetry written for children. In this poem a child has left a note to his mum explaining why she will discover how the house has been left in a terrible mess. Other themes that Patten touches on in his poetry also explore issues not found in children's literature up until the 1970s/80s, including family splits and single parent lifestyles.

*I'm Watching You* by James Carter

James Carter is also a popular poet for children who writes how to teach children about poetry (1996). This poem was taken from his teacher book 'Rap it Up' (2000) that explores ways to teach children to perform and write poetry using a rap structure. This poem was chosen because it is written in a rap style and presented the children with another structure and style. It invites performance and movement. I was also interested in the message it was offering about bullying in school.

## *The Land of Counterpane* by Robert Louis Stevenson

This poem was chosen because of its historical relevance. Stevenson has been said to be one of the first writers to write for children with a sense of childness closer to his own audiences' (Styles, 1998). Andrew Lang wrote of Stevenson's work that its first quality: "*is the survival of the child in him. It was the unextinguished childish passion for playing at things which remained with him*" (1905, p.53). I was interested to see how the children reacted to this poem in terms of the childness it evokes. It provides a good example of a classic poem that is still an important part of the National Literacy Strategy (DFEE, 1998). This poem was taken from his only collection of poetry for children: *A Child's Garden of Verse* published in 1885.

### **5. Data Analysis**

The major task of any analysis is to find answers to research questions (Robson, 1993). Analysis, according to Brown and Dowling (1998) is the process which turns information into data: "*Essentially data is information which has been read in terms of a theoretical framework or in terms of an analytic structure of some kind*" (Brown & Dowling, 1998, p.80). This enquiry aims to interpret the information/data given by the subjects of the study within a form of conceptual understanding based upon a set of theoretical propositions (Yin, 1989). The present study, as mentioned earlier, sits within the interpretative paradigm of educational research. It does not strive to reveal objective truth, but looks at the field from defined theoretical perspectives and interprets the empirical evidence accordingly. It presents a version of reality based upon these theoretical positions. There are those who

have argued convincingly that any form of systematic enquiry, be it interpretative or positivist research, is bound to approach the subject of their work from some form of theoretical perspective (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, Brown & Dowling, 1998, Scott & Usher, 1999) – achieving objectivity is impossible. I wished to draw upon the insights and theoretical perspectives discussed in the literature review to interpret the information I collected.

### **Numbers**

In answering some of the questions I resorted to counting. Asking children if they liked poetry needed this method. I also could count the preferences that children gave for the sample of poems, as well as the hypothetical sources the children named for these poems. I coded the children's use of terms to describe the reasons why they liked or disliked the poems and could count these and convert them into percentages. For example, humour was a useful code for the ways children described why they enjoyed a poem. Some used the word 'funny' or 'humorous' when writing about them and this was coded accordingly and then counted. In this analysis, code materialised as patterns were found through repetition in the children's writing to describe their opinions. Although I had hypothesised about what they may write, I gave the children's views codes as I saw them manifest themselves as I sifted through the information.

## Theoretical Perspectives for Analysis

In looking for the appeal of poetry written for children for children, specific theoretical perspectives explored in detail in chapter two influenced the coding methods mentioned above as well as in the rest of the analysis. I was looking for indications of the children finding appeal for themselves as children, perhaps counter to adult intentions. In doing so, I was interested in looking for signs that would help confirm or challenge Zipes' (2001) arguments suggesting passivity in children's critical engagement. I looked for appeal from the following:

- Intrinsic qualities found in children's literature and poetry;
- A feeling of 'childness' (Hollindale, 1997) in both adult and child
- Subversive 'carnival' pleasures (Bakhtin, 1984)
- *Jouissance* and *plaisir* (Barthes, 1975)

In addition, I looked for indications of adult control of the exposure to texts given to children and the children's own awareness of the relationship that exists between adult and child within society (Zipes, 2001, Parsons, 1956, James and Prout, 1997) and how this emerges in the literature they are given (Sarland, 1999, Cherland & Edelsky, 1993).

This chapter has described the research methodology and data collection techniques employed in this study. It has attempted to show how the methodology attempts to listen to children within the context of a school setting, aware that they exist as a system within a system. It has also named the main theoretical perspectives that have influenced the process of analysis. The next chapter will make an analysis of the data that was collected.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Data Analysis**

#### **“It made me feel funny”**

This chapter will make an analysis of the children’s views of the appeal the collection of poems had for them. The structure of the chapter is guided by the research questions that have been generated from the main question and that were declared in the previous chapter. This chapter begins by examining the source of the children’s experience with poetry. This will be important to the argument of the thesis when examining the extent of adult intervention and control of the poetry they meet. It will then go on by looking at other characteristics of appeal. This will include their general attitude to poetry, their stated reasons for liking poetry, their favourites from the sample of poetry offered to them and their articulation of the reasons for their judgements. The chapter will then progress towards an analysis of appeal in terms of their conscious and unconscious interaction with adult ideological involvement. It will examine the children’s sense of ‘childness’ in relation to the poetry, the nature of the pleasure that they articulate and how they appear to indicate their recognition of an adult manipulated and controlled diet of literature that they are offered. All the data will be presented as a means to answering the research questions given in the methodology chapter.

## 1. The Children

### **'Where Do They Get their Poetry from?'**

#### **The Sources of Children's Poetry and General Attitudes**

There was evidence to suggest that the children in this study had the expectation of receiving their diet of poetry from adults. When the children were asked which poem they liked the most and the least, they were also asked to hypothetically name, out of three categories, who would give them this kind of poem?' The three choices were parent, teacher or school friend. Out of those who chose *Eddie and the Nappy* by Michael Rosen as their favourite, 9 said that a friend was likely to have given them this poem, 4 said a parent and 9 said a teacher. Of those who liked *I'm Watching You* by James Carter, 5 said a friend, 6 said a teacher and 3 a parent. The one child who liked *Arthur Wigglesbottom* the most felt a parent would give this to him. When it came to the poems the children did not like, no one cited their friends as someone who would give them the poem, all put the source as parent or teacher, but most commonly teacher. Some named grandparents as the more likely source. It would seem that the majority view was that poems like these would come from adults rather than their peer group. It suggests that poetry, even the most enjoyable forms, are given by adults. Poems are not sought out by friends and passed around like Pokeman cards, sweets or CDs, or even books and magazines. Poems are adult given for these children, they come from the realm of adult authority and control.

This perception was emphasised by the interview data. The children confirmed that they all had books at home and that they often read for pleasure. They were asked about their collections of poetry books;

*Q: Have you ever bought a poetry book with your own money?*

*Child D: I've got a lot of poetry books at home*

*Q: Who buys them for you?*

*D: My mum likes poetry and she buys them for me*

*Lots of nods of agreement*

*Q: So, for everybody, in most cases your parents buy your poetry books?*

*All: Yeah*

*Child B: My parents have lots of poetry books because my dad is an English teacher in a school*

*Q: Would you ever choose to buy a poetry book?*

*B: No*

*Q: Why?*

*B: I don't know, I just prefer novels.*

*Child E: I've got one that is my sisters and she lets me borrow it, but I can just go down the library and get them.*

The children were quite sure that they would never knowingly choose to spend their money on a poetry book. For these children, adults initiated their experiences of poetry. Parents, teachers, uncles and aunts mediated all the poetry they had met. Despite actively liking it, they would never spend any of their own capital upon it. Novels were the favoured reading-matter, enjoyed enough to purchase them themselves. This is not to

suggest that their non-poetry book buying was not under surveillance or mediated in some way by adults too, but that through the children's own volition they chose to buy the books. This is an important part of the argument of this thesis and readers are asked to bear this in mind when reading the children's views about the appeal that poetry has for them.

### **Do the children like poetry and if so, what is the nature of the appeal?**

#### **Humour, Rhythm and Rhyme –Positive Feelings**

On the questionnaire, all thirty of the children said they liked poetry. There was not a single dissenter. The data suggests, as I will show, that the appeal seems to come from poetry's potential ability, as the children perceived it, to create a positive effect on mood and mental state through humour. They mentioned the appeal from humour the most. 80% of the class used the word 'funny' or 'humorous' to say why they liked poetry. This enjoyment of humour in the poetry can be correlated with their love of nonsense rhymes: 40% mentioned nonsense rhymes as being one of their favourite forms of poetry. The rhythm of some poetry was also an important feature of its appeal. This became more evident when they expressed their opinions about the samples of poetry given to them. Continuing on this uplifting, cheerful theme, 60% wrote they enjoyed poetry because of its tendency to rhyme. 3 children wrote this in connection to rhyme's ability to assist in reading. The children also mentioned poetry's ability to create other general positive feelings: 30% wrote that they felt that poetry had therapeutic powers. Comments like the following emerged: that it was "good company", that it can "Cheer you up", and be calming. One boy wrote: "*I like poetry because it helps relieve the day's stress and it calms me down when I'm annoyed;*" another boy states that: "*when I'm sad, it cheers me*

up.” Others wrote that it could be “*Heart warming or touching*”. Already it was clear that children genuinely liked exposure to poems that had life-confirming positive features, that could make the reader laugh and that had a structure that was spirited and uplifting, often through the use of rhyme.

**Which poems do the children like the most and the least and why?**

**What is the nature of the appeal of these poems?**

### **Positive feelings**

The most popular poem was Michael Rosen’s *Eddie and the Nappy* with 60% indicating this was their favourite. The runner up was James Carter’s *I’m Watching You* with 37% of the vote. 3% thought Potty Poet Andrew Collett’s *Arthur Wigglesbottom* was the best. Here again the humour of the poems was the most appealing factor. 73% of the children stated funniness of the poem as being what appealed to them. 33% said that they liked the way the poem made them feel.

The structure of the poems seems to have been perceived by the children as adding to the evocation of uplifting feelings. In the case of *Eddie and the Nappy* it was the liberating free verse structure that appears to have created this response. Indeed, the children enjoyed the poem because it was not like a poem at all. One girl wrote of this poem: “*On the page it looks really long and boring, but it’s not.*” Her wariness and knowledge of long, boring poems is tempered by the reality of the reading itself. Children’s awareness that not all poems *are* appealing and positive is shown here and elsewhere. The liberating and surprising nature of the structure of the Rosen poem comes out again when a boy writes:

"It's like a story more than a poem", a girl notices that "it's not like other poems, it's set out like a story." This was their favourite 'poem' and so may be an indication that poetry may not be in fact, their favourite form of writing as they appear to like this one because it was *not* like a poem. Another girl observes that "it's set out like a story or somebody speaking." Rosen's post-modernist approach to the writing of poetry appeals, on one level, because it's not like poetry in its form at all and reminds children of the more favoured form of reading matter, namely story narrative.

The structure of *I'm Watching You* seems to add to the appeal and positive feelings invoked. Here the children identify intrinsic components of poetry. In the case of this poem it is the chorus and the rap rhyming structure. The children commented that: "*the chorus was brilliant,*" "*I like to read it because it's fast,*" "*I like the rhythm and the rhyme sounds,*" "*I like it because it goes back and forth to the chorus...you can flow with the poem.*" Children were also made to 'feel good' by the subject matter. One boy wrote: "*It made me feel good because someone's trying to stop a serious matter in a really clever way.*" The 'someone' he means is the poet who advocates a morality on the issue of bullying. The underlying nature of the pleasures that these favourite poems create will be further discussed later.

The children's taste for humour and positive approaches to themes and structures is echoed in their dislike of some of the poems that they sampled. 60% of the class of thirty liked the least *What Happens to the Colours?* by Jack Prelutsky, 27% objected to *Dear Mum* by Brian Patten and 13% named *Arthur Wrigglesbottom* as the least favoured poem. The children perceived boredom as the main reason for not liking their least favoured poem, with 70% mentioning it in the questionnaire. 30% wrote that they did not like them

because they were “not funny.” Structure was also very important. 33% named structure as a reason why they did not like the poem. One girl writes: “*I hated it how it was laid out ...and how it was read out.*” Another noted that “*It looks like a normal poem, it hasn’t got any special features and it is just a quiet sort of poem.*” Appeal to this child is related to action, movement and rhythm. Another girl wrote: “*It’s a very long and boring structure,*” and another commented: “*It doesn’t have rhyme or funniness.*”

### **Different Pleasures**

As the children indicated that humour was the most important aspect of the appeal the poems had for them, it seems important to analyse the nature of the humour that they enjoyed so much. The poem the children found the funniest was Rosen’s *Eddie and the Nappy*, the analysis will concentrate mainly on this poem and will be under three main headings: mind/body humour, *jouissance* and the Second Life.

### **Mind/body Humour.**

A noticeable feature of the children’s comments about the humour of the Eddie poem is their seeming delight in the baby’s body, its movements and its sounds. A number of the children mentioned that they loved the way Rosen describes Eddie’s legs as ‘rubbery’, or as one child noted, that the baby has: “*fat chubby legs that rushed around the house and the cream on his bum.*” Eddie’s baby noises also were the source of much amusement: “*I liked it when Eddie was running around making funny noises,*” or “*I like the bit when the baby makes noises.*” The children also indicated an empathy with the plight of Eddie as a cold blob of cream is slopped on to his bottom: “*It was funny where he put the blob of*

*cream on the baby.*” The indignity of wearing a nappy: “*It was funny because the baby had his nappy pulled off,*” also was seen as a hilarious spectacle.

The humorous appeal of this poem for these children can be analysed from a dualist mind/body Cartesian perspective. Berger (1997) discusses the comic dimension of the human experience and cites Max Scheler’s distinction between *being* and *having*. It can be argued that humans are placed in an eccentric position of both being and having a body. Despite being and having a bodily shell, humans can subjectively distance themselves from their own bodies and assume a critical position. This is crucial in trying to understand the appeal of this poem that emphasises a body, namely Eddie’s. Critchley (2002) uses the example of the eating disorder, anorexia to illustrate how a critical distance can be created between what we feel to be ‘mind’ from what we feel to be ‘body’: “*Where the body that I ‘am’ becomes the body that I ‘have’ the body-subject becomes an object for me, which confirms both the possibility of taking up a critical position, and also underlines my alienation from the world and nature*” (2002, p.42-43). Critchley goes on to explain how some forms of humour exploit the gap between being a body and having a body – he calls it ‘*returning the physical into the metaphysical*’ (p.43). The laughter arises when we recognise the strange fact that we do have a body, the realisation of our own materiality comes as somewhat as a surprise and this evokes laughter.

Humans laugh at silly walks, unusual sizes of bodily parts – large noses, big feet – and our tendency to lose co-ordination of the material parts of our being are seen as hilarious by many. The physical humour of Rowan Atkinson or John Cleese are good examples of this, as is the success of television shows that present clips of home video that record members of the public falling over in different contexts, mostly in the gaze of others. *Eddie and the*



*Nappy*, it can be argued, exploits this form of humour in a number of ways: firstly, Eddie models babyhood, a period in a human body's development. Not only is that in itself a curious factor in our own materiality, but it is also a period when the body is less developed and least able co-ordinate itself. Secondly, fat rubbery legs are funny, the laughter comes from realisation that we have or had these features, but also that we are or were these features too – the concept of being and having. Thirdly, the noises that Eddie makes, that were seen as very funny from the sample of children, are the uncoordinated utterances of a developing body and this is funny in the same way. Wearing a nappy emphasises and increases the propensity to laugh at the body in this poem; it is another indication that Eddie represents an uncoordinated materiality of human-kind. In addition to this, Eddie's father's attempts to assist his son in tackling his lack of co-ordination produces more laughter as Eddie's innocent antics begins to make the grown-up look physically uncoordinated and clumsy.

This can be seen as an example of children engaging and interacting with a text in a way that is common to all readers – child or adult. The sense of humour and the response is not unique to children. However, it is driven by the context of being human, but for this poem, it is the context of being a small human – Eddie and his rubbery legs.

## ***Jouissance and the Second Life***

Barthes' (1975) discussion of the nature of the pleasures of texts – *jouissance* and *plaisir* - is very relevant to a discussion about the appeal the poetry had for this sample of children. Evidence of *plaisir* was very clear in all the research data collected and this will be discussed later, being contrasted with Barthes' other identified pleasure, *jouissance*, that this section intends to discuss.

There were several indications that the children implicitly recognised, what Barthes calls the writerly nature of *Eddie and the Nappy* – this was also true of Andrew Collett's poem *Arthur Wrigglesbottom*. A text that is 'writerly' invites a broader range of interpretations, possibly unorthodox or unexpected. A girl in the class indicated her awareness of strange feelings while reading *Eddie and the Nappy* when she writes: "*It made me feel funny because it said the word bum.*" Either she means it 'was' funny because of the word or, more interestingly, she was actually experiencing the sensation of *jouissance* – a blissful and liberated delight derived from her subversive interaction with the text. If the latter interpretation is correct, it indicates the extent to which some children are subtly bound and constrained simply by literature, but also how some texts have the power to invoke sensations of freedom. The rude word appealed to many of the children who enjoyed *Eddie and his Nappy* the most, and the appeal of the subject - a baby running away from an adult whilst having his nappy changed - can be related to the Bakhtinian (1984) notion of carnival.

## Carnival Pleasures

In addition to the children's delight in Eddie's nappy being changed, many of the children mentioned that they enjoyed the word 'bum' being used in the poem. If they do not actually mention the word when they review their reasons for liking the poem, there are comments like "*some of the words are funny*" which may point to the more 'inappropriate' vocabulary that has been used by the poet - most however enjoyed writing the word in their reviews.

As the literature review of this thesis has described, symptoms of carnivalesque, second life behaviours are often exposed by the delight and the laughter found in the contemplation of human bodily functions. Nappies are used because of a human bodily function and that in itself provides sound Bakhtinian reasons for laughter around this poem. The subversive nature of laughter like this makes this humour's sources avoided in controlled institutions, like schools, so the introduction of texts of this nature presents opportunity for subversion. Interestingly, the children in this study had never read any poetry from Michael Rosen before. This must be unusual, as Rosen is one of the most popular children's poets in the country. It may also indicate the range of poetry offered to these children up until the point of this study and the extent to which carnivalesque humour has been avoided. The word 'bum' in *Eddie and the Nappy* is a word that is likely to be disapproved of in the official life of the children, so its appearance may be construed by the children as a sign that indicates and initiates subversion. Bakhtin (1984) writes that the second life of the people is expressed through the world of excess, obscenity and degradation. Although this poem offers very mild forms of this world, it nonetheless may be an element in the appeal this poetry has for a group of children immersed in the official

life of school. One girl showed her awareness of how there could be disapproval from the adult world, when asked who would give her such a poem, she writes: “*School friend because my mum would never suggest a nappy*” as a subject for a poem.

The sample of children often mentioned how funny the spectacle of a baby running away from a father appears: “*I like how the baby was described and how the baby acted.*” Or “*the baby’s trying to get him off (father) by kicking and everything;*” and: “*it’s about Eddie getting his nappy changed, but he don’t want to, then about putting cream on but don’t want to.*” Despite the benign nature of the adult’s actions, the children clearly enjoyed how the baby is determined to avoid the control of the adult. In this poem the irrational spurns the rational and the constancy of the official life – clear second life characteristics. The poem depicts a child in defiance of adult initiated rationality and order and this has immediate appeal to those locked in officialdom. In addition, the writerly nature of the text invites children to read against orthodox rational, controlled and ‘appropriate’ responses that are expected of child-readers. This may be implicitly recognised by the children and they flirt with the opportunities afforded to them.

In Andrew Collet’s *Arthur Wigglesbottom* the writerly nature of the text is even more explicit. However, only one child liked this poem the most. His reasons can be similarly analysed in relation to *jouissance* and the second life. He describes liking it because its “*disgusting*” and says: “*I like it because Arthur Wigglesbottom is like me*” and that “*It makes me feel sick*”. A girl in the interview, who ranked this poem the least-liked, said her mum would disapprove of this poem: “*because it’s not hygienic.*” Most children appeared to recognise *Arthur Wigglesbottom* as lacking merit, despite its overt appeal to children’s

unofficial pleasures. As will be shown later, the children seemed to notice something manipulative about his poem.

### ***Plaisir – Feeling Safe***

The children's enjoyment of *I'm Watching You* by James Carter was mainly situated, as discussed earlier, in the rhythm and the rhyme of the piece. Its strong chorus encouraged interaction with its readership and, as Hunt (1994) contends, this is seen as a trait of poetry written for children. The children in this study joined in spontaneously and clearly were excited by its pacey rhythms. However, another factor of enjoyment the children mentioned many times was the subject of the rap – bullying.

Arguably, this poem offers its readers a contradictory appeal. Rap poetry or rap music is often surrounded by a certain amount of controversy. The musical form has been aligned to crime, violence and anti-establishment themes, often based on lawlessness, particularly gun crime. The sub-genre of 'Gangster Rap' is a good example of this image. The children in the study were aware of this. They implied in some of their comments that those who may not normally be inclined to listen to moral advice about bullying may pay attention when it is within this form of poetry: "*I think people take notice of the message as it is a rap than a normal poem.*" Another girl comments that it's a: "*good idea turning this important matter into a message and embedding it into a rap.*" The juxtaposition of a rap with a moral message is highlighted here: "*I like I'm Watching You because it tells bullies that you shouldn't bully, but it's a really good rap.*" One child expressed how the poem made him have a pleasing feeling when reading it: "*It made me feel good because someone's trying to stop a serious matter in a really clever way.*" The voice in the rap is

the unnamed 'watcher', one child interpreted it thus: "*It's about being spied on by a spiritual character.*"

The children in the class always imagined an adult, either a parent or a teacher, being the source of their introduction to the poems. The children stated that poems like *Eddie and the Nappy* and *Arthur Wrigglesbottom* could conceivably be given to them by school friends, but even with these poems, they still hypothesised about adults being involved. As reported earlier *I'm Watching You* was perceived mainly to have come from an adult source. The children also recognise that it has a clear message, indeed it is a message about a theme that many of the children felt passionately about: "*it also makes me cross as I used to get bullied.*" In contrast to the evocation of *jouissance* that other poems created in some of the children, this poem's appeal arguably emanates from Barthes' other named textual pleasure – *plaisir*.

The children appear to recognise the 'readerly' nature of the poem and instead of reading against it, those who liked this poem the most were happy to indulge in the moral theme and messages the poet wants to relay. The ideology in the rap is 'overt' (Hollindale, 1988) and the children are happy to assume it wholesale. The appeal here, looked at using Barthes' analysis of textual pleasure, is *plaisir*. Those who liked this poem engaged consciously and rationally with the message the poem contained. The children's comments about bullying conformed to the social order created by adults and this appeared to comfort them by making them feel accommodated within in it. Like the other children who favoured this poem, this child clearly assumes the ideology: "*It persuades anyone to stop bullying. It makes it into a rap so it will get attention quicker – a better way to communicate that bullying is bad.*"

## Are the children aware of adult control of the literature they read?

### Adult Control and the Parents' Role

As has already been described, the poetry experiences the children had had up to this time were entirely adult-instigated. In the interviews the theme of adult ownership and control of reading diets was touched upon. The comments from the children indicated a fairly firm hold over children's reading. The poem, *Arthur Wigglesbottom* was discussed and they were asked what they thought their parents opinions would be of this poem. Child B said "*They would probably tell me not to read it and probably take it off me and tell me to go and read something else.*" Child C explained: "*My mum would probably giggle or be sarcastic and say you can't read anything like this again.*" The other children in the group reported similar, but gentler signs of disapproval from their parents. Child E said: "*If I read it to my mum she would probably make a funny face at me. She wouldn't stop me reading it.*" Child D: "*If I read it to her she would probably go yruuuuh, and laugh or something like that.*" Despite the more tolerant responses from the parents in the latter examples, the children were aware of the control parents exert over literature and the kind of material they would disapprove of their reading. The control was tighter in the former examples. The censorship was such that the children would have to stop reading it and the material would be physically removed.

The questioner followed-up this theme by asking if they read any material at home that they knew their parents would disapprove. Only one child out of the five said they did. Child B replied: "*I've got an idea, I read teenage books.*" She was then asked to speculate on why they would disapprove: "*I don't know, I just think she thinks I'm going to get ideas*

(laughs). One could speculate here that the parent feels the child is too young and immature to be confronted with issues and themes that are probably of a sexual nature.

Despite the child's inclination to read this material and her clear ability to do so, the parent feels it would be inappropriate reading material. This must be a common example of adults exerting values that both reflect and construct conceptualisations about childhood. The other children all confirmed that they were aware of the kind of reading material sanctioned by their parents. Some cited Jacqueline Wilson as being an example of authorised literature. One boy (Child C) whose most enjoyable pastime he named as football said that his parents would approve of him reading: *"anything because I don't really read enough. I read my own books like The Northern Lights, it's a trilogy. I got it for my birthday from my mum."* His parents purchase even his 'own' books. The questioner asked if they ever read anything only because they knew it would please their parents. Child B again reports: *"My dad's got a collection of novels that he read when he was a boy, so sometimes when I don't enjoy them I pretend to read them. If I do like them then I just read them."*

The children's descriptions portray a set of parents who are well-informed, active and assertive in the way they raise their children. They have a wealth of educational social capital (Bourdieu, 1986b) that sets the values, and controls the materials that they feel confident suits the aspirations they hold for their children. The impression is of a 'tight-ship' where literature is controlled and is seen as key in their goals in the overall construction of their child and a childhood.



Like the perceived vulgarity of the 'potty poem' *Arthur Wigglesbottom*, the 'teenage books', that child B says she reads and are disapproved of by her parents, are seen as a potentially corrupting influence upon the development of the 'child' - as the parents conceptualise this period of life. The parents' response indicates the extent that they: firstly, conceptualise childhood as a period of innocence that can and should be protected from certain "ideas," or ethos and inappropriate behaviours which can menace a child's cultural development. This may well include texts that foreground carnivalesque humour and anti-rational *jouissance* pleasures. Secondly, the parents are very strongly aware of the acculturation potential of literature, both positively and negatively in terms of the children's cultural development. This is evidenced in the children's awareness of parental steady encouragement of certain forms of literature, but equally their militant and robust censorship of others. Certain kinds of poems written for children clearly appeal to parents and teachers; they promote them and are, in fact, the sole source of poetry for the children in this study. The appeal that poems chosen by the parents have for them, must be partly their potential for positive socialisation and acculturation.

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| <b>Can 'childness' be detected in the appeal they identify?</b> |
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### **Childness**

The parents' insistence on the close monitoring of the children's reading material reflects what Peter Hollindale (1997) calls their adult sense of 'childness.' This sense is derived from an adult's memories of childhood, their feelings of continuity between themselves as children and themselves as adults. This leads to a sense of what they feel is appropriate behaviour and ideas for children at certain ages. A child's sense of his/her childness,

Hollindale contends, is the sense of his/her own development as a result of interaction with images and discourse from adults that conceptualise childhood.

The poems that the children were given in this study had childness too, a childness constructed by the adult poets in different ways. Hollindale comments that: "*We are in trouble if there is a gap between what adults 'know' about childhood and what children 'know' about childhood, especially as adults and children alike regard such temporary, socially conditioned 'knowledge' as immutable and permanent*" (1997, p.49). There were a number of poems that the children could not relate their childness to. Jack Prelutsky's *What Happens to the Colours?* seems to have fallen foul of this perception. There were many comments, with regard to this poem, that indicated that they were unable to relate to it: "*I don't like this sort of thing*" or "*It didn't appeal to me.*" In most cases the children were talking about the subject of the poem. This clash of perceptions of childness is evidenced by the way most children thought that either a parent or teacher would give them such a poem. Intervention by an adult, with a misguided vision of childness appears to be sensed. In many cases they saw it being given to them as an educational resource. One child wrote that he thought a teacher would give it: "*as part of a literacy topic.*"

There was broad general disapproval of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Land of Counterpane* too, mainly because they thought it was boring. The boredom that the children articulate seems to derive from the clash of perceptions of childness between poet and reader, perhaps as a result of the gap of time between writing and reading. They did not appreciate any of the antiquated vocabulary and reference to old toys. The two girls here, who were working together on this poem, showed disdain, not only for the old toys described, but also the gender bias that they perceived: "*Dislike about boys old toys,*

*couldn't it be a girl playing with girls fashionable new toys.*" A gendered sense of childness comes up a number of times as criticism of *The Land of Counterpane*: "I don't really like this bit, it's a bit boyish." However, not all the children were dismissive of this poem. On the contrary, it may be interpreted as credit to the longevity of Robert Louis Stevenson's sense of childness that many of the children could relate to the child portrayed in the verse. In relation to the first verse, two girls comment: "I like it because it makes me think about when I was ill." Another two girls commented that the idea of a 'land of counterpane' was: "A bit old fashioned, but great to use." The greatest compliment to the poet's childness comes from two boys: "We like the dreamy world of bed. It's real and we think the toys and play, pretend games are real." Stevenson is often credited as being one of the first writers for children who represented the world from the child's perspective – the children in these latter examples were clearly connecting to this representation.

### **Positive Senses of Childness**

The children's comments about their favourite poems show a connection to the children's sense of childness. Many of the children declared that they thought that their school friends could be, at least, one of the sources for being introduced to *Eddie and the Nappy* by Michael Rosen, which might attribute a kind of childness authenticity or 'street cred' to the poem. A number of children commented like this: "School friend, because they like funny poems like this."

As discussed earlier, many of the children's comments about their favourite poems have humour as integral to their appeal. A feature of these children's perceptions of childness is

the need to laugh and indulge in light-hearted pastimes. Seriousness was not appreciated unless it was concealed under uplifting rhythms, like in the rap.

Unlike the Stevenson poem, children made comments about how they could relate to the subject and characters of *Eddie and the Nappy*: “*It reminds me of my baby cousin*” or: “*I now know what’s to come when my mum has her baby.*” It would appear unlikely that these children could relate so closely to the poem unless they detected a strong correspondence between it and their internal perception of what it is like being a child in modern society.

Another trait of childness is captured in the data by the children’s consent to being ‘told’ about ethical behaviour. This is not unrelated to a previous discussion in this chapter about Barthes’ (1975) theory of textual pleasure – *plaisir*. The children may have a notion of childness as being a period of life when one is controlled and/or cared for by adults. The children’s enjoyment of *I’m Watching You* by James Carter is a good example of this. There were many comments from the children, in describing the appeal of this poem, that indicate their enjoyment of the poem coming from how it ‘tells’ its audience how to behave. It “*tells you not to bully other people*” said one girl, “*it gives a good example*” and “*it’s like telling someone off.*” These comments may be interpreted as indications of how children perceive their childness as partly involving the reception of adult pedagogy in the form of moral directives built into discourses like this poem. Part of the experience of childhood is about being nurtured by adults and *I’m Watching You* embodies that control.

## 2. The Class Teacher

### **Poetry in School**

The class teacher said that she personally “*loved poetry*” and that she was particularly fond of John Donne and the Metaphysical Poets. Her favourite poem from the sample was *I’m Watching You* by James Carter that was popular with the children too. The teacher expressed her pleasure in teaching poetry to her class and was very enthusiastic about the standard of creativity in the children’s own poetry they had written during the weeks when she had been concentrating her literacy teaching around poetry.

The teacher described the way she had introduced poetry to the children that year. She began by asking the children what they knew of poetry. She declared in the interview that: “*They didn’t have an awful lot of knowledge of poetry. They hadn’t done much.*” This is an interesting and perhaps disturbing observation in terms of what the National Curriculum (DfEE 2000) stipulates and what the NLS (DfEE, 1998) suggests children should be exposed to in terms of texts over a child’s stay within the primary phase. There is an expectation that by Year 6 children should have a good understanding and experience of reading and writing poetry. The NLS suggests children be introduced to poetry from reception stage onwards.

Throughout this stage of the interview there were many references made by the teacher to how poetry has the ability to liberate creativity and provide a vehicle for the imagination. ‘*Freedom*’ was a word used by the teacher on a number of occasions. This seemed

particularly relevant for this enquiry, as I was interested to determine how the teacher perceived her role and what her motives were in using the strategies that she did.

After her initial informal audit of the children's knowledge of poetry she introduced poems with particular structures: *"I did do some work on cinquains and limericks and shape poems which I know is not free verse to them, but I think is a good way in because it gives them some sort of format to build their own ideas on."* This pedagogical strategy resembles those advocated by the Jill Pirrie (1987). Pirrie suggests deliberately setting boundaries and constraints as a way to 'liberate' the creativity within the writer. Forms and techniques of poetry are taught explicitly using examples chosen by the teacher.

The teacher in this study goes on to describe a lesson with the Lewis Carroll's poem *Jabberwocky*: *"We actually did a fairly formal English lesson in which we actually explored the syllables and explored the nonsense words. I needed to give them an idea of how easy they could find it....I went on to tell them that there were meters and syllabic forms that are useful to know."* The technical close readings of the poems that she introduced led on to writing. She states: *"After they had the structure, it just came natural to them."* For Pirrie (1987) poets need to be conscious of their craft and work at the skills needed, only when this competence is formed can imaginative liberation be won (Wilson, 2001, Lambirth, 2002). Rosen (1989) takes a different position and objects to these methods. He contends that asking children to write in specific, adult-given forms demands that the children translate their own feelings and knowledge about the world into contrived patterns of writing, ultimately dissolving the children's original creative intentions. Form, for Rosen, should be the choice of the writer, harnessing, mixing and experimenting with those that best suit his/her intentions. Rosen would advocate children's exposure to a range of poems, but would also insist that children make their own choices from the forms that

they have met. The teacher in this study, like Pirrie (1987), asks the children to experiment with specific forms in their own writing. She goes on to say: "*It gives you freedom because you know exactly what you are going to be doing and I said you can write about anything you want but it's in a very specific form.*" It was unclear from the interview whether the children were given comparable time to choose from these different forms to compose poetry within the school day. The freedom, as the teacher describes, manifests itself in the choice of topic, yet it might be argued that the choice of content or topic of the poem may be constrained by the form in which it is to be written.

When it came to free verse the teacher said: "*I wouldn't say they have read a lot of it. We started to move towards free verse but SATs (Standard Assessment Tasks) interrupted us.*" In addition she stated that "*children are more nervous of free verse.*" Interestingly, a large proportion of the class declared that the free verse poem *Eddie and the Nappy* by Michael Rosen was their favourite from the sample that I had given them. It is possible that the teacher means that when writing in free verse the boundaries between poetry and prose are unclear and as a result the children are insecure about how closely they have met adult expectations. Assessment of their success in writing 'poetry' is blurred by the open nature of the form they are using. This would also be a problem for the adults who are assessing the children's competence and may account for teaching that asks children to work in very closed definitions of specific structures that are easier to identify and consequently access.

The teacher's description of how she teaches poetry suggests a fairly controlled and structured process based upon models of teaching given by writers such as Pirrie (1987). Within the time constraints of a busy curriculum schedule, specific and clear forms of poetry are introduced and the children are asked to use them in their own writing. As has

been suggested earlier there may be unequal weight given to the balance between choice and coercion in how children are asked to write poetry. The emphasis appears, from what the teacher says, to lie on adult initiated reading and production of poetry.

### **Teacher's Comments**

I asked the teacher's views of what the children had said about poetry. They had told me that they would not buy poetry for themselves and that adults gave them all the poetry that they had at home. The teacher said that: "*basically children are products of the advertising media*" that it is "*not sold enough in the media*" and "*if it was cooler, if it was promoted more*" children might be motivated to spend their money on it. This view that children are 'products' of the media is an intriguing one and mirrors the views of Postman (1983, 1992) and others (Steinburg & Kincheloe, 1997) who observed the powerful and controlling nature of the media. In addition they conceived children as being passive and uncritical when faced with the manipulation of these new technological institutions. This undifferentiated passivity bestowed upon childhood has been disputed (Buckingham, 2000). Yet this position that the teacher takes indicates that she may share the perception that children are passive and seemingly at the mercy of the media. It suggests a conceptualisation of children as being unable to critically engage or be active in reading against media texts and their ideological intentions. A view like this can potentially influence the forms of pedagogy active in schools where it is extolled. Again, it might be argued that the teacher sees her role as a controlling one and that children require this form of approach if they are to be guided in the 'right' direction. It hints at a 'dominant framework' (James and Prout, 1997) view that sees children as 'becomings' rather than human beings in themselves.



The class teacher disputed the claims made by the sample of five children who said that their parents would take poems away from them that they thought inappropriate. In one child's case she says: "\_\_\_\_\_ 's mum's a teacher.....I don't think she's telling the truth when she said her mum would not like this." The teacher goes on to defend another parent, she says: "\_\_\_\_\_ 's Mum definitely wouldn't take it away.....they are an intellectual family, they would be alright about everything." There is no way I can discover who is right here. I must respect the opinion of the teacher who has probably known the children and the families for many years. Yet, I also must wonder why the children, unprompted, should be so forthright and assertive in their opinion of what their parents would think about some of the poems that I showed the class that afternoon. They gave me no indication that they were being mischievous or deliberately deceptive. As, perhaps arguably, the more objective observer, I felt the children were expressing their opinions and I had no reason to disbelieve them.

The teacher went on to say that parents do sometimes "kick up a fuss" when "ghosts, witches and fairy stories" are read. The sensitivity to these texts derives from Christian beliefs. The school is church aided and would attract parents of children who are of a Christian persuasion. She goes on to say that in terms of her teaching: "if there was come-back from parents I would definitely listen to it and I might amend what I was doing to include them, not exclude." The teacher felt it important to acknowledge the views of the parents as a way to include all opinions in the way the school was run and how the teaching was carried out. The teacher reports good relations with the parents who are supportive in many ways. It is part of the school ethos that parents' views are listened to and respected. Clearly the school has parents who are vocal and active in expressing their opinions and beliefs about how the school is run.

## **Summary**

The three cases provided some interesting and thought-provoking information. The nature of the data from the three sources provides an intriguing texture of information for discussion. Both children and teacher had very clear perceptions and conceptions of poetry, their relationship with it and the contexts in which they meet it. Perhaps unexpectedly, power relations between the participants – child and adults – were appearing to play an important role as a significant factor in the question of the appeal of these specific texts. The nature of the appeal for children was a concern to adults as much as it was a concern for the children. The children appeared to find a great deal of the appeal from their own individual perceptions of their own ‘childness’, sometimes ignoring the adult contrived attempts to make appeal from their own feelings of ‘childness’. Despite poetry being physically under control from the adult world, perhaps more so than for any other form of literature, the children, nonetheless were actively finding appeal for themselves.

This chapter has analysed the data collected from the three main sources: the class of 30 children, the group of five children and the class teacher. Each group was reacting to the sample of poetry that I presented to them. The next chapter discusses this analysis and attempts to highlight the important themes that come from this chapter.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Discussion**

#### **Poetry under Control**

This chapter will discuss the appeal of poetry written for children from findings in this study. It draws on the analysis of the collected data and the work of others in this field. It will discuss the nature of this appeal of poetry for children and adults. It will demonstrate how intrinsic poetic qualities still form the crux of much of the appeal children find in the poetry written for them. When children are asked to read poetry it is this that is a major ingredient in their positive engagement with it. The chapter will also discuss how the discourses that exist between the different agents, adult and child, are rich and complex in the field of children's literature.

This study set out to explore how children respond, in terms of appeal, to adult produced poetic texts. I was keen to see to what extent children reject, embrace or subvert the intentions and motivations of the adult world. The work reveals the extent of the control that adults attempt to exert upon children's reading habits and consequently their control over children's socialisation and acculturation. Much of this control is concentrated in pedagogical or instructional purposes. Yet, children seem to negotiate and manage the discourse directed at them with great dexterity, and in this study demonstrate their active engagement with the poetic texts that they are offered. Indeed, the chapter will demonstrate how children reject many of the attempts by adults to direct and control their responses to texts and how adults continue to try a variety of devices to achieve their ends.

## **1. Children's Literature**

The children in this study said they liked poetry. It has some appeal for them. It pleased them, stimulated them and interested them. They enjoyed the structures, unique to it and they enjoyed the humour that infuses many examples of it, as well as the positive life-affirming properties of many of its themes and subjects. However, the power of this appeal had certain parameters. It might be a reflection of the potency of this appeal that the children made it clear that they would not be prepared to spend any of their financial capital on poetry. This was left to parents to do. The children's views reflect Zipes' (2001) conclusions that children will read what is put in front of them and form their own tastes based upon what is available. Given the choice, under fiscal constraints, they are happy to leave it to parents to provide their diet of poetry. They would rather spend their scarce capital on other things. The children in the study indicated that there were forms of literature that they did choose and were prepared to purchase using their own funds, but poetry was not one of them. An appeal that prompted a desire for ownership was not evident in what they said. Other products that are made for children offer sufficient appeal to warrant purchase – stickers, cards, CDs comics and so on. Adult given poetry did not appeal in this way.

Zipes (2001) would contend that children's literature has evolved as the social construction of childhood has developed and expanded. Literature perceived as children's, reflects an adult perception. Adult control of the poetry given to the children in this study will be discussed later in this chapter. At this point, indications from this small study suggest that although the children showed strong preferences for certain poems, it appeared that

genuine children's poetry, that children felt and desired ownership over, (as the possessive apostrophe suggests), was not evident.

On the other hand, when children enjoyed the two most favoured poems and engaged with humour and rhythm, then, as Peter Hollindale (1997) has written, its appeal as 'children's literature' achieves a subjective status and integrity. Like all the texts the children read or watch and engage with, the texts' status and definition is given by the nature of the experience of the child. According to Hollindale, definitions of a children's literature are not made from within the text itself, it is the individual intellectual response of the child that counts. It follows that the poems the individual children rejected in this study cannot be credited with the badge of children's literature, or 'child's literature', only those that the children favoured win this definition. So in this sense of the meaning of children's literature, there was plenty of evidence of it being alive and well. It was the level of the appeal that seems to be in contention. Children may subjectively realise a literature given by adults to be '*children's*' but will not be necessarily keen enough to want to actively engage with it from choice.

## **2. The Nature of the Appeal**

The doubts over the ownership of poetry by children (as suggested by the possessive apostrophe in 'children's literature) are central to this thesis and informed my desire to explore the appeal these texts have for children who have no agency over its production. However, there is a clear and unambiguous appeal that poetry written for children can generate in its readership, despite children's lack of control over what is offered to them. This section will discuss how some of the appeal the poems had for the children

corresponds with poetry's universal appeal. It will also show, however, how some adult motives for offering poetry to children are often not realised.

### **Rhythm and Rhyme and Form**

The children highlighted rhythm and rhyme as two of the main reasons for liking poetry. The rhythmic nature of poetry, built into the forms that it offers, has been identified by many as being, perhaps the only sustainable differences between poetry and other forms of language use (Furniss and Bath, 1996). Most books that discuss the power and richness of poetry contain a chapter on its rhythm and form as one of its defining features. Indeed, its presence in poetry has been said to be the fundamental reason for its universal appeal: *“Rhythm is fundamental to our very existence and to the way we experience life in our bodies. Our bodies work in rhythmic ways: our heartbeat, our breathing, the way we walk, run dance, swim... ..Jogging, swimming, and even walking becomes a pleasure only when we get into a rhythm”* (Furniss and Bath, 1996, p.25).

The appeal of rhythm is not just an appeal for children, or indeed for just the children in this study. It has universal appeal. It is part of the pleasures of life, and that need for pleasure and life-affirming stimuli lay at the heart of the children's assessment of what poetry can do. Clearly this love of rhythm was no unique trait of child-like hedonism, but an indication of how children will enjoy poetry for the same reasons that many adults will. It also demonstrates how the intrinsic qualities of poetry seen here in its rhythms and rhymes transcend any contrivance by adults. The children found appeal in 'poetry' and its unique ways of using and elevating the throb and pulse of speech and language. They embraced the way a message was articulated - they enjoyed the poetry.

However, it is not solely rhythm and rhyme that distinguishes poetry's appeal for children. James Reeves (1956) shares the views of the children in this study when he remarks: "*There is no such thing as 'rhythm' – there are only events in rhythm, of which words of course are all-important. There is no such thing as 'rhyme', only rhyming words or syllables*" (1956, p.69) Like Reeves, the children did not see these technical features as making the appeal on their own. By rejecting some of the poems shown to them in this study that also had these features, they recognised that rhythm and rhyme were merely abstractions drawn from the actual poems. Their appreciation of poetry, as Reeves affirms, is found in the words and the whole meaning. Here again the appeal of rhythm and rhyme match the appeal that adults perceive in poetry. Their love of this feature is by no means unique to their age. However, children's love of humour and the laughter it generates does seem to have special appeal for children.

### **Humour and the Lighter Side**

It was humour in poetry that appealed to the children in this study the most. This needs to be discussed in greater detail in terms of the adult pedagogic and instructional aims of educational institutions using poetry as a resource. Does the children's enjoyment of humour as the largest and most important reason for liking poetry correspond to some of the rationale that is used to justify poetry's inclusion in school curricula? In other words, does it conform to the adult motivations manifested within institutionalised pedagogy? The children found appeal in poems that were funny. They appeared to reject some of the poems that were excessive in the measure of direction that was being offered by adults.

This would include the over-zealous ‘nudge’ by adults to direct them towards ‘high’ culture.

The last thirty years have seen a mountain of reports and inspection evidence that highlight the need to teach poetry in schools (DES, 1975, 1982b, 1983, 1984, 1987, 1989). This demonstrates how for many adults the appeal of poetry written for children is about pedagogy. It also shows how for some, the appeal of poetry, should be centred in an ‘elevated’ cerebral response. Many of the reasons for teaching poetry stated revolve around the importance, highlighted by the great liberal-humanist critics (Arnold, 1960, Leavis, 1977), of youngsters communing with the greatest artistic minds in history, who represent their thoughts in erudite ways. The cultural and pedagogic purposes of poetry are always at the forefront of both the government inspection material, but also in the work of literacy educationalists.

*“Poetry matters because it is a central example of the use human beings make of words to explore and understand...poetry embodies delight in expression, stretched between thought, feeling and form. As we become aware of the ‘true soundings’ of poetry so we become aware of what we ourselves might do with language” (DES, 1987, p.1)*

or

*“Through the reading of authentic literature – and poetry is its highest form – we can experience modes of consciousness from which otherwise we would be totally debarred, and our sympathies, our tolerance, our understanding of life itself may be measurably enriched” (Scannell, 1987, p.26)*

In addition to sentiment such as this that emphasises the spiritual and linguistic benefits of using poetry, a number of other writers on the subject present an almost romantic and idealised vision of teaching it. Here is an example from a book written for primary school teachers:



*“Miss pulls down a book they haven’t seen before, and without any introduction, begins reading. By the end of the poem the class is completely silent, the quietest they have been for an activity all term. A boy with reading and behavioural difficulties puts up his hand and says ‘Can we have that again Miss?’ The same boy, two weeks later, crosses out some of his work (another first) to make it ‘sound more like me’ (Wilson, 1998, p.3).*

This is an attractive and seductive story, but it might be accused of offering an incomplete and possibly misleading picture of how all children interact with poems. It suggests a notion of poetry having metaphysical power, capable of capturing children’s attention and imagination and offering a form of ‘healing’ to those with learning difficulties. Although the children in this study are not a representational group of children, their relationship with poetry and their interaction with it in the study did not suggest that such a great aesthetic and spiritual force had touched them.

In this study, children wanted poems that directly gave them pleasure in a much lighter way. They rejected the sensitive Jack Prelutsky poem, *What Happens to the Colours?* because they detected in it a serious contemplation of a complex world. They chose the poems that made them laugh. Although the reasons for their laughter were complex, they were not concerned about a poem’s capacity to aesthetically move them, or its ability to develop their use of language – they wanted fun and uplifting amusement most of all. It is true that some enjoyed James Carter’s *I’m Watching You* because it explored a serious issue, but even with this poem, it was the fun and excitement of reciting its rap structure that was most appealing. Here a disjunction between pedagogic discourse around poetry and these children’s perceptions of poetry seems to emerge. For the children, the poetry they favoured explored issues and represented the world in a way that was affable. The Rosen poem, *Eddie and the Nappy*, most favoured by the children, deliberately portrays everyday issues in an everyday kind of language, using a written form that is unlike much

of traditional poetry. The children in this study were active readers, drawing pleasure from the meanings that some of these poems activated by their writerly (Barthes, 1975) nature. Here is an example of how adult intentions to acculturate are rejected by the children as they actively seek poetic texts that appeal to their sense of humour and conform to their desire to see the world in a positive and uncomplicated way. The control by adults of this form of literature does not always seem to be able to penetrate the children's active and discriminatory abilities.

Andrews contends: "*Poetry has been given special attention because of its supposedly purifying quality, its universality, its restorative value*" (1991, p.128). Part of poetry's problems, Andrews continues, is its failure to encourage a regular readership with adults as well as children. Commentators and critics who insist on portraying poetry as a restorative agent, both linguistically and spiritually, risk putting it in opposition to the common language and common language-use and thus alienating it from a common people.

### **3. Covert Pedagogical Poets – Constructing the Child as a Receiver of Knowledge**

Encouraging children to read more aesthetically powerful forms of poetry, or even just encouraging children to read any form of poetry, continues to be an adult pedagogical fixation. Some have tried alternative routes to reach this goal. As their actions would imply, the adult world appears to acknowledge children's ability to sift through and reject texts that do not appeal to their tastes and their needs and so look for ways to attract children to texts by covert methods. Margaret Meek (1996) has written that poetry for children has ways of "*endowing children with poetic potential.*" (cited in Styles, 1998, p.265). This implies that many of the features that poetry written for children possess can

prepare and set an agenda for poetry reading in later life - it has pedagogical potential and poets think of the readership in terms of the 'child-becoming' rather than the 'child-being' as Hollindale (2000) categorises it. Meek (1988) is famous for seeing this power in much of children's literature. However, she has always described this potential as manifesting itself in subtle ways through children's interaction with text and their implicit learning of how books and stories work to make meaning with their readers. Yet there are some that explicitly write poetry to introduce and imbue children with a love for reading it. In doing so, they set up a discourse between themselves and children that inevitably has an ideological agenda. In some cases this agenda is hidden.

The group of poets known as the 'Potty Poets' (an example of which was part of the sample of poetry given to the children in this study) attempts just this. Their methods might be read as a reaction against approaches of introducing children to poetry by simply attempting to teach erudite versions of it, yet is another example of adults imposing their will. The 'Potty Poets' have no desire to introduce poetry as being some how restorative, or aesthetically 'cleansing', they want to draw children to poetry by offering material that they believe will make children laugh, but lead them to finding appeal in other forms of poetry. Andrew Collett (1998), Potty Poet and author of *Arthur Wrigglesbottom*, the poem used in this study, describes his goal in his author's note at the beginning of his book 'Always Eat Your Bogies':

*"The Aim of 'Always Eat Your Bogies' is to promote the reading of poetry through humour. Some might argue that cow pats and bogies should not be the subject of "real" poetry. I understand this. But if, through reading this book, I can establish the reading habit with just one child, then it will have served its purpose. So, happy reading." (Collett, 1998, p.5)*

This study confirms Collett's view that children like to laugh at poems – particularly poems that evoke subversive laughter. His attempt to interest children in poetry through the medium of fun and humour appears potentially to be a more 'child-friendly' method than offering poems drenched in romantic and poetic language - which the children in this study would not be interested in. Yet, only one child indicated interest in Collett's poem, *Arthur Wrigglesbottom*, in the sample that was offered and four children rated his poem the worst of the group. This is not a representative sample of children and the 'Potty Poets' books sell well in the United Kingdom. However, the four children who listed it as the worst were appalled by the description of the child whom one child in the sample described as "very dirty." Another of the children added that he did not like it: "*because of the gross facts given by Arthur.*" It was interesting how these five children praised its structure, remarking on how easy it was to read because: "*it's set out well and it does rhyme which I like, but I do not like the actual poem because it's horrid.*"

This is another example of how children are attracted to the intrinsic qualities of poetry. Collett's note at the beginning of his book, quoted above, makes clear his intention in writing the kind of poems he does. Yet, in doing so he constructs children in what could be perceived as rather patronising a manner. Like all the poets that were offered to the children in this study, Collett has a vision of 'childness' too. His vision may be interpreted as children being only hedonistic seekers of gross and vulgar scatological entertainment, who need to be not just taught, but persuaded or even duped into liking poetry. His poems, he seems to suggest, have a clear pedagogical intention - they are a means to an end that is distinct from the poetry itself. By exploiting a child's interest in humour and laughter he sets bait that may lure children into the world of poetry and reading. He concedes his own understanding of adult reaction that accuses his work as being anti-poetic, but is eager to

show that he, like others, sees his methods as simply another way of teaching children to like poetry. Evidently Collett writes poetry that is not genuinely for children to enjoy as poems for their own sake. They act as a tool to lead children to other forms of poetry that have a genuine aesthetic integrity. Like advertisers and propagandists before him, he is well aware of the attraction of the poetic qualities of rhythm and rhyme and exploits this in his own verse.

However, it may be argued that Collett's poetry has a marked distance from any kind of literature that could be described as 'children's literature', a literature that is an end in itself. It could be argued that Collett's poems are concerned with the 'child-becoming' rather than the 'child-being.' Collett joins a long line of authors and poets in history, from the Puritan tradition onwards, that appears to foreground teaching and instruction rather than to aesthetically appeal. Like the Puritans, his success comes in his understanding of the intrinsic appeal of poetic form - the children in this study liked that - but he fails by his over-zealous appeal to children's sense of subversive humour. For the Year Six children in this study, they appeared to detect the hand of adult direction, even when gloved in humour. They seemed to recognise that in this case, instruction was covered by a façade of recreation.

All thirty of the children in this study were not at all impressed by Collett's poem that they were shown. The four who named it as the worst, said that although they liked its structure, they were not convinced by its content. As discussed earlier, rhythm and rhyme can never be enough on their own and the children were not seduced by the appeal of vulgar subject matter. This may be because of their age, maturity and experience of poetry. They did not find appeal in this poetry, not only because it vulgarised children's poetry as a genre, but

also because it became too ‘heavy-handed’ in the means used to appeal to children. In addition, the ‘childness’ conveyed was not how the children in this study saw their own ‘childness’ and one commented that “*this was an absolutely ghastly poem and it makes me think about the bad habits the writer must have.*”

#### **4. A Poet in Collusion – Constructing the Intelligent and Critical Child**

As has been shown, Collett’s approach to writing poetry can be perceived as emanating from adult ideological and pedagogical motives. Perhaps, as a result of this, he was given short shrift from the thirty children in the Year Six class of this study. In contrast to Collett’s distinct unpopularity for these children, Michael Rosen’s *Eddie and the Nappy* received a massive following. As the data analysis shows, the children found appeal in the way the poem was not *like* a poem. Many of the children enjoyed and noticed that Rosen’s poetry is written with a natural speech-like cadence, that it uses language of the everyday and is informal and direct. There is nothing in his work that could be considered elevated or self-consciously poetic. By being this way it possibly challenges adult ideological conceptualisations of what poetry should be and what needs to be offered to our young. Indeed, free verse poetry has been criticised by some educationalists (Scannell, 1987, Hall, 1989). Hall writes: “*Of all the non-rhyming forms, free verse most resembles prose in that it dispenses with the music and obvious patterning that makes poetry so distinctive and memorable, particularly at primary level*” (Hall, 1989, p.116).

This was clearly not the case for the primary level children in this enquiry. Many articulated vociferously that the free verse form was one of its main reasons for its appeal. Contrary to what Sloan (2001) concludes, that free verse is “*an acquired taste*” (p.53) for

children, those in this study instantly engaged with this form. Arguably, *Eddie and the Nappy* contributes to liberating poetry from a definition that creates a restrictive halo of reverence around it. In challenging this paradigm of definition it also intellectually challenges the child readers in this study by offering them an alternative to contemplate. By so doing, it constructs a child that is thoughtful, intelligent and creative as it opens up new possibilities for a form, that up until they met the poem, they thought was closed. In this sense the poem is 'writerly' (Barthes, 1975); it allows children to read it in a more active and open stance. As the analysis chapter also illustrates, the poem is writerly because it opens readings to subversive and liberating feelings. *Jouissance*, the pleasurable feeling of unbounded delight, is also generated in the children from this poem. This is reflected in the appeal to a Bahktinian 'second life', particularly emphasised by the laughter over Eddie's determination to reject the official life and rational intentions of his father.

In his poem, Rosen colludes with children who are operating in controlled and rational environments. He allows children to laugh at themselves and the adults who attempt to control them. He holds a mirror up to children's 'childness' and their environment that appears to have fairly strict control over how they can express themselves as children. The flashes of freedom that the children felt when reading and responding to this particular poem shows the extent of these children's immersion in a controlled and official world. The girl who wrote about the sensation of 'feeling funny' when she read the word 'bum' in the poem, expressing possibly her *jouissance* (Barthes, 1975), provides a stunning example of the degree of emotional and social confinement she lives within – it was after all, only the word 'bum'. But it was heard in the classroom, an official environment for this child where she must be, arguably constructed as a passive recipient of supplementation.

Her response and the responses of the other children in the class become a testament to the power a text such as *Eddie and the Nappy* can have in its liberating effect of igniting feelings of *jouissance*. It is not hard to see why Michael Rosen poems are so appealing.

There is no concealed agenda in Rosen's work, the poems are offered for their own sake. Rosen foregrounds the 'child being' rather than the 'child becoming.' Of course in offering these kinds of poems, the whole nature of the uses of children's literature and the concept of poetry as a whole, are also challenged – Rosen initiates a discourse between adults, as well as a discourse between an adult and child. In doing so, he reveals an ideology of his own. Yet, the messages he makes appeal to children on a number of significant levels that have already been discussed. The children in this study embraced the 'childness' that Rosen offers in his work. They seem to enjoy being addressed as a human being rather than a 'human becoming'. The life that Rosen's poems depict is the life happening to these children now – the appeal for this kind of work was starkly obvious.

### **5. Children Looking for Order**

As Watson (1992) has pointed out: "*It seems, then, that adults enter the arena of children's books with a bewildering variety of purposes*" (1992, p.21). These purposes include subversive drives, as well as the more Liberal Humanist pedagogical intentions as indicated in a number of the reports published concerning poetry's place in the curriculum. And of course some are more open than others. There are texts that openly offer acculturation and a means to socialise their readers into a culture. However, for whatever purposes the adults have, the children appear interested in these messages if they are carried in attractive, but honest packages.



The children in this small study engaged with the texts and ideologies in a number of ways, reflecting some of the research in children's response to adult ideological positions (Fox, 1979, Protherough, 1983, Eco, 1981, Sarland, 1991, Cherland & Edelsky, 1993). As much as they enjoyed the subversive patterning, themes and subjects some of the poems offered, they also engaged positively with the more overt pedagogical texts that were presented to them. Understandably, many of the children embraced the official adult rationales and ideologies that were spooned to them, but these messages had to be skilfully woven within the text. A large group found appeal in Carter's *I'm Watching You* for just these reasons. As Hollindale (1997) stresses, a book written for children is defined and judged subjectively - by a child's individual experience while reading it - children's literature exists in the reading experience as opposed to within the text itself. The children's responses to *I'm Watching You* and its appeal were positioned both in the entertainment and pedagogy it offered; they enjoyed its catchy rhythmic music as well as its message. Again, one could describe this poem as playing to the 'child being' and the 'child becoming' simultaneously. The children liked the moral pedagogy that the poem offered. None of the children appeared to feel it was addressed to them personally, yet they were aware that bullying, the subject of the poem, is a disturbing and destructive element within children's society, but equally within the adult society they will join. They were pleased that children were being instructed not to do it. The poem offered comfort to the children by its confirmation that adult power can be directed in ways in which they clearly approved. It implied an ordered society in opposition to elements of 'second life' anarchic, wild disorder that they recognised children had the potential to indulge. The children appeared to embrace a society that contained a leadership that fairly and thoughtfully administered its sovereignty.

## **6. Poetry and 'Social Capital'**

As the data analysis suggests, adults appear to have almost exclusive control over the children in this study's exposure to and experience of poetry, with the exception of the children's responses during reading of course. The teacher did dispute their claim, but some of the children indicated a strict authority over the forms of literature they are authorised to read at home. As has been discussed earlier, this indicates the level of cogency that parents' confer when it comes to children's literature. They appear rigorously active in their role of socialising their children into a culture by encouraging children to read the literature that assists this process - and poetry has a part to play. I was surprised by the two children's comments about the extent of their parents' control over their reading habits. Despite the class teacher's belief that they were being untruthful, I feel strongly that our discussions generated mature and thoughtful answers from children, chosen both by the class teacher and me, because they seemed capable of providing trustworthy and accurate views. It is for this reason I felt it was important to examine further the children's comments by studying the motivations of parents who take such forthright and assertive action when it comes to the texts their children read. There has been much discussion throughout this thesis of how society conceptualises children and how this influences the nature of the texts produced for children and the kind of appeal that they hope to generate. The concern is to influence how a child 'becomes' an adult (Parsons, 1956) and take a place within society. I intend here to discuss the specific case of the children in this study and examine poetry's role in the process of social reproduction, which is so closely aligned to a general conceptualisation of acculturation.

The children in this study have been socially categorised earlier in this thesis as ‘middle class’. As the class teacher reported, their parents exhibit much of the interventions in and around their children’s education, as Ball (2003) describes as typical of this social class. They possess a form of social capital (Coleman, 1988, Putnam, 1993, 2000, Bourdieu, 1986b, Ball, 2003) in which poetry has a role.

Clear definitions of social capital are elusive, but for this discussion it is Bourdieu’s (1986b) version of the concept that is the most relevant. Social capital for Bourdieu is centred on class-specific forms of sociability, which enables this class to reproduce itself. Social capital is an ability to network with others in particular social settings like schools to maintain or improve social positions: *“privilege is not automatically transmitted but depends upon purposeful activity directed towards the maintenance of class position and the prevention of downward mobility”* (Allat, 1993, p.142). Stephen J. Ball (2003) has documented how parents with social capital are able to make key interventions in schools to secure the scarce resources available in state education that suit their child’s needs. Ball remarks that social capital relies on, *“The existence and use of social networks; that is, group membership, contacts and shared identities, accumulated exchanges and obligations, and actual potential support and access to other valued resources”* (2003, p.82). Ball goes on to assert that cultural capital – a competence and confidence to engage in traditional cultural systems found in places like schools – combines with social capital to make middle class parents effective managers and decoders in the educational domain.

It is possible to argue that the children’s articulation of the extent of their parents’ intervention in their reading diet hints at the cultural and social appeal that poetry written for children occupies for the parents. Parents’ possession of social and cultural capital

gives access to the educational discourse, discussed above, that concerns the pedagogic potential of poetry. The children here do not choose to buy poetry themselves, instead, a carefully chosen diet of poems is supplied to the children by their parents. The sample of children in the study were aware of the control and the resulting nature of the poetry that adults, whether teachers or parents, tend to sanction.

As was reported in chapter four, one girl in the class of thirty, when responding to the questionnaire asking the children where, hypothetically, the source of Michael Rosen's poem *'Eddie and the Nappy'* that she chose as her favourite might be, was very clear: "*My mum would never suggest (a poem about) a nappy.*" This comment mirrored the general view that the poems coming from adult sources were the ones they perceived to be the most boring and the least appealing. Indeed, these were the poems in the sample which contained themes and structures of a more traditional category, the less 'writerly' and more 'readerly' poems - the ones that belonged to a canon of literature. In chapter four of this thesis, a good example of a parent's desire for social reproduction is evidenced by Child B in the interviews who described her awareness of the immense pleasure her father takes when she reads the books he had read when he was a child. Touchingly she adds: "*sometimes when I don't enjoy them I pretend to read them. If I do like them I read them.*" The child is doing what her father did when he was a child – social reproduction in action. Like the other devices and strategies parents use to preserve privilege for their children, children's literature and indeed poetry become an important cultural lever for the aspiring middle class. Poetry needs to be under control in order to socially reproduce a cultural status.

For these particular children in the study, their parent's resolve to censor certain kinds of poems and sanction others may be a part of a general middle class agenda of social reproduction. It might explain and justify the children's reports of their parents' arguably controlling behaviour. The children in the interviews appeared to be aware of the urgency to which their parents set about this task. Yet, like other attempts by adults to coerce or pressure them to behave in specific ways in terms of their recreational texts, they also found ways to either avoid or subvert them. Evidence from this enquiry alone suggests that children are able to actively create their own responses to the texts they are given. They were able to discern when adults were attempting to manipulate their opinions or contriving an appeal from certain texts. Theories of social reproduction can sometimes appear too reductive when the responses of those targeted in the process are analysed.

### **Summary**

There is no doubt that children's literature is under control from adults, in terms of production, distribution and consumption. In this study, poetry seemed to be the most controlled form of literature. Poetry has been given an elevated status in educational and social class discourse and therefore has status in middle class adults' perceptions. A larger study might find evidence of this on a national level. Yet, despite the control of adults over poetry that this study revealed, the children are seen to interact actively with the ideological purposes of the adult world, both deflecting some and embracing others. They are aware of adult interest in their development and possible social reproduction and again, where this is detected in the texts, some they accept and others they reject. They show clear interest in the poetry offered to them and seem to enjoy making meaning from it in their own ways. They appear to be able to spot when adults are instructing or directing them

through the texts and evaluate the devices they use with great skill. The children in this study were not passive readers, but active in constructing their own meanings and finding appeal in texts that represented themselves and the world they know as it is to them. The texts they found most appealing were the ones that highlighted the funnier side of living today and those that contributed to a life of happiness and contentment to which they aspire. There is a danger that ideas, like those presented by Zipes (2001) construct an oversimplification of the social reproductive forces that are present within society, and do not give enough credence to the critical abilities of young readers.

This chapter has discussed some of the rich and complex discourses that surround the poems written for children and has presented a commentary on the data that has been collected in this study. The next chapter will attempt to draw conclusions from the whole work and summarise the study's contribution to the field.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Conclusion

#### Poetry Appeal

This chapter draws together my thoughts on the appeal that poetry written for children has for the children in my study. Throughout this thesis, deriving for me principally from the work of Zipes (2001), one strong theoretical thread has dominated the main questions and analysis of the study. It is the role of the literature written for children within a society - a society that has been defined (Lee, 2001) as a 'developmental state', a state where "*children are understood and treated as sites of investment, as human becomings requiring special treatment*" (Lee, 2001, p.77). What appears a simple task of looking for the appeal of poetry for children, is complicated by this literature's place in a complex society. It is within the parameters of contemporary conceptualisations of childhood, that the discourse, - in the form of children's literature - is generated. Discovering and exploring the appeal that a section of this literature, namely poetry, has for a group of 11-year-old children has been my goal. This study has been able to generate and explore data to discuss this special kind of appeal, an appeal that exists within the confines of the official world of school, which arguably plays a crucial role within the developmental state (Foucault, 1977, Lee, 2001). It has attempted to lift the lid on a world of officialdom to seek out how children manage and engage with the literature that they are offered.

The chapter will draw my own conclusions from the work that I have offered. It will briefly summarise the contribution of my work to the field of study it shares. I will go on to describe the implications for this study and, with the help of hindsight, improvements I

would make if attempting it again. There will be a description of the implications for my own professional role and for the wider professional context and how, why and for whom I could disseminate my findings.

### **The Sociology of Appeal**

This study, in seeking to explore the appeal of poetry written for children, has looked within the context of the official world of school. It was Foucault (1977) who compared school to other institutions like prisons, factories and the army barracks - a place to mould people to play particular roles within a given society. School is an institution where skills and information are to be passed from teacher to pupil. The school's role is to turn children into 'passive becomings', by crushing 'misbehaviour' and demanding a dependence upon the teacher, negating any desire for autonomous thought and individual behaviours. However, a classroom of children, all having their own interests and desires, compelled by innate drives to create and enjoy a happy life, all able to engage critically with the world, is a problem for the teacher and the school. Any form of individuality needs to be controlled by discipline and children are forced to abandon their own activities and made to follow the lead given by the teacher. For Foucault (1977), children in schools are tested and ranked into particular abilities based upon their capacity to learn the skills and knowledge taught in segmented pieces from a utilitarian driven curriculum. Expectations of their performance are calculated from test data and the individual child's rate of success towards 'becoming' can be accurately determined.

A chill must pass down the spine of all those who have worked in schools when reading Foucault, as one can not help but recognise some of his descriptions of the role and



practices of school-life. Despite the rise of so called 'child-centred' schooling in the 1970s, which emphasised the need for children to be more active in their engagement with the learning offered in school, remnants of the all-controlling model of teaching can still be found. However, the pupil "*of child-centred education was still a 'becoming'....But they were conceived of as active rather than passive becomings*" (Lee, 2001, p.81).

This thesis has shown that throughout history, since the Puritans of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and through to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the appearance of childhood as a distinct period in life, the adult world has seen children as 'becomings'. From some of the data collected in this enquiry the children and the adults articulate, either implicitly or explicitly how this process continues. The children's relationship with the texts they are given, the discussion of the appeal of some of the poetry has for them, their communion with some of the poets and their description of how their parents control their reading, is a clear reminder of how a society operates and how discourses like children's literature are still key to its success. It illustrates how the feeling of 'childness' from the two perspectives - child and adult - is constantly being confirmed and challenged. Adult pressure to formalise 'childness' and to confer upon children their role as 'becomings', is constantly a site of struggle.

The appeal of poetry written for children is complex, but fascinating, studied within this context. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, the appeal that the poems I showed the children had for them reflected the ambiguity and eccentricity of their place in the human social condition. From this sociological position, the poems appealed to their desire to feel a part of their social environment, as in the case with the moralising rap. Yet chinks of liberation, insights of what it is like to be free from official constraints came out starkly when they were confronted with poetry that generated unexpected, unorthodox feelings

that appealed – *jouissance* and the call of the ‘second life’. The poem that accomplished this most effectively was Michael Rosen’s poem, *Eddie and the Nappy*. I want to conclude that much of this poem’s success came from the way it placed in the foreground the ambiguity of childhood that many of the discourses surrounding childhood, including children’s literature, have attempted to concretise. Childhood, as this study has shown, is an unstable concept and Rosen’s poem helps to inform children of this fact. The events in *Eddie and the Nappy* and many of his other poems blur the previous stark contrasts between adult beings and child ‘becomings’ and inform children of this being so. It tells children implicitly that they *are* ‘beings’ and that their status as ‘becomings’ is manufactured by the developmental state. This has enormous appeal to young readers who struggle to draw on as much material as they can find to understand the world in which they are being inducted.

### **The Aesthetics of Appeal**

A pleasing result of the inquiry was the children’s obvious delight in the intrinsic qualities of poetry and their love of the poetic textures of this form of writing. As has been raised in previous chapters, children, indeed humans, do seem to have a natural affinity with the pulse that some poetry exudes (Furniss and Bath, 1996). Kenneth Koch (1998), in describing a poem by Gerald Manley Hopkins writes: “*The music is of a sort that takes the breath away, and one is excited before quite knowing what is going on*” (1998, p.212). Aesthetic response has often been described (Collinson, 1985) as an experience that we are aware of, but at the same time unaware of in a clear intellectual way. Collinson (1985) writing about aesthetic responses to painting writes:

*“Perhaps aesthetic experience is even better typified by the gaps between ‘the ordinary spectator’s’ phrases; by the wordless moments when the spectator is poised in the act simply of apprehending the painting rather than remarking on it. For it is not an experience in which we formulate an intellectual judgement”* (1985, p.271).

The children found the intrinsic qualities of poetry aesthetically appealing, in that they were, like Koch, unwittingly engaged with its compelling nature. They were carried away on the rhythms of the language, the impulse to move to its beat and to unite their own internal pulse with that of the poem. Some of the poetry invoked the will to dance and all the positive feelings that that can bring – scintillatingly appealing.

### **The Contribution of this Study**

This enquiry has looked at response to poetry within the context of children’s literature. This is one of the study’s distinctive features and sets a different agenda to previous observations in this field. As discussed in chapter two, its aim was not to purely explore how children respond to poetry, but how they respond to texts theorised as key parts of the discourse that surrounds conceptualisations of childhood. This makes it distinctive from other research in the field of reader response research (Benton et al, 1988, Dias & Hayhoe, 1988, Pike, 2001). The sociological context of where the texts exist was a crucial part of my analysis of the appeal that the children articulated. In doing so it provides an illuminating case study of children at the end of their primary school phase growing up within a context of officialdom. Some of the children’s responses to the poetry revealed how critical they could be and how most of the class had strong assertive views about the texts they were offered. It also showed, quite starkly, how children can be given brief ‘time-outs’ (Stephens, 1992) from the official life and feel sensations of freedom, flashes of their own ‘childness’ without the constraints imposed upon them by adults and the adult

world, just from reading a poem. These latter findings contribute particularly to research that shows that the processes of social reproduction are active in homes and schools and in the discourse that children's literature contributes. Yet, my findings also contribute to an understanding that this process is not at all clear cut. The active critical engagement of the children in this study with these socialising texts offers a glimpse of the complexity of describing the social processes present in society.

It was Jack Zipes' (2001) argument that acted as a catalyst for this thesis. He offers a compelling challenge to naïve views of the social and political neutrality of children's literature and disputes the contention that children's literature is only for children and for their needs. However, Zipes (2001) offers a far too simplistic account of the role of children's literature in social reproduction, often failing to concede how some literature for children can offer messages and provoke responses that run counter to social reproductive demands - as in the work of Michael Rosen. Literature for children, particularly poetry, also has intrinsic qualities that are enjoyed for their own sake and despite any other intentions from those who are the producers. In addition, Zipes certainly does not credit children enough with the critical capabilities that produce readings against the ideological messages found in texts written for them.

The adult world's authority and control over children's reading matter, that Zipes (2001) highlights, was revealed by the children's candid descriptions of how they perceive their parents manage their reading diet. In some cases it was in a strict manner and indicated the urgency felt by some parents to provide appropriate reading matter. Another distinctive part of this thesis is the clear confirmation by these children, of how rigorously censorship is felt to be needed to be applied. The motivations of these adults have been discussed in

detail in the last chapter and seem to be linked with the need to socialise children - in addition and specifically, in these children's cases, for social reproduction. These results clearly contribute to the field of children's response to literature research adding a different dimension to how this response is theorised.

### **Implications for Further Study**

There are a number of questions deriving from this study that deserve further attention. A larger study of children's perceptions of parental attitudes to the literature they read would increase our understanding of the role children's literature plays in the socialisation process that Zipes (2001) writes about. Equally, it would be exciting to see if feelings of *jouissance* could be detected in larger samples of children when they are given writerly examples of children's literature. It would help establish the extent to which; firstly, children feel fettered by the official life and adult preconceptions of how children should behave and, secondly, would show the liberating effect of this kind of literature on its readers. In addition, a survey of parents' own opinions of the uses of children's literature for enabling their children to 'become' the adults they wish them to become would be a useful contribution within this field. A larger sample for both these cases would help our certainty about the use of children's literature in the acculturation process.

### **Improvements to a Hypothetical Repeated Version of this Study**

Given the size of this project and its exploratory nature, I am pleased with some of the data that I was able to collect. I felt that the children genuinely wanted to help me by answering my questions as honestly and as thoughtfully they could. I was limited by time, both by the

parameters of the study, but equally because I was working within a school that, like all schools, have a tight schedule. I would have been interested to broaden the means I used to talk to the children. Meeting the children in relatively hurried circumstances did provide interesting data, but I would have liked to have had the opportunity to have the more intimate mode of conversation with more of the children. This again would have provided more certainty, even within the case of the class of thirty, of the accuracy of some of the children's comments. As has been explained in the methodology chapter the children I did speak to were chosen by myself and the class teacher. They were considered to be children who would be sensible, honest and keen to talk about their lives and the poems. As it turned out, despite the teacher's role in selecting children whom she felt were capable of answering the kinds of questions I was asking, the teacher was sceptical about some of the comments the children made. I do feel the data was secure in terms of the children's honesty and in their determination to answer the questions given to them. However, discussions with more children might have made my data feel safer. Having said this, the nature of case study is that it offers data from a particular case. It is a way of exploring empirical settings through specific subjects and it interprets this information accordingly.

In particular instances in this study, more detailed exploration and probing of some the children's written comments (in more detail) would have been helpful. For example, as I have discussed earlier, the child who mentions how the Rosen poem made her "feel funny" offers an ambiguous comment that could yield a number of interpretations. If I were to repeat this study I would create more opportunity for the children to talk about the kind of poem that this child was discussing and to comment on the feelings they provoked within the school setting. This could have productively been explored in more detail. The nature of the analysis I offer would mean that there could not have been an explicit discussion of

pleasure in the way Barthes (1975) contends. However, there could have been more opportunity to talk about the nature of the response to a poem like 'Eddy and the Nappy'.

The presence of an adult, probably seen as part of the world of school, may also have affected the nature of the answers I obtained from the children. If I were to conduct the research again I would attempt to look for more varied means of collecting this kind of data. For example, it might have been possible to set up a form of child initiated literature circle – a group of children independently debating issues around a text. This could have contributed to a more open forum. Some form of recording device would have been needed, and although physically an adult may not have been there, the children would have been well aware that an adult would be listening in the future. None the less, the initiation of the discussion by the children themselves might have brought different or richer results.

Lastly, the way the sample of poems was introduced could have been more conducive to engagement by a young audience. As I mentioned in the methodology chapter of this thesis, there are a number of ways to encourage children's interest in a poem. The involvement of drama, role-play, physical movement and performance might have influenced the children's attitude to the poems. I set these options to one side and introduced the poems through my readings, but it would be fruitful to explore alternatives in future work.

### **Implications for my Professional Role**

There are a number of implications to my own professional role:

- 1) As someone who has published in the field of children's poetry in education I can feel heartened that poetry's forms have the kind of appeal that can transcend any ideological motivations of all those involved in the production and distribution of children's literature. Poetry has its own aesthetic appeal for children and adults. It is part of the world of art that, although not free from the society from which it is produced, can still possess an independent integrity through its form. The children in this study like poetry as a form and there is clearly a future for my work encouraging students to use it in their own teaching.
  
- 2) My role as a teacher-educator, specialising in Primary English, requires me to teach about the role of children's literature in schools. Listening to the children talk about poetry written for them in this study and my consequent interpretation of their views, helps me contextualise my work within a wider sociological framework. It assists in countering what I feel to be naïve perspectives that conceptualise the literature for children as a neutral entity. The relationship between children's literature, the child and society is complex and the appeal of these texts to children is inextricably linked to the child's view of themselves and the struggle that exists between a child's sense of 'childness' and that of The State. Prospective teachers need to be at least aware that the texts they introduce to children within schools are loaded with this sociological baggage.
  
- 3) My choice of texts to recommend to students cannot help but be affected by this study. The intentions of writers for children are many. The children in this study were attracted or repelled by the poems I offered for many reasons. I was particularly struck by those texts that seemed, for a moment, to intellectually liberate their readers by



validating the child's own sense of 'childness' and allowing them access to this 'childness', possibly independent of the influence of a developmental State. A poem's ability to do this was stunning and I feel compelled to suggest to my students they introduce such 'writerly' (Barthes, 1975) texts as these. In addition to motivations for selecting particular texts for children I would want to ensure that students learn to appreciate how poetry's forms can excite and stimulate children and provide happiness and positive feelings by its pulse and energy

- 4) The process of completing this study and the work undertaken on the Doctor in Education programme has contributed to my perception and conception of the nature of knowledge and its role within social settings. Much of my work on the course has highlighted the advantages of recognising professional uncertainty and the benefits of approaching educational research with openness to a range of possibilities. For example my 'Institution Focused Study' highlighted the benefits of professional uncertainty in a group of PGCE students teaching poetry in schools. Those who were more confident to teach poetry all disclosed their awareness of the difficulties of defining the type of writing they were teaching. Instead of this being a disadvantage, their uncertainty appeared to power their teaching by enabling them to approach poetry with children in an openly curious and questioning way - it created a community of learners all enjoying the experience of examining a wide range of poetic texts.

This present study has underlined the importance of approaching research with an open mind. The data that was generated from the children demanded that the analysis would be an interpretation of the children's written and spoken comments.

Researchers working with children have a responsibility to support their interpretative assertions with a clear theoretical framework. The children's comments in this enquiry were sometimes ambiguous and I feel strongly that my interpretation was simply that – an interpretation based upon a particular framework for analysis.

As a researcher, my perception of my own personal understanding and knowledge could not help but be affected by the process of enquiry. I found myself both becoming aware of increasing uncertainties about the world through study, but at the same time I continued to see patterns that pointed towards my increasing certainty about particular aspects of social life. I recognise the relative subjectivity of knowledge, but I also feel strongly that the social world and its communities will only 'develop' if it is acted upon with an informed assertiveness rather than only being studied, discussed and debated. Many children's lives in adult constructed and controlled social settings are full of inequality and injustice that can only be improved by concerted and determined efforts to expose and undermine the powers that wish to perpetuate them. I feel strongly that academics have a role to play in this endeavour.

The dichotomy of both being aware of the uncertainty and subjectivity of knowledge, but at the same time feeling increasingly aware of patterns and processes that appear as constants are arguably part of the dialectic of existence. However I might wish to interpret the phenomenon, it has come to influence my teaching at every level. I wish to imbue my students with the need to examine and to explore the world with an open mind, but to do so equipped with the means and

the possibilities of interpreting what they perceive. This requires access to multiple analytical frameworks through the study of other scholars who have come before them. Through this approach, they will then be able to come to their own conclusions and form their own informed understanding of the world.

All these implications for my own professional role can be transferred to the wider professional context within which I work. The sociology of appeal, when used as a theoretical framework for enquiries into response to children's literature might act as a way to measure the degree of intellectual autonomy that each state or society allows their children. The availability of the more 'writerly' texts like those by Michael Rosen, and the opportunity for children to read, recite and discuss them in schools might help provide this measure. Studying response to literature that theorises these texts as part of the discourse that helps to define childhood can illuminate a State's relationship with its children. It also firmly places a response to literature within a particular sociological context.

### **Dissemination of my Findings – Hopes for Publication**

I have had the opportunity to disseminate some of my initial findings at the United Kingdom Literacy Association's annual conference at Homerton College, Cambridge (2003). Teachers and academics concerned with children's literature and its use within schools attend the conference. However, I plan to publish in journals within the fields of education and children's literature drawing on the information I have collected and the theoretical perspectives I have used in making my interpretations. These include the following:

- Studying appeal of poetry written for children *for* children from the context of a society's view of children. As has been already said, studying response to poetry from this more sociological perspective takes an alternative view to others previously working within the field of exploring response.
- An exploration of the work of Michael Rosen for children – his ability to mirror 'childness' for children and to highlight the ambiguities of a child's place in society, emphasising the 'child being' rather than the becoming.
- A critical study of the popular 'Potty Poets'. This would consist of an exploration of the motivations of these poets and their place within the history of children's literature.
- The role of poetry written for children in the process of 'social reproduction' (Ball, 2003). This derives from my perception of 'middle class' parental control over poetry. It would examine parental motivations for this, exploring how parents may perceive poetry as a valuable form of 'cultural capital'. This would need more empirical input, as I have described earlier in this chapter.

All these publications in journals or books would be intended to contribute to the knowledge within the area of children's literature and education, adding to the debate in this field.

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# APPENDIX A

## The Poems

### What Happens to the Colours?

What happens to the colours  
When night replaces day?  
What turns the wrens to ravens,  
The trees to shades of grey?

Who paints away the garden  
When the sky's a sea of ink?  
Who robs the sleeping flowers  
Of their purple and their pink?

---

What makes the midnight clover  
Quiver black upon the lawn?  
What happens to the colours?  
What brings them back at dawn?

**Jack Prelutsky**

## **Eddie and the Nappy**

Eddie hates having his nappy done.

So I say all cheery,

‘Time for your nappy, Eddie’,

and he says, all sad,

‘No napppee.’

And I say,

‘Yes nappy.’

So I have to run after him going,

‘Nappy nappy nappy nappy...’

And he’s got these little fat rubbery legs

That go round like wheels;

So away he runs

With a wicked grin on his face

Screaming,

Woooo woooo woooo

So I go running after him

Shouting,

‘Nappy nappy nappy,

I’ll get you I’ll get you...’

Until I catch him.

Then I lift him up

Lay him over my knees

to get his nappy off.

While I’m doing the pins

he gargles

‘Geereegreegeereegreee,’

waving his podgy little legs in the air.

He thinks,

Great. Time to kick Dad's chin.  
And smack smack smack  
On my chin.

When I've cleaned him up  
it's time for the cream  
You have to put cream on a baby's bum  
Or they get nappy rash.  
But we leave the jar of cream  
on the window-sill  
where it gets all cold.  
So I go,  
'Time for the cream, Eddie.'  
And he goes,  
'No cream.'  
So I say,  
'Yeah cream,'  
and I blob it on  
and he goes, 'Oooh.'  
You imagine what that feels like.  
A great blob of cold cream.  
It would be like  
having an ice-lolly down your pants.

So then I put the nappy on  
And away he goes on those little rubbery legs  
going,  
'Woooo woوو woوو.'

**Michael Rosen**

## **Arthur Wigglesbottom**

My name is Arthur Wigglesbottom  
I like to suck my toes,  
They're the best I've ever had,  
But you should try my nose.

My fingernails, another matter,  
They taste of cheese and greasy batter,  
But on days like this, when all's not nice,  
I peel off a crispy, mouth-watering slice.

And across we go to my ear no less  
Where, to be sure, you'll find a mess,  
For buried inside, where no one can see  
Is my bubble gum to chew after tea.

And shall we go further, right up to my hair,  
Where in it you'll find creatures quite rare,  
Ones which are spotted and pull funny faces  
Swing from nose and run relay races.

## **Andrew Collett**



## **Dear Mum**

While you were out  
A cup went and broke itself,  
A crack appeared in the blue vase  
Your great-great granddad  
Brought back from China.  
Somehow, without seeing me even turning on the tap,  
The sink mysteriously overflowed.  
A strange jam-stain  
About the size of a boy's hand,  
Appeared on the kitchen wall.  
I don't think we will ever discover  
Exactly how the cat  
Managed to turn on the washing machine  
(specially from the inside),  
or how the self-raising flour  
managed to self-raise.  
I can tell you I was scared when,  
As if by magic,  
A series of muddy footprints  
Appeared on the new white carpet.  
I was being good  
(honest)  
But I think the house is haunted so,  
Knowing you're going to have a fit,  
I've gone over to Gran's for a bit.

**Brian Patten**

## **I'm Watching You**

Now I'm not stupid – I'm no fool  
I know what's happening in your school  
I've checked it out – and clocked your scene  
And I've been shocked by what I've seen

Picking on those that you don't like –  
So how can you really think that's right?  
And hurting those that do no wrong –  
How long's that been going on?

### **CHORUS**

*I say – hey you  
What 'ya gonna do?  
You better watch out  
'Cos I'm watching you  
I say - hey you  
Gotta get real  
And stop and think how others feel  
Give me a P, E, and A-C-E:  
Peace in this community  
If you don't, won't  
Give it a go  
I'll haunt you and I won't let go*

I won't name names but you know it's you  
And messing with lives is what you do  
You're on my list and there you'll be –  
As you don't play games with those like me

And sticks and stones they make break bones  
But bones in time are mended  
Yet words and names and silly games

Will always be remembered

CHORUS

Who am I? I hear you say  
Well, I'm many things, in a kind of way  
For I'm the voice that's in your head  
And the noise at night from under your bed

I'm the banging pipe, the creaking stair  
I'm everything and I'm everywhere  
I'm a faceless face from the other side  
Run if you like, but you'll never hide

CHORUS

**James Carter**

## **The Land of Counterpane**

When I was sick and lay a-bed,  
I had two pillows at my head,  
And all my toys beside me lay  
To keep me happy all the day.

And sometimes for an hour or so  
I watched my leaden soldiers go,  
With different uniforms and drills,  
Among the bed-clothes, through the hills;

And sometimes sent my ships in fleets  
All up and down among the sheets;  
Or brought my trees and houses out,  
And planted cities all about.

I was the giant great and still  
That sits upon the pillow-hill,  
And sees before him, dale and plain,  
The pleasant land of counterpane.

**Robert Louis Stevenson**

## APPENDIX B

### THE QUESTIONNAIRES

## Questionnaire A

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Do you like poetry? (Tick the box) Yes  No

Why do you like it?

Why don't you like it?

## Questionnaire B

### THE POEM YOU LIKE THE BEST

Name \_\_\_\_\_

The name of the poem \_\_\_\_\_

What did you LIKE about it?

Did you like WHO and WHAT it was about? Why?

Did you like the way it LOOKS or SOUNDS? E.g structure,  
rhythm, rhyme.

**How did it make you feel? E.g. Did you want to laugh, feel sad, cross, happy?**

**Why did it make you feel like that?**

**Who might give you a poem like this - a teacher, parent, school friend?**

**Is there anything else you want to say about why you like the poem?**



## Questionnaire C

### THE POEM YOU DID *NOT* LIKE

Name \_\_\_\_\_

The name of the poem \_\_\_\_\_

What did you **NOT** like about it?

Did you not like **WHO** and **WHAT** it was about? **Why?**

Did you not like how it **LOOKS** or **SOUNDS**? E.g. structure,  
rhythm, rhyme.

**How did it make you feel? E.g. Did it make you want to laugh, feel sad, cross, happy?**

**Why did it make you feel like that?**

**Who might give you a poem like this – a teacher, parent, school friend?**

**Is there anything else you want to say about why you DON'T like the poem?**