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Veronica R. Whelan

Brigham Young University - Provo, veronicawhelan13@gmail.com

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Veronica Whelan

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Sylvie and Bruno and the Loss of Innocence

Sylvie and Bruno, written by Lewis Carroll, is a novel that dismally few people have heard about. It was written in the year 1889, and was considered by Carroll to be something of a break away from his earlier works (and among these earlier works are included such classics as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *The Hunting of the Snark*). Sadly, while these earlier works take the spotlight, for lack of a better phrase, *Sylvie and Bruno* and its sequel, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* have remained relatively untouched by critics' hands. This novel, however, is something to look at. Within this novel, Carroll has combined both the whimsical (and at times almost disturbing) nonsense which he is known for, and something entirely different--a very obvious, very intentional meaning. *Sylvie and Bruno* follows a narrator--an adult man--who drifts back and forth between the very fine line that constitutes a dream and reality, and he accompanied (at least to his belief) by a wide set of characters, including both adults and children. It is set in Victorian England, and, to anyone familiar with the *Alice* stories, retains much of the same "color palette" in terms of storyline, however, reads very differently. The story revolves around said male narrator, and focuses mainly upon his interactions with and observations about both the children and the adults, both in the dream world and in reality, including their political endeavors, their birthday parties, and a number of other ridiculous mishaps. He remains, however, rather impartial to the activities surrounding him, and is more a passive observer than any kind of action-maker or hero, almost seeming, at times, to be a mere vessel for the narrative. Indeed, he is only ever known to us as "the narrator"—and that the story is told from the first person

perspective. Lewis Carroll, in his novel *Sylvie and Bruno*, makes the statement that although children may be seen as "innocent" and adults "guilty," there must be a bridge between these two places in order to arrive at an ideal balance between innocence and knowledge—or, arrive at a purer wisdom.

Some things that separate the children from the adults in this story are really very obvious. One example (possibly one of the most significant examples of all in this story), is Carroll's choice of names, and his use of their power. Most of the adults' names are never revealed. They are known only by titles, such as "The Gardener" or "The Baron." Even those whose names are known are not without title. These are names that supposedly tell the world something about them, and are purported to mean something to those that hear. Meanwhile, the children of the story are known simply by given names--Sylvie, Bruno, and even Uggugg. Even from this device alone, the separation between the two populations is grossly evident. This changing (or loss) of a name can be attributed to the distance the adults feel to their previous childhoods, or periods of innocence and purity of character. "Distance or the loss of innocence is constructed as a fall from essence, attended by feelings of loss and of brokenness" (Dutchinsky 755). It is quite possible that the adults in this story feel (or are meant to appear as though they feel) that their essence, in a sense, has been lost, and that they must therefore construct a new one for themselves in order to be "fixed"—in the form of a title that others will notice, rather than anything that really comes from deep within themselves.

After Carroll creates this broad separation, he continues to expand it. At one point, the characters are "celebrating" Sylvie's birthday, and one adult character—the Professor—gives Sylvie the gift of a small "second-hand" sewing-kit, which he brags only cost him a few pennies. While he is boasting of the money he saved, Sylvie is honestly pleased with the gift, including even the damaged bits, saying that she could use an included bent pin "as a

hook...to catch Bruno with when he runs away from his lessons!" (15). Sylvie bears no such understanding of money nor of its importance, and has too much imagination—or essence, perhaps—to be disappointed in her gift. Her mind is not focused on the outside, but the inside—she knows what a bent pin could be to her, not what it might be to someone else. An adult clearly sees it as useless, however, a good bargain, but only because he has, in effect, trained himself to view the world around him in that way.

The children, frankly, lack the self-conscious, trained awareness that the adults in this story are burdened with. They lack self-interest, almost completely, and in one instance, Sylvie (while an adult attempts to pull her away) clutches a dead rabbit to her heart, crying that it had a beautiful life that it could have lived. ““Oh, my darling, my darling!’ She moaned, over and over again. ‘And God meant your life to be so beautiful!’” (107). Not only that, but she states that "God" had intended him to have a beautiful life, yet it had been cut off. She is only aware, in that moment, of the rabbit, and the rabbit's purer meaning. She is able, in a second, to recognize how precious life is, while, perhaps, the adults have pushed the thought from their minds. Earlier on, on that very page, Sylvie is shown asking the narrator whether or not God loves hares, to which he replies, “He loves every living thing. Even sinful men. How much more the animals, that cannot sin!” (15). Sylvie in return to this answer, expresses that she *does not know what sin is*. She is on the very far away, very opposite end of the spectrum of innocence. She is so innocent, in fact, that she does not even know what it is to sin. When asked, the narrator does not explain it to her. Carroll’s conscious decision to keep his narrator from explaining sin to Sylvie shows that the narrator (who is the voice, very likely, of the average adult) would rather maintain Sylvie’s “purity” than teach her about sin (or give her, in a sense, a piece of wisdom). A prime chance to begin the foundations of a bridge has been missed, and the story progresses rapidly onward.

In the second novel (which is, mainly a continuation easily understood without much explanation), *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, a character states, "I suppose every child has a world of his own — and every man, too, for the matter of that. I wonder if that's the cause for all the misunderstanding there is in Life?" (*Concluded* 57). Here, however, is yet another aspect that one must question to identify the gap. Is it truly another world, or simply another understanding of it? Adults are forced to gain a reputation in order to survive. Growing up, or moving out of innocence, is "marked by the emergence of competitive individualism and authority, since the individual's living depends upon the reputation he achieves" (Clarke 6). However, it is undoubtedly the same world, and, oftentimes, an adult does not become an adult or "lose their innocence" by choice. Society has forced them to do so, not because innocence is frowned upon, but because a created name will do you more good than a given one.

What, then, is the ideal? Innocent adults and knowledgeable children? If the roles were skewed, what then? This absolutely cannot be expected—it goes against the very fibers of learning. However, it seems to be an idea that authors (namely of modern fiction) play with incessantly. Evil genius children, or overtly sexual children, for example—characters that, while interesting, far less bridge the gap than are just forced to the other side, without any prior warning. Instead of creating a middle ground, they have taken an extreme towards the opposite ground. There are dozens of stories that "explore our desires for a paradoxically *knowing-innocent child*" that we, in our misunderstandings, may view as some mutation of a bridge (Jones 2). The text (if I dare call it a text) which Jones explores is the infamous Japanese manga entitled *Kuroshitsuji*. *Kuroshitsuji* ("kuro" meaning "black" and "shitsuji" meaning "butler"—literally, the title translates to "Black Butler") is the story of a boy who wishes to exact revenge upon his parents' murderer (or murderers) and so makes a deal with a demon to assist him and become his butler. From the very beginning of the story, he is

portrayed as cunning, very self-aware, and completely lacking in innocence. Where the children in *Sylvie and Bruno* have a purer view of their surroundings, the children in *Kuroshitsuji* are just as wickedly knowledgeable as the adults, constantly outsmarting them and “saving the day” in a very anti-heroic fashion.

But does this create a realistic conflict? No, of course not. Genius children such as *Kuroshitsuji*'s protagonist, Ciel Phantomhive, are created for shock value, not for moral reasoning. As Jones states, “Indeed, *Kuroshitsuji* is a sophisticated meditation on the figure of the child and the social order that is maintained through that figural child's fetishization” (Jones 2). While Jones seems to take her statement almost to an extreme, her point is not far off mine. A remarkable child character may satisfy our baser literary desires, but an innocent, realistic, untainted child will teach us a great deal more. These are children, as I stated, that were forced through literary means to the other side—these are children that know things that most children do not or should not, not necessarily children who understand, any better than anyone else. Again, they are not a bridge but a leap across the gap.

However, as we all know, it is impossible for us to regress once we have learned, or “lost our innocence.” Perhaps this is another reason why such “knowledgeable” infantile characters are created—to really recreate such innocence as is realistic may hurt our delicate, self-aware, adult sensibilities. This, essentially, is what Carroll is trying to tell us, in the bluntest way that he can. We must move forward, however, we must not let ourselves forget. We must learn, but use that learning as wisdom built upon purity, not as a tool to rid ourselves of naivety. Schatz makes the observation that “Carroll's dream-child is neither an actual child nor is it simply a dream about a child” (Schatz 96). Carroll's children are remembrances of children, or of innocence, and are manifestations of an adult's longing to reach back across that gap. *Sylvie and Bruno* may, very likely, be his call towards others to a remembrance of the innocence that we as adults now lack. As long as one remembers innocence and its

importance, gaining knowledge can only aid him. It is only when one forgets the importance of purity that they begin to completely lose sight of morality or honesty as a whole.

Sylvie and Bruno, to anyone who has read it, undoubtedly bears a meaning. Carroll is able to use what many see as confusion and nonsense to his complete advantage in this novel, and is able to make a point that is not impossible to see. The importance of a mediation is one that we, as humans, often forget about, constantly telling others to "grow up" or "not act like a child". Perhaps we should become more interested in a "pure knowledge"--or, the ability to learn and gain wisdom, while maintaining the innate purity that we were all born with.

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