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The Construction of the (Convincing) Child Subject in Victorian Literature

Katie Arthur

Drawing on genre theory and especially Shklovsky's definition of ostranenie, or defamiliarisation, this article investigates the evolution of the construction and understanding of the child subject in Victorian literature. Engaging not only with the role of literature in shaping representations of the child, but also how the child's knowledge is furthered or tested through the genre of 'children's literature', this article offers close readings of several key novels. From the 'plastic children' of Dickens to Carroll's empowered Alice, this article fuses a discussion of the technique of defamiliarisation in creating a convincing child voice with an emphasis on the implications of doing so. Moreover, it traces the roots of the contemporary child's agency as well as the linguistic formulations of childhood, language, and civil society. In weighing the distinctions between nineteenth-century realism and non-sense, this article ultimately proposes that the ostranenie synonymous with the technique of the child's standpoint evokes a coded social commentary, shifting the child from an affective to a political narrative device.

> To carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood;
> … this is the character and privilege of genius[1]

There seems a transcendental connection between the thrill of novel experience to the child and that of aesthetic ecstasy to the beholder of art. To encounter something for the first time inspires in the human condition a different understanding, beyond the tedium of the everyday signified. To recover this childlike fascination is art's aim, the aesthete's opiate, the character of genius. Marking Shklovsky's understanding of this phenomenon of defamiliarisation, this article hopes to illuminate the success and effect to which it is used in evolving Victorian literary constructs of the child.

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[1] S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* in J. Shawcross (ed.) (London, 1939), Vi, 59.

Ostranenie, or defamiliarisation, is the literary device employed to portray the ordinary and the known with fresh eyes, free of the associations bound within our socialisation that alters our understanding. In his essay *Art as Technique*, Shklovsky outlines perception as an 'aesthetic end' in and of its own, declaring:

> The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception…[2]

In Shklovsky's view, the aim of art is to defamiliarise the reader, its beauty arising from making the known unknown, by asking us to look again and see differently. He differentiates between the 'known' and the 'perceived': the known as laden with the normative inflections of tacit social discourse, and the perceived as the defamiliarised object free of normative connotations. He describes the 'attenuated' and 'tortuous' form of poetic speech as the mode best to achieve perception. Wonderful and strange, almost 'foreign' in its reduction to evocation and musicality, Shklovsky understands its qualities as most adequate to simultaneously distance the reader from the 'known'. Antithetic to poetic speech is prose, which Shklovsky argues is automatising and habitualising, rendering its object as known by tacit social discourse. Shklovsky offers as an example the '"direct" expression of the child'[3], whose portrayal is plain and reductive. Yet, Shklovsky overlooks how the child's abruptness offers perception and not knowledge, with their expression of thought still deeply embedded in an attempt to grasp what is new to them and not overloaded in socialised codes of language.

Jakobson's work highlights this ostranenie within the child's perception and elocution. He analyses how the development of semantic understanding and linguistic conventions often leads to curious, substitutive misuses in children's vocabulary.[4] Indeed, the confusion and displacement of words and meaning, based on the individual's own cognitive understanding, are deemed a necessary phase in children's linguistic development before they conform to conventional understandings and usages that shape their perception of the world. This discrepancy in perception, language use, and meaning provides defamiliarisation through the child's perspective. The combination of Shklovsky and Jakobson thus provides an analytical framework to measure the success of creating convincing literary constructs of the child, and the effects to which defamiliarisation is utilised by the authors. Interestingly, Jakobson divides aphasic disturbances into two broad categories: metonyms regarding contiguity, and metaphors in relation to substitution. He argues that the '"realistic" trend' is underpinned and even pre-determined by metonymy[5], an idea that will ground the later part of this essay as it attempts to expose and distinguish between the political and semantic implications of the child in realism and literary non-sense.

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[2] V. Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique' in J. Rivkin & M. Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd Edition (Oxford, 2004), 16.

[3] Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', 20.

[4] R. Jakobson, *Studies on Child Language and Aphasia* (Paris, 1971).

The child received unprecedented attention during the Victorian era. Although the cult of the innocent child prevailed in the days of the Romantics, their poetic fascination further transpired into anthropological and psychiatric study. Amidst the days of empire and codes of civilised conduct, the figure of the child was constructed alongside Darwinian anxieties and concerns of sexual transgression.[6] As the cornerstone of British civility and social order amidst the fears and tensions of an expanding world, the discursive figure of the child became 'the site for the exploration of the self, the measure of morality, and human perfection and the standard for the evaluation of Victorian society.'[7] The adult fascination with innocence wrote of the child with idealised sentimentality, whilst the cultural dictums rendered it the signifier of primitivism and hegemonic masculine paranoia on the warm hearths of genteel English homes. As the Victorians struggled in their brave new world to reconsolidate the bourgeois order, the child became a focal lens through which the future of society was seen and contested.

As such, the literary and scientific space of the child in the Victorian era expanded to play out the tensions of an increasingly fragmented society in its newly designated role as the 'father of man' as bequeathed by the Romantic vision[8]. Shuttleworth argues the newfound social space brought the child a 'complex subjectivity'[9], with novels by

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[5] R. Jakobson, 'Two Aspects of Language' in J. Rivkin & M. Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd Edition (Oxford, 2004), 77.

[6] S. Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science and Medicine, 1840-1900* (New York, 2010), 4.

[7] L. C. Roberts, 'Children's Fiction', in P. Brantlinger & W. B. Thesling (eds.), *A Companion to the Victorian Novel* (Oxford, 2002), 355.

[8] Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child,* 3.

[9] Ibid., 359.

Dickens, Eliot, and the Brontës locating the child's interiority within a growing paradigm of psychoanalytical understanding. Beginning with Dickens, this article will examine the evolution of the construction and understanding of literary representations of the child. By contrasting Pip in *Great Expectations* with the 'plastic'[10] Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, this article will argue that ostranenie creates a convincing child voice. Proceeding down the rabbit hole into Carroll's *Alice* narratives, this article will assert that a defamiliarised perspective overturns naturalised ideological apparatus through a fierce and uncivilised sense of injustice. The child subject thus becomes the site of transgressive potential to unpick the very bourgeois moral ideals it had come to represent. Tracing the child to the end of the century, we mark the progression in the epistemological understanding of the child, and the literary representations which founded the basis of the contemporary child.

Critics often cite Dickens as one of the central propagators of the myth of childhood and one of the worst offenders for wielding the sentimentalised child as a rhetorical mechanism[11]. His 1841 novel *The Old Curiosity Shop* serves as a useful starting point of enquiry into contemporary considerations of the literary innocent as a fictitious construction drawn from the need to gratify adult ideals. Little Nell certainly cannot withstand accusations of conforming to Carey's notion of Dickens' 'manufactured children'[12], with Oscar Wilde infamously purporting that '[o]ne must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without dissolving into tears… of laughter.'[13] Pattinson evokes that her innocence is 'somehow fatal'[14], and her obliging and pliable character bend her to inevitable annihilation as she is finally symbolised as the adult potential for redemption, bowing to the adult necessity to write children in gratification of their own pursuits. The opening chapter sees Nell first addressed as 'my child'[15], the possessive pronoun oddly indicative of Nell's one-dimensional malleability. Described as earnest, helpful, and infallibly angelic, Nell — although exceedingly competent — is restricted as an emotive device.

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[10] J. Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of the Dickens' Imagination* (London, 1973), 136.

[11] L. Langbauer, 'Ethics and Theory: Suffering Children in Dickens, Dostoyevsky and Le Quin' (2008) 75:1 *English Literary History* 104; R. Pattinson, *The Child Figure in English Literature* (Georgia, University of Georgia Press: 2008), 78; J. Kincaid, 'Dickens and the Construction of the Child' in W. Jacobson (ed.), *Dickens and the Children of Empire* (Hampshire, 2000), 37.

[12] Carey, *The Violent Effigy,* 131.

[13] R. Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London, 1987), 441.

[14] Pattinson, *The Child Figure,* 80.

[15] C. Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (London, 1985), 44.

It is ironic then, when the first-person narrator speaks of his shame in considering taking advantage of the child 'for the purpose of gratifying my curiosity'[16] when the reader is not encouraged to reflexively appreciate a shame in their exploitation of Nell's sentimentalised construction. As her death is revealed at the end of the narrative, Dickens' narrator explains '[s]he was dead. Dear, gentle, patient, noble Nell, was dead.'[17] This roll of adjectives, in addition to the comparison of her to her tiny bird, renders Nell preposterous — a shell of an imagined idealised child, the adult-reader's child, Dickens' glib means to ensure sympathy. It can thus be deduced that the adult author's rendition of the child often inscribes the fictitious qualities of the innocent, decimating child agency and imposing conventions of emotive conditioning in relation to the reader's conception of the child.

But it would be brash to assume that Dickens offers no recompense for Nell, and it is indeed found in the intuitive voice of Pip, published twenty years later. Here Dickens employs the technique of ostranenie to create a convincing child subject. Defamiliarisation is inherent within the narrative tone of child Pip in the 'first stage', where Dickens constructs a fine balance between self-vindication and retrospective rebuttal. The device of a first-person retrospective narrator at the end of his Bildungsroman journey, and thus moral teleology, allows for careful comic consideration of Pip's childish thoughts. The disparity between child and adult understanding, and the gentle reproving tone with which Dickens has Pip comment on his former self creates a convincing child and moreover, a convincing character. The first page of *Great Expectations* entertains the 'childish conclusion' Pip 'unreasonably derived' regarding the gravestones of his family, creating a vibrant conception of the child's perspective, or as Pip notes, his 'vivid and broad impression of the identity of things.'[18] It is important here to note that adult Pip recognises that his acquisition of knowledge at that stage was merely an 'impression', as opposed to a grasping of substantive reality.

The child's voice is marked by a dislocation from understanding and an imperative curiosity filled with internally constituted comprehensions. Tied into the trajectory of the coming-of-age narrative, the reader is initially presented with a child inept in conditioned ideas: Pip recollects his light-hearted childish fantasies regarding his family's gravestones, as opposed to a deep mourning that would characterise the sentimentalised child. These discrepancies often allow descriptions of sympathetic circumstances that avoid self-pitying. For example, young Pip fathoms a parallel meaning to the notion of his being raised 'by hand', 'having at that time to find out for myself what the expression meant', [19] and notes Pumblechook at ease whilst smothering Pip with sums.[20] While the first example uses comic ostranenie to code a sympathetic characterisation without deploring for pity, the latter sees Pip appropriate his adult register to describe and undermine the 'gorging and gormandising' [21] Pumblechook. This balance between redeemed retrospective narrator and unjustly treated child creates an incongruity of meaning that not only allows comic lightness, but also encodes Dickens' realist moral intent.

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[16] Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop,* 46.

[17] Ibid., 654

[18] C. Dickens, *Great Expectations* (London, 2003), 3.

Thus, the biggest tragedy to child Pip is his premature enlightenment. The twisted revelation of his being 'ignorant and backward'[22] after meeting Miss Havisham and Estella thrusts him unkindly out of ignorance. The irony of course, which the narration instils, is that his newfound knowledge only serves to breed his ignorance. The sense of being coarse and common haunts young Pip, but leads his retrospective narration to admit that it 'is a most miserable thing to feel ashamed of home.'[23] The reader is then led not to agree with Pip's 'black ingratitude' but the contrived adult world that brings this perception to him. Furthermore, the reader is pushed to acknowledge the keener insight of the child Pip, who is not engulfed by morally senseless adult convictions. His observation that moving from kitchen to parlour for Christmas dinner 'was a change very like Joe's change from his working clothes to his Sunday dress'[24] (from 'well-knit characteristic-looking blacksmith' to a 'scarecrow in good circumstances' [25]) highlights the keen perceptiveness of Pip outside the acculturation of conduct. Not taken in by adult habitualisation, the ostranenie allows Dickens to have him to comment most freely and accurately in his position of the other.

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[19] Dickens, *Great Expectations,* 7-8.

[20] Ibid., 54.

[21] Ibid., 55

[22] Ibid., 71.

[23] Ibid., 106.

[24] Ibid., 25.

[25] Ibid., 23.

It is precisely this misapprehension of adult codes through the defamiliarisation of the child's perspective that successfully translates into a social commentary with an acute sense of (in)justice. As G. K. Chesterton commented, '[b]y [Dickens'] solemnity he commands us to love our neighbours. By his caricature he makes us love them.'[26] *Great Expectations* then confronts the didactic realist use of the child as emotive device. The narration gently nods towards the keener insight of child Pip, his defamiliarised perspective proving more rational than the erratic adult moral codes that eventually corrupt it. Unlike Nell, who is so good that there is nothing more to her, Pip has agency, and a specific child's agency. This agency prevents Pip from becoming the symbol of childhood which gratifies the adult reader. Dickens avoids the pitfall of characterising him as innocent; rather, the child is seen as the vehicle for denaturalising ideological apparatuses against the autonomy of adult codes.

This brings us neatly to Alice, whom Carroll too, imbues with a specific child agency. Alice's adventures are marked by her attempts to fix meaning or understand the conventions presented to her. Her futile attempts to discern rationality within her nonsensical settings are combined with the child's prerogative of fearless curiosity: the story begins with Alice carelessly chasing the rabbit down the hole, 'never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.'[27] Unlike Pip, Alice has a two-track defamiliarisation of perspective, that of the child and that of non-sense. Lerer propounds that literary non-sense derives its foundations from the nineteenth-century novel, as each explores 'the limits of social expectation through linguistic experiment.'[28] He notes the fairy-tale quality to Dickensian names and caricature as well as the estrangement evoked by his use of dialect, going so far as to argue that the key proponent in such defamiliarisation is to see the world through the child's eyes. The child as the 'other', outside automatism adds colour to the author's lines, allowing gothic melodrama and wild chremamorphisms, with Pip describing characters through object-like attributes. Whereas in realism, the ostranenie of the convincing child affords satire, in non-sense the meanings are a lot more obscure. So though both Pip and Alice are staples of the transformative energies[29] of the child subject who do not conform to the gratification of the adult reader, Alice's endeavours into the symbolic allow Carroll to exercise ostranenie on a further level.

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[26] G. K. Chesterton, *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens* (London, 1911), 59.

[27] L. Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* (London, 2012), 6.

[28] S. Lerer, *Children's Literature: A Reader's History, from Aesop to Harry Potter* (Chicago, 2008), 191.

[29] K. Reynolds, *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (Hampshire, 2007), 1.

Wonderland and the world of the *Looking Glass* do not only satirise adult codes, but also the linguistic and semantic conventions that they arise from. If *Great Expectations* illuminates the child's rejection of adult rationality, the *Alice* narratives call forth a dissection of the child's linguistic development and acculturation. Returning to Jakobson's emphasis that realism relies on metonymy, we can see non-sense disrupting this contiguity and thus providing no hierarchy of discourse; no final signified. The poetic use of metaphor is also unsettled by Alice's constant displacement, uneasiness, and inability to construe meaning, resulting in an absence of entrenched semantic proposals from the text. In this sense the genre resonates with the power of language by torturing the reader's need to find coherent meaning. Lecercle advocates an inherent tension within non-sense, as it 'both supports the myth of an informative and communicative language and deeply subverts it'[30]. To achieve its purpose, non-sense strictly adheres to certain rules, like syntax, yet it is from this that the reader recognises the signs as empty[31], conforming to Shklovsky's notion of poetic speech – wondrous, strange, and foreign.

Carroll's 'Jabberwocky'[32] poem is the quintessential example of this: seemingly meaningless yet actually imitating the rules of the English language. Thus, when Humpty Dumpty begins to interpret the poem to Alice, she is able to understand which words are verbs from their syntax as she asks 'And what's to "*gyre*" and to "*gimble*"?'[33] The importance here is that Alice can deduce enough to ask 'what's to', implying her understanding of the word as a verb that conveys an action. Humpty Dumpty also defines "outgrabe" to Alice using its present tense "outgribing", tracing the word's morphological markers in accordance with the logic of English conventions. The signifier then has no fixed meaning — it merely derives it from the signifying rules which it follows.

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[30] J-j Lecercle, *The Philosophy of Nonsense: The Intuitions of Victorian Nonsense Literature* (New York, 2002), 3.

[31] M. Yaguello, *Language Through the Looking Glass: Exploring Language and Linguistics* (Oxford, 1998), 95.

[32] Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass,* 131.

[33] Ibid., 191.

Yet, Carroll has Alice constantly meet characters who do attempt to deliver meaning. From Humpty's reading of 'Jabberwocky' to the pun-based explanations of the Gryphon and Mock Turtle, the creatures of the dream-world present themselves as custodians of knowledge, a knowledge Alice must adapt to and make sense of. The corruptions of etymology and semantics used by the monsters can be seen as undermining adult didacticism; as Silverstone notes, although 'the tone of these utterances is frequently pedagogic and belittling, the content is ridiculous.'[34] The arbitrary morals of the Duchess represent the futility in trying to wrestle meaning from meaninglessness — 'everything's got a moral, if only you can find it.'[35] The vulgar repetition, 'And the moral of that is…', only serves to render them more nonsensical and so reflect the absurdity of the adult code to the child. Where before the child subject was posited as the passive receptacle and unwitting upholder of bourgeois values, Carroll uses Alice's innocence to afford her the ability to reject and transgress social codes and cultural dictums.

Rather than being bowled over by the preposterousness she is greeted by throughout her journey, Carroll writes of Alice as engaging with and rebelling against the codes and conventions presented to her. This agency is vital in preventing Alice from becoming a submissive, sentimentalised subject, and instead ensures that she is inquisitive, active, and consequently subversive of the Victorian construction of the child as a projection of the ideals and anxieties of the adult world. And so the twofold employment of ostranenie, both within the child's perspective and the genre of non-sense, propels Carroll's *Alice* narratives to a new capacity to deconstruct and denaturalise ideological apparatuses, from adult codes to the structure of language.

Both Carroll's Alice and Dickens' Pip are child subjects written convincingly and with vigour through the author's use of defamiliarisation, which in turn allows them to denaturalise and reflect upon the constructs the character is restrained by: from class to language to adult conventions. It is Dickens' device of a first-person retrospective narrator, and Carroll's careful use of an unobtrusive third-person narrator, which allows their child subjects to be children. Indeed, Carroll, whose narrator offers no enlightened vision through carefully measured interjections such as 'I hope you understand what *thinking in chorus means* — for I must confess that *I* don't'[36], places meaning with the reader in a profoundly distinctive way for his time. He thus empowers his child reader alongside his child subject, the transition of meaning from author to reader since becoming 'a central tenet of modern critical theory.'[37]

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[34] B. Silverstone, 'Children, Monsters and Words in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass' (2001) 30:4 *Cambridge Quarterly* 325.

[35] Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 77.

This epistemological shift in the understanding of the child and its literary representations paved the way for modern child subject. The end of the century was marked by works like Morrison's *A Child of the Jago*, turning to the child subject but embracing a new subjectivity. Away from the sentimentalised innocent of the Romantics, Morrison portrays the protagonist Dicky Perrott as fierce and resourceful, ambiguously sympathetic and doomed to corruption. His two-year-old sister's death is met by his mother's 'listless relief'[38] — a far cry from the tears shed for Little Nell. Sparing neither the adult-readers' need for idealised innocence nor the characters that litter his plot, Morrison's tragic naturalist trajectory offers no recompense of meaning. Dicky still misunderstands the adult world, with his redemptive gift to the Ropers being perceived as 'spite'[39] and his first encounter with Weech leaving him feeling 'guilty without in the least understanding the offence'[40]. However, he also 'clicks', fights, and lies. Morrison states he killed Dicky because he could not escape, and 'would have become perforce, as bad as his surroundings',[41] reinforcing the idea of moving away from the conventional affective use of the child as an emotive rhetoric device.

The child subject and its literary representations are still subject to contemporary debate, yet we can conclude that it was through the Victorian era that the child found its agency and its subversive voice. From the constraints of the plastic child as an emotive device, to the empowered modern child subject and reader, we have seen how Dickens and Carroll rewrote the epistemological category of childhood as well as our understandings of it. Shklovsky's definition of ostranenie and Jakobson's appreciation of it within the child's linguistic development pave the way for an analysis of how it has subsequently been employed by authors to create a convincing child subject. The defamiliarisation of children's eyes also allows them to see what the habitualised adult's cannot, and thus is a technique used by authors to evoke social commentary, whether coding realist concerns of justice or the satire of language in non-sense. The child shifted from an affective to a political narrative device, empowered by a consideration of his or her keen perceptiveness. In her adventures, Alice is constantly pestered to 'say what [she] mean[s]'[42], but in truth the child does so — and usually captures meaning better than the most eloquent logophile, as the stories do not fail to remind us.

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[36] Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass,* 146.

[37] J. Dunisbere, *Alice to the Lighthouse: Children's Book and Radical Experiments in Art* (Hampshire, 1987), 42.

[38] A. Morrison, *A Child of the Jago* (1896; London, 1969), 102.

[39] Ibid., 89.

[40] Ibid., 70.

[41] A. Hunter, 'Arthur Morrison and the Tyranny of Sentimental Charity' (2013) 56:3 *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 293. Citing: A. Morrison, 'The Children of the Jago: Slum-life at Close Quarters: A Talk with Mr Arthur Morrison', *Daily News,* 12th December 1896, 6.

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[42] Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland,* 59.

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