

Spring 2016

The Shadow of the War: PostWar Destabilization, Nostalgia, and Fragile Truth in the Works of A. A. Milne

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Recommended Citation

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<http://collected.jcu.edu/mastersessays/38>

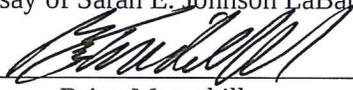
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THE SHADOW OF THE WAR: POST-WAR DESTABILIZATION, NOSTALGIA, AND
FRAGILE TRUTH IN THE WORKS OF A. A. MILNE

An Essay Submitted to the
Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts & Sciences of
John Carroll University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Sarah E. Johnson LaBarbera
2016

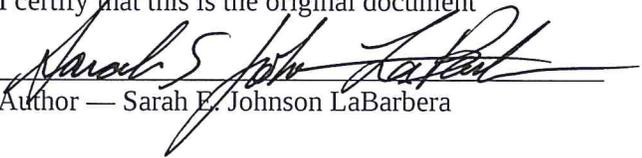
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3/31/2016
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The Shadow of the War: Post-War Destabilization, Nostalgia, and Fragile Truth
in the Works of A. A. Milne

Anyone attempting to begin a literary analysis of A. A. Milne's writing faces the delicate challenge of both strategizing a compelling entry and locating an interested audience. However, given current status of Milne studies, not many find themselves navigating these issues. This is the true problem in Milne studies: there are none to speak of. While it is true that Milne's works have found a small place in the growing field of children's literature studies, even there he is usually grouped with other writers in broad, thematic criticism. Focus rarely settles on Milne exclusively, and never on his writing outside of children's literature. The trouble is rooted not in Milne's own abilities as a writer, but rather, as I claim here, in field-created obstacles and a failure to see past Milne's popular whimsical style and best-selling children's literature, both of which contribute to the impression that Milne was a slight or inconsequential writer. A closer look at his varied and copious collected works suggests otherwise. What is wanted, then, in order to encourage Milne studies is a means of approaching Milne's work that provides a critical center lens through which to examine his writing and launch more significant and specific research concerning his writing for adults. By using World War I as a locus of investigation of Milne's writing, I hope to avoid what have previously been obstacles to further Milne studies. Employing this method, I argue that—despite limited direct confrontation with the war in his writing—Milne's personal experience of World War I is reflected in his literature through a changed perspective of the present. While Milne's early writing demonstrates a playful and unquestioning immersion in the present, his

post-war writing explores a disrupted and destabilized present—glancing back, every now and then, to reflect on the past.

Literary critics sooner or later run into the same obstacle thwarting Milne studies, typically by way of *The Pooh Perplex* and the attitude it represents. Written by Frederick Crews in 1963, *The Pooh Perplex* parodies the field of literary theory and various avenues of literary criticism using Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *House at Pooh Corner* as vehicles in order to do so.¹ While it could be argued (as Paul Wake does) that Crews effectively killed any potential academic interest in Milne, it may also be that *The Pooh Perplex* merely made use of an unspoken, yet widespread feeling that Milne fails to meet certain literary standards. Regardless of whichever is the case, whether Crews caused this negative reaction to Milne or simply represented one already in progress, we are left with a current neglect and dismissal of Milne's writing, as indicated by Crews's second parody collection, *Postmodern Pooh*, published nearly four decades after *The Pooh Perplex*. Many will argue that the real trouble hindering Milne studies now is the lack of interest or momentum, but some still point to *The Pooh Perplex* as the direct instigator of these trends; Paul Wake, for instance, comments that "the subsequent embarrassment of pursuing ideas so effectively parodied has led to a relative paucity of critical studies of Milne's works for children" (27).² I would hasten to expand on Wake's statement concerning the lack of current research, since the lack of work done on Milne's children's

¹ It must be emphasized that Crews's project does not reflect any real sense of interest in Milne's work as serious content for analysis; in fact, the very use of Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *House at Pooh Corner* is meant to embarrass the field of literary theory.

² This exact situation occurs in Wake's "Waiting in the Hundred Acre Wood: Childhood, Narrative and Time in A. A. Milne's Works for Children," in which he finds himself arguing against an interpretation of Milne raised by one of Crews's fictional critics.

literature has effectively barred any movement into analysis of his writing for adults, Milne's currently lesser known literature collection.

Those who do venture into examinations of Milne's work for adults face the complicated situation of placing Milne as a writer, whether in terms of genre, audience or affiliation. Before and after the explosive debut of his children's verse and the *Pooh* books (all published between 1924 and 1928), Milne wrote as a humorist, playwright, novelist and essayist. Approaching him exclusively as a children's writer ignores the issue of his complicated writing identity. David Galef categorizes authors writing for both adult and child audiences into three possible camps: adult fiction writers who deviate to children's literature, child fiction writers who deviate to adult's literature, and what Galef terms "polygraphic writers," or those who write for both audiences equally and simultaneously (29). Galef identifies Milne as a representative polygraphic writer "who penned nursery rhymes and box-office hits with equal facility" (29), although Milne himself would have likely classified himself in the first of Galef's groupings. Looking back on the monumental success of his four children's volumes in his autobiography, Milne observes that

it is easier in England to make a reputation than to lose one. I wrote four 'children's books', containing altogether, I suppose, 70,000 words—the number of words in the average-length novel. [...] These last ten years in which I have been writing plays, novels and invocations against war are littered with affiliation orders on behalf of all the 'juveniles' born so lovingly and with such complete absence of labour into the book-world. (*It's Too Late Now* 224)

However, despite Milne's underhanded insistence that his children's works had unduly overtaken his reputation, the juvenile verse and Pooh stories resulted from the very trend in Milne's career that makes it difficult to classify him now. As he puts it, "It has been my good fortune as a writer that what I have wanted to write has for the most part proved to be saleable. It has been my misfortune as a businessman that, when it has proved to be extremely saleable, then I have not wanted to write it any more" (*It's Too Late Now* 225). Milne wrote *When We Were Very Young*, the first of his children's literature, while he was still under contract to write a second mystery novel to follow his successful detective debut, *The Red House Mystery* (Thwaite 239). Instead of fulfilling his contract, Milne became distracted with his new children's literature venture, which yielded greater returns than his detective fiction, only to lose interest again after the fourth children's volume. Milne's collected literatures include serial comedy, essays and daily columns, light verse, plays for adults, plays for children, novels, a short story collection, nonfiction/philosophy, revised fairy-tales, works that he admits are neither specifically for children or adults, the already mentioned detective fiction and, of course, his children's literature. Approaching Milne as only a children's author fabricates an identity that Milne never had; Milne himself claimed to have invested little effort for his craft into his juvenile writing.

Lacking any critical depth concerning Milne's adult fiction, a wide range of avenues could present themselves to guide analysis; entry by way of Milne's experience in World War I, however, allows both for a textual analysis of particular texts and a broader view of Milne's personal history. By centering evaluation of his work on a

significant contemporary event in which he participated, the complication of Milne's varied output may be consolidated around a specific center. Addressing the war also provides an opportunity to examine intersections with contemporary writers that have otherwise proven elusive. How Milne fits into the dominant strains of modern consciousness (or if he does at all) is not immediately apparent in his common themes or style, in which case turning to catalyzing events of the era may prove useful.

A similar method has been used by critics examining J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Another writer whose work is not easily categorized among that of his contemporaries, Tolkien's personal experience in World War I was strikingly similar to Milne's.³ Tolkien himself claimed that World War I had few direct manifestations in the *Ring* series, while still admitting that "an author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience" (*The Lord of the Rings* xvii). Critics such as Michael Livingston and Steven Brett Carter have applied Tolkien's war experience in order to align *The Lord of the Rings* within particular parameters.⁴ Analysis such as Livingston's and Carter's demonstrates how the Great War can be used to center readings of Milne as it has benefitted inquiries into Tolkien.

³ Both Tolkien and Milne served on the front for most of the Battle of the Somme, mirroring each other's warfront experiences. Tolkien entered the battle on July 14, 1916 after waiting in the British reserve forces (Livingston 80), and Milne joined a few weeks later after a stint teaching at a military signalling school (Thwaite 172). Shortly before the battle's end on November 1, Tolkien was sent home with "trench fever" on October 27 (Livingston 81); the same ailment caused Milne to be sent back to Britain to be hospitalized on November 8 (Thwaite 180). The Battle of the Somme consisted of almost all of either Tolkien's or Milne's frontline experience with the war.

⁴ Michael Livingston takes a psychoanalytical approach to trace moments of veteran survivor's trauma in Frodo after the destruction of the One Ring. Specifically, Livingston views these reflections of the war as tied to Tolkien's experiences in the Battle of the Somme, a particularly traumatizing event for Franco-British Imperial forces (78). In a similar vein, Steven Brett Carter investigates Tolkien's portrayals of heroes in *Lord of the Rings* against the backdrop of "a conflict that was both psychologically and technologically different from any war that had previously occurred in history" (90), claiming that the character of Faramir represents a new type of hero for the modern era (92).

This example of how a war focus can be beneficial must be taken broadly, despite the close similarity of Tolkien's and Milne's war experiences. Perhaps as a result of the differences in their experiences before the war, Tolkien brushes aside overextended association of his works with the war while Milne avoids the question of war's influence on him or his writing nearly entirely. Milne's path to war was uncommon. Long before he reached the frontline or war was even declared, Milne's pacifism was already well-developed despite the unpopularity of such attitudes in the months leading to the conflict. However, the growing crisis and rhetoric of the time convinced him that "this (I thought with other fools) was a war to end war" (Milne, *It's Too Late Now* 195). Thwaite comments that Milne "had some faint hope that England was fighting for a more democratic world, for many things symbolized by the end of the top hat. But the war failed to kill the top hat" (163). With these hopes and beliefs in the war aims, Milne fell in with the effort, was assigned to the 4th Battalion of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, and "through a variety of accidents" was eventually made a signalling officer (*It's Too Late Now* 196). Once he would reach the front, after serving as a signalling instructor at training camps, his position as a signalling officer kept Milne from the expectation of offensive violence in the field.

When it comes to his actual war experiences, Milne glosses over much of what he saw or lived through at the front. Opening the chapter "Amateur Soldier" in his autobiography, he writes: "I should like to put asterisks here, and then write: 'It was in 1919 that I found myself once again a civilian.' For it makes me almost physically sick to think of that nightmare of mental and moral degradation, the war" (*It's Too Late Now*

195). Yet, to fill out his account he preserves only a few heartwarming token stories about favorite colonels or the lance-corporal who shared his admiration for Jane Austen (200–1). In the most action-filled story he includes, the “nightmare” episodes are softened: the wounding of the first signalling officer is rendered as “we fell into a burst of whizz-bangs and Harrison was knocked out. We got him back to the first aid post”; and the death of the sergeant-major in the shelling of their headquarters is retold as “[he] went up the steps with some idea, I suppose, of getting information, and was blown out of existence before he reached the top” (202). In his accounts sent back home to be published in *Punch*, later collected in his personally published collection *Those Were the Days*, the stories are even less direct, although still heartfelt; at his most personal, Milne describes with affection his horse Toby used in place of the signalling officer’s traditional bicycle (“Toby” 756–9). While Milne refrains from being flippant about the war, he rarely speaks seriously about it. Presumably, this interpretation falls in line with how he felt about war in general, as he recounts that in response to his commanding officer’s demand that he use his “common sense” in attempting to establish phone lines, he “promised, but felt quite unable to distinguish between common-sense and cowardice. The whole thing was so damned silly” (203).

Although his battle experience was limited, Milne took part in a battle that, as Modris Eksteins describes it, “embod[ies] the logic, the meaning, the essence of the Great War,” contributing to the “standard imagery we have of the Great War—the deafening, enervating artillery barrages, the attacks in which long lines of men moved forward as if in slow motion over a moonscape of craters and mud, only to confront machine guns,

uncut barbed wire, and grenades” (145). In a letter to Rayner Unwin, Tolkien writes that although the war did not influence the plot of *Lord of the Rings*, its presence was felt “perhaps in landscape. The Dead Marshes and the approaches to the Morannon owe something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme” (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* 303). It is this bleakness and palpable despair that surfaces again in Eksteins’s speculation on seemingly contradicting accounts of both horror and boredom at the French front:

If one insists that horror is the sensation aroused solely by the *unexpected* contradiction of values and conditions that bestow meaning on life, and that in turn boredom is the inevitable upshot of routine, even of routine slaughter, then the question can never be resolved, because no sense of horror, even one caused by this war, can remain constant. After several weeks of frontline experience there was little that could shock. Men became immunized, rather rapidly, to the brutality and obscenity. (154)

From Milne, the closest we get to seeing this side of the war is in his single chapter-opening line, “that nightmare of mental and moral degradation, the war.” Beyond this impression, the war Milne experienced exists in the silhouette of his writing rather than in the heart of it.

This is not to say that Milne did not write about the war at all. It is helpful here, however, to distinguish between Milne’s actual war experience and the British idea of the war. Of Milne’s war experience, there is little written beyond what appears in his autobiography. It is the British idea of the war that we encounter in works like his

war-related *Punch* articles (specifically in installments such as “Armageddon”) or *The Boy Comes Home*. Seldom does Milne allow glimpses of his war experience, and usually these moments have been carefully screened. Considering again his *Punch* account of “Toby,” his horse at the front, he concludes his fond thoughts of the horse writing, “This is a beastly war. But it has its times, and when our own particular bit of the battle is over [...] I doubt even in England [...] you will find two people more contented with the morning than Toby and I, as we jog along together” (759). Even as Milne clarifies to his audience that he has had to sift through the war experience to present a positive episode, he succeeds in ending on a hopeful note that undermines the horror of war even while acknowledging its presence lurking in the background of the scene.

When dealing with the idea of the war, Milne is less cautious. In “Armageddon,” a *Punch* short piece published the day after war was declared (Thwaite 161), Milne presents a mythoparody of the beginning of war, attributing the event to a divinely ordained club member named Porkins, who—“leaning back and puffing at his cigar”—opines:

“what England wants is a war. (Another whisky and soda, waiter.) We’re getting flabby. All this pampering of the poor is playing the very deuce with the country. A bit of a scrap with a foreign power would do us all the good in the world.” He disposed of his whisky at a draught. “We’re flabby,” he repeated. “The lower classes seem to have no sense of discipline nowadays. We want a war to brace us up.”

* * *

It is well understood in Olympus that Porkins must not be disappointed. [...]

Accordingly the gods got to work. (751)

The purposely convoluted plot that follows, in which the gods orchestrate small political occurrences that eventually lead nations to war, demonstrates Milne's belief even then that war was, inevitably, "silly." This sentiment is continued in *Once On a Time*, despite Milne's claim in the foreword to its reprint that the novel is not directly representative of the war.⁵ His exasperation with war's silliness transforms into a more direct bitterness and social inquiry in the poem "O.B.E.," which was not published in the conservative and pro-war *Punch*, but added into the publication of Milne's collection *The Sunny Side* in 1921 (Thwaite 172). After describing several civil donors at home who, as result of their patriotism, "thank God!—ha[ve] the O.B.E.," the final stanza draws the cut that was too deep for the pages of *Punch*:

I had a friend; a friend, and he
Just held the line for you and me,
And kept the Germans from the sea,
And died—without the O.B.E.

Thank God!

He died without the O.B.E.

(750)

⁵ A fairytale written, Milne claims, in partnership with his wife Daphne, *Once On a Time* takes place within the war context of two imagined countries, Euralia and Barodia. The king of Barodia interrupts the king of Euralia's breakfast, leading the king of Euralia to order that his archers shoot off on of the king of Barodia's whiskers. A drawn-out war ensues. The entire premise glances at the minute (and, Milne would say, silly) political movements that lead to massive war, regardless of Milne's claim that the narrative is not about World War I.

These intensely left-leaning moments of Milne's occurred mostly during the early part of the war. After his service on the front, he would refrain from overly political statements until the onset of World War II.

While Milne may have avoided direct politics in most of his writing, the disparity between the experiences of the civilians back in England and the veterans of the war expressed in "O.B.E." resurfaces again in his one-act play *The Boy Comes Home*. Concerned with the friction-filled return of a young soldier to civilian life in his uncle's house, *The Boy Comes Home* attacks less the policy of the war than the public's understanding of the war experience. However, even in this personal characterization of the effects of war, Milne pushes the drama beyond its central relational dynamic through what Thwaite describes as "one moment of electrifying drama" (182): the veteran Philip draws a revolver on his demanding uncle James. That "electrifying" moment forces audiences beyond the narrative of an uncle and nephew and into an awareness of the larger social conversation. When James nervously protests, "You settle your arguments by force? Good heavens, sir! This is just the very thing that we were fighting to put down!" Philip quickly responds, "*We* were fighting! *We! We!* Uncle, you're a humorist" (121). After the initial shock of the scene, though, Milne reveals that the whole encounter was a dream. Although the gravitas of the moment relies on the dynamic between Philip and James, the fantasy element of this scene as a dream creates the necessary distance to turn the narrative into a discussion. While the stage notes indicate that James is unsure whether he truly did dream ("Was it a dream, or wasn't it? He will never be quite certain" [127]), some added staging would seem necessary to communicate completely this

ambiguity to an audience. The uncertainty preserves the abstraction of the issues Milne raises, making the tense moment between nephew and uncle a prophetic warning, a vision doubly removed from the audience.

Outside of his works that deal directly with the war, a change in perspective arises that I read as resulting from his service in the war, specifically a shift in how Milne represents—and seems to understand—the present. Before examining this shift, though, I should acknowledge a specific difficulty in analyzing trends across Milne’s writing during World War I. Before war was declared, Milne had already begun a transitional process from producing light magazine humor to more serious writing. The arrival of war allowed him to smoothly disengage from his career at *Punch* and begin pursuing ventures as a playwright (Milne, *It’s Too Late Now* 193–4). Because of this transition over the course of the war, analysis of transcending trends in Milne’s writing must be executed carefully. Not only did Milne’s preferred genre change, but his audience and publishing context were reoriented as well.⁶ These contextual shifts cannot be ignored. That said, many of these changes in Milne’s writing can be attributed to a natural maturation: the growing desire to refine his craft or to tackle more serious writing projects. Differences in his writing processes between writing columns and serials and writing for the stage are contrasted starkly in his autobiography. While writing regularly for *Punch* as an assistant editor, he claims that “Friday was my busy day. I sat down after breakfast to make my own personal contribution [...]. I might have sat down for this purpose on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday morning; I regretted now that I hadn’t; but it

⁶ Milne freely comments in his autobiography on his struggle to maintain political balance while at *Punch*, a traditionally conservative publication. Milne’s progressive views (including, but not limited to, his pacifism) often put him at ideological odds with the magazine’s official political position.

was too late” (*It’s Too Late Now* 175). This last-minute approach appears to have been abandoned by the time Milne describes his process as a playwright: “The most exciting form of writing is the writing of plays. [...] For one who insists on full value [in writing] a play is the thing. So strongly do I feel this that, when I write a play, I write all the dialogue first, without a single stage direction, and then reluctantly turn novelist” (*It’s Too Late Now* 226, 228).⁷ Milne’s changing contexts reflect this development from a sporadic writer to a thoughtful one.

Determining trends in Milne’s writing, then, requires care and awareness in tracing both Milne’s developing career context and transcending thematic patterns. I find that Milne’s thematic shifts can be traced back to a common thread of destabilized reality, either through a new element of reflection and gaze turned to the stable past or an increased questioning and suspicion of established truths, values, and social realities. While the root cause of Milne’s destabilized reality is likely never to be definitively determined, I speculate that his experience in WWI contributed substantially to this change in perspective and worldview, signified both by the timeframe in which we see these changes occur and the correlation of these changes to Milne’s war experience. Though Milne obscures most of his specific war experience, we know that he compromised his convictions of pacifism in order to enlist for the purpose of achieving a supposed greater good: war’s end. Milne may not explain what happened to his beliefs in

⁷ Gabriel Josipovici has expressed similar prioritization of dialogue in narrative. In an interview with literary arts magazine *Numéro Cinq*, Josipovici comments that his dialogue-exclusive style allows him to avoid the “dead wood” of description meant to orient readers: “I wanted [*The Inventory*] to be alive from start to finish, from the first word to the last. And in dialogue it could be alive, for what dialogue did was provide words where (in the fiction) the characters would be providing words. Why the words are spoken, how speaking them affects the situation and what they ‘mean’ can be left as open as in any encounter in real life” (“Mind of the Modern”).

the war, but we do know—particularly from his 1934 manifesto, *Peace with Honour*—that his pacifist convictions were not swayed by war, but strengthened. What Milne must have experienced at the front, then, would be a drastic destabilization of his own beliefs and values that allowed for his self-compromising enlistment. Perhaps Milne avoids confronting the war personally in his writing because he viewed himself as complicit in the horror he witnessed at the Somme, even if he never inflicted harm himself. The incongruity between Milne’s noble goal of “the war to end war” and the grisly reality of the French front in light of his own choice to participate willingly in the conflict might plausibly lead to shame, avoidance, and an inescapable distrust of a reality that used to seem much more sure.

Perhaps the clearest transformation within Milne’s *Punch* writing is in terms of theme and reflection, best seen in his series starring characters Ronald and Celia. Clearly the most autobiographical of Milne’s magazine writing, Ronald and Celia’s lives thinly mask episodes taken from those of A. A. and Daphne Milne. These vignettes follow Milne from his bachelorhood to courting Daphne to their marriage and through the war. His earliest writing in the series, often concerning wedding planning or early marriage concerns, showcases some of Milne’s sharpest comedy, characterized by a breathtaking quickness that leaves the author winking at the audience rather than pausing for the effect of the joke: “‘I want,’ I said jauntily to a sexton or a sacristan or something—‘I want—er—a wedding.’ And I added, ‘For two.’ He didn’t seem as nervous as I was. He inquired quite calmly when I wanted it” (“Getting Married: The Day” 532). At this early

stage, Milne writes with concern for sports ventures in cricket, croquet, and golf, the carefree adventures of young socialites, and light-hearted young love.

After Milne's return from the front, the comedy was revived, but inevitably altered. "The Joke: A Tragedy," which recounts the failed journey of a joke written home to Daphne about the rat-catching cats in the trenches with Milne, is delivered with Milne's characteristic deftness and charm ("And then [Celia] had another brilliant inspiration. 'In fact, you might write an article about it.' And, as you see, I have" [786]). The backdrop of the vermin-ridden trenches acts immediately to dull the wit of the piece with the reality of the French front, but even beyond this the obvious change in tone is a new element of reflection lacking in his earlier writing. Where Ronald and Celia's daily adventures originally read at a hurried pace in the present that can hardly be bothered with either past or future, "The Joke" purposefully turns a past event into a parodic tragedy, which Milne communicates both in tone and in formation of the piece into "chapters" and an "epilogue." What might have once been spontaneous realization is now thoughtfully planned.

"The Patriot" continues this look to the past as Milne shares the story of Ronald and Celia's attempt to get rid of their pianola. While his fare for *Punch* still includes inconsequential daily occurrences, the comedy shares equal weight with commentary. The piece opens with the history of Ronald's pianola and its role in the couple's courtship, as well as Ronald's preoccupation with playing "The Charge of the Uhlans" by Karl Bohm in a manner that created "a whole battle scene" (802).⁸ When the couple

⁸ Despite the fact that a pianola is not "played," Milne persistently describes the operation of the instrument in terms of a traditional piano. Presumably, this is a reflection on the speaker, Ronald, who would like to believe he is the performer, rather than the pianola.

decides to hand off the instrument to someone else after Ronald has returned from war, they reminisce together on the instrument's role in their lives and decide to play a sending off song, only to discover a change: "It really was wonderful. For the first time in its life my pianola refused to play 'The Charge of the Uhlans.' It had played it a hundred times before the War, but now—no!" (804). Tellingly, Ronald/Milne is unable to recreate "a whole battle scene" after his stint in the war, but is instead able to reflect on his experience both in the war and before it.⁹

Over the course of the war Milne's plays also demonstrate his shift in theme and approach, and even more so the change in his representation of the present. However, the change is more difficult to establish in his drama than in his magazine writing. Unlike his writing for *Punch*, Milne began writing plays during the war, making it impossible to establish a pre-war baseline. In fact, Milne only wrote one play before his assignment to the front, *Wurzel-Flummery* (Thwaite 170). Situated amidst both Milne's switch from humorist to playwright and his trend toward a more troubled understanding of the present, *Wurzel-Flummery* bridges the various changes in Milne's writing: it is both lighter and more humorous than his later works, and more systematically cynical than his magazine humor. Like Milne's later dramas, the play demonstrates a growing suspicion of social institutions and values. The play pits social dignity and legacy against money and ambition, considering "the unlikely question: Would anyone be willing to assume the name Wurzel-Flummery, in order to receive an inheritance of £50,000?" (Thwaite 170).

⁹ The title "The Patriot" itself quietly comments on the war and calls into question the nature of patriotism. "The Patriot" within the story is not Ronald, Celia, or the person they are going to give the pianola to; it seems to be a label for the pianola which refuses to play war-oriented music after Ronald returns from his service. To Milne, true patriotism involves a rejection of war activities, as he outlines in *Peace with Honour* (1934).

Character Denis Clifton offers two members of Parliament, Robert Cranshaw and Richard Meriton, sizable inheritances from his deceased uncle on the condition they each adopt the family name of “Wurzel-Flummery.” The ruse, as revealed by Clifton, was designed by his departed uncle to prove that “there was nothing, however contemptible,” that men, even rising politicians with name recognition, “would not do for money” (24).

While the play does probe social issues, the idea that real stakes are involved for either politician is undermined by light-handed treatment of both characters’ values and sensibilities; like Milne’s *Punch* writing, *Wurzel-Flummery*’s premise unfolds more as a game than as a theoretical exploration. In particular, Meriton’s decision reveals the lack of depth in the play’s development, as Milne turns to a favorite popular exploit—young love—in order dismissively to justify the younger MP’s decision to adopt the name as a means of funding his marriage to Cranshaw’s daughter Violet. Such antics and love-plots echo Milne’s “Rabbits” column, or his Ronald and Celia series. Due to these trivial diversions, the play fails to truly consider the issue at hand, but to manipulate it instead for the sake of comedy; as a result, the limited stakes of the play curtail the potential of generating a probing social commentary.

Despite its tendency to undermine its own conversation on social values, *Wurzel-Flummery* sets the stage for Milne’s later, more effective plays. His plays shortly following the war—particularly *The Lucky One* (written 1917, produced 1922), *Mr. Pim Passes By* (written and produced 1919), and *The Truth About Blayds* (written and produced 1921)—also revolve around thematic questions as *Wurzel-Flummery* does, but within much more disrupted contexts with much more at stake. Where *Wurzel-Flummery*

unravels like a carefully planned game, plays like *The Lucky One* dance around far more complicated and elusive problems. *The Lucky One* carries overt autobiographical tones in relation to Milne's family: Gerald, the lucky son, appears to be a thinly veiled version of Milne himself, while the struggling Bob seems to be a projection of Milne's older brother Ken. Milne regularly referred to Ken as a better person than himself, but Bob represents how Ken might have responded to Milne's consistent successes if Ken had been a worse man. The play refuses to act as either a comedy or tragedy, turning convention at the end when the girl goes home with the wrong man (in this case, Bob). Thwaite theorizes that "the probable reason why [*The Lucky One*] did not find a producer in 1917 was the fact that the plot was so disturbing and unconventional" (182). It remains unclear if each or neither brother is intended to garner the audience's support by the play's conclusion.

Pamela, the love interest of both Gerald and Bob, functions throughout the play as a source of stability to those around her, while simultaneously catalyzing a rift between the brothers. In the final scene, as Pamela confesses her decision to break her engagement to Gerald in order to marry Bob, she claims that "Gerald, you couldn't really have loved me; you don't really now" (93). Until this point the audience has been led to trust Pamela's insight. When Bob is first introduced, Pamela quickly informs both Gerald and the audience that she senses something is wrong: "He's worried about something. I tried to get him to tell me as we came from the station, but he wouldn't" (51). Gerald automatically believes her, encouraging the audience to do the same, and his subsequent conversation with Bob reveals the legal issues that have arisen at Bob's firm in the city. This pattern of Pamela's correct intuition continues throughout the play. Even though

Pamela clearly changes and develops over the course of the play, she still functions as a stable element for both the main characters and the audience. Yet at the moment when Pamela declares that Gerald cannot really love her, the truth of the matter is obscured: Pamela claims Gerald does not and cannot love her, but the play ends with a focus on Gerald's jilted despair, giving him the final word and the appearance of finality. An audience is denied a true conclusion of dramatic tension, left wondering who was really right. Throughout *The Lucky One* thread tensions of dysfunctional, yet necessary relationships: Gerald and Bob's competitive legacy, Bob's hopeless career gaffes, unequal parental expectations, and Pamela's conflation of love, friendship, and caregiving. The lack of resolution of any of these strains in the play leaves audiences with only the precariously unstable landscape of human interactions and very little hope on the horizon.

Despite the potentially bleak picture painted in *The Lucky One*, Milne frequently drew on more stable relational situations as the bases of other plays, particularly focusing on marriage.¹⁰ In his initial 1919 foray probing the topic, *Mr. Pim Passes By*, Milne tests the stability and relationship of legal marriage and marital love, disrupting the assumption that one signifies the other, hence problematizing the existence of either. Previously, Milne's treatment of love, while prolific, existed in light, casual terms (in, for instance, his serials) or within a fairy tale context (as in *Once On a Time*). In *Mr. Pim*, however, love and marriage are regarded not as developments but as stakes to be lost. When George Marden discovers that his wife Olivia's late first husband has been

¹⁰ In addition to *Mr. Pim Passes By*, Milne notably wrote on the theme of marriage in *Michael and Mary* (play, 1930), *Two People* (novel, 1931), and various essays. Earlier in his writing, young love and marriage had been frequent themes in his *Punch* series, but never addressed with much seriousness.

discovered alive (nullifying the Mardens' marriage), differences in interpretation arise as the couple attempts to sort out the crisis. George laments that Olivia can discuss the option of divorcing her now-living first husband “so calmly, as if there was nothing blameworthy in being divorced, as if there was nothing unusual in my marrying a divorced woman, as if there was nothing wrong in our having lived together for years without having married” (104). In response, Olivia reveals Milne's counter to the limiting legal understanding of marriage: “What seems wrong to me,” Olivia says, “is that I lived for five years with a bad man whom I hated. What seems right to me is that I lived for five years with a good man whom I love” (104).

Beneath this play's comedy of unintentional bigamy lurks an uncomfortable view of the ability of social institutions to dictate values. Milne complicates the relationship between social values, love, and marriage as a means of testing what constitutes true marriage; his answer seems to leave no room for either religion or law. This question is revisited in his 1929 play *Michael and Mary*, in which the title characters knowingly commit bigamy after Mary's first husband abandons her and leaves no means by which she may divorce him. In the lengthy introduction to the play, Milne suggests “that a marriage ceremony is something more than a formal compliance with the Law of Man or the Law of God. It is something in itself” (xiv). In *Mr. Pim*, the fact that Olivia views the Mardens' marriage as “something in itself” allows her to deem the marriage right, regardless of legal or religious sanction. Unlike the relational outlook in *The Lucky One*, in Milne's marriage writings there seems to be hope for healthy conclusions, but even this hope is troubled. Even if Milne's redefinition of marriage is primarily hopeful, his

plays demonstrate the dismal outlook of truly escaping traditional conventions of marriage. Milne's true marriage must always navigate and, at times, combat social definitions of marriage. Tradition offers little help in adequately explaining what marriage should look like, and Milne's emphasis on marriage as a specific type of love suggests that marriage must be defined within individuals. But as *Mr. Pim* shows us in the characters of George and Olivia Marden, two individual selves—even two in love—cannot rely on naturally aligning with each other. When George and Olivia fail to resolve their differences over their marriage crisis, the two threaten to separate. However, when Olivia learns that her first husband actually has died, she comments to herself that “George is the only husband I have” (134). With this acknowledgement, Olivia reconciles with George. Although she allows George to believe that the nature of her first husband's death requires that they legally renew their marriage, Olivia never attempts to rectify George's socially traditional definition of marriage. This unsatisfying ending disrupts even Milne's revision of marriage, which already must operate in a destabilized social context.

In *The Truth About Blayds*, Milne turns from discussing belief in marriage to the nature of belief itself. *Blayds* is Milne's heftiest theoretical exploration from this period of writing, taking on the question: “What happens in a religious community when its god is discovered to be a false god?” (*It's Too Late Now* 230). While he phrases his theme in religious terms, Milne does not mean to investigate religion exclusively. The play focuses on a great national poet, rather than a pope or saint. The literary legacy of Oliver Blayds is revealed to his followers and family as a farce, built on the work of a contemporary

who died before having the chance to publish his verse. Each family member struggles to reorient their identities, often acknowledging irreparable injury along the way. Blayds's caretaker daughter Isobel, who first learns the truth and shares it with the family after Blayds's death, realizes the true extent of her sacrifice:

What has my life been? Look at me now—what am I—a wasted woman.
[...] Ah, but I was doing it for Blayds, for the sake of his immortal poetry.
(She laughs—such a laugh.) And look at me now, all wasted. The wife I
might have been, the mother I might have been. How beautiful the world
was, all those years ago" (164-5).

Unlike the rest of the family, Isobel has known the truth for weeks and been allowed to dwell on its implications. William, Blayds's son-in-law and personal assistant, must respond immediately and oscillates between acceptance and denial. He begins to question the proofs of Blayds's legacy, asking, "His friends, Isobel. The great friends he had had. The stories he has told us about them—were those all lies too? No, they couldn't have been. I've seen them here myself" (155). To William, admitting his own deception is one thing; admitting the deception of other "great" literary figures is quite another. In light of the uncovered truth about Oliver Blayds, the whole system of value surrounding the Blayds family suddenly collapses, and the wider sphere of British culture and values begins to teeter.

After the initial shock of the revelation passes and the family comes to terms with what has amounted to years of misguided devotion, Milne appears to postulate that in such a situation the (religious) community will elect to resurrect its false god. The family

chooses to continue the charade. While Milne's disapproving voice enters through Blayds's granddaughter Septima ("I think it's rot, trying to deceive ourselves by making up a story about Grandfather just because we don't like the one which he told Aunt Isobel. [...] I am quite content with the truth" [182-183]), the play ends on the disturbing note that "You know, the trouble is that the Truth about Blayds won't seem very beautiful. There's your truth, and then there's William's truth, too. [...] Hadn't we better just leave [Blayds] with the poetry?" (185). The truth becomes a matter of convenience, and the moral debate that has been raised for the majority of the play is quietly put aside as the previous champions of justice—specifically, Septima and Isobel—acquiesce to the ongoing facade. *Blayds* may, in this sense, be the most troubling of Milne's plays: not only do both the past and present prove to be unstable, but the implication of humanity's convenient truth threatens to cloak the disruption and forestall any hope of negotiation. As Blayds's daughter Marion asks, "Could a man who wrote so beautifully about truth as [Blayds] did, tell lies and deceive people as Isobel says he did?" (154). The answer, as Blayds never wrote about truth in the first place, must be circular and consequently useless.

In each of these three plays, we find a questioning that pushes beyond the inquiry of *Wurzel-Flummery*. Where *Wurzel-Flummery* premises a conflict of social values for the sake of comedy, real stakes are raised in *The Lucky One*, *Mr. Pim Passes By*, and *The Truth About Blayds*, even as comedy weaves through the narratives. Characters lose, or stand to lose, meaningful relationships or identities as the result of disrupted contexts and values rather than through their own actions. Reality, knowledge, and even morality

become suspect as Gerald, George and Olivia, the Blayds family, and even the audience realize that what once seemed true or safe is no longer impermeable. In this pattern I suggest we find the shadow of Milne's war, in which he discovered the same thing about his own reality, beliefs, and self. The disruption occurring in his post-war writing reflects the destabilization of understood reality that Milne experienced as a result of his WWI experience.

What we see in Milne's writing before, through, and after World War I is a growing distance from the present, both in the development of reflective glances at the past and increasingly persistent questioning of assumed stable truths. His progression as a writer toward more serious content—even in comedic wrappings—signals not only the development of a maturing author, but, within only a few years, a writer whose worldview has been significantly disrupted. Perhaps it is due to the moral compromise Milne felt himself involved in by enlisting and participating in World War I that he consistently avoided representing personal reverberations of the war in his writing; whether or not Milne consciously acknowledged the personal complications caused for him by war, the ramifications of the event still remain in his work. Using the war as a centerpoint allows us to see more accurately this shift and disturbance in Milne's worldview, this discomfort with the present. At the same time it also raises a new question: How does Milne's altered worldview manifest in his children's literature?

Even without a focus on Milne's wartime experience and shifted worldview, the nostalgia of *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *House at Pooh Corner* is so marked that critics writing on his children's literature rarely fail to comment on it. Jackie Wullschläger even credits

Milne's pervasive nostalgia in *Pooh* with his own fall from fame: "The Pooh books rested on an appeal to nostalgia, so that in a sense Milne was old-fashioned even when he was the height of fashion, a fact which proved to make Pooh enduringly popular while Milne was soon seen as hopelessly out of date" (197). Reading with an imperial focus, Daphne Kutzer similarly observes that "Milne is nostalgic about lost childhood, both his own and his country's, and this nostalgia pervades the world of the Hundred Acre Wood" (95).¹¹ Both Wullschläger and Rebecca Knuth locate Milne's nostalgic and sentimental tone within the greater public reaction to the Great War as audiences sought means to escape a dreary post-war reality. Even though both the Pooh stories and the poetry of *When We Were Very Young* and *Now We Are Six* were inspired initially by Milne's son Christopher Robin after the war, the gaze of all four books turns to the past when an adult readership finds in them access to the forgotten innocence of childhood. Thwaite observes that Milne's early drama success resulted from his awareness that "many people going to the theatre just after the war did not want *anyone* to be serious" (198); with the introduction

¹¹ Although Kutzer identifies the same nostalgia that other critics do, overall she argues for a revised reading of the Pooh stories. Kutzer prioritizes what she reads as imperialist moments in the text of *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *House at Pooh Corner*, although she still reads Milne's focus on childhood as a retreat. In her book *Empire's Children*, Kutzer proposes that as an adult appropriating ownership of a child's sphere and narrative, Milne colonizes Christopher Robin and silences his voice (96). She also takes Kanga and Roo, Tigger, and the invisible Heffalump, as exotic animals from imperial regions, and treats them as exemplary symbols of empire (100-101). David Rudd, in his book *Reading the Child in Children's Literature*, rightly criticizes Kutzer's view, specifically her claim that Milne colonizes Christopher Robin without elaborating what the alternative—Milne not assuming the role of narrator—might feasibly look like (66).

I would also respond to Kutzer's claim that Christopher Robin's "expotition to the North Pole" represents an adoption of adult imperial behaviors (102). While Milne most likely is referencing the pattern of national discoveries and achievements following World War I, his mocking tone hardly conveys approval: "expedition" is butchered into "expotition," and the Hundred Acre Woods' "North Pole" is actually a stick in the ground. If anything, Milne seems to be once again glancing critically at social achievements and values.

of Milne's children's literature, novel new opportunities for escapism presented themselves to his adult audience.

To be sure, the children's books were only loosely motivated by Christopher Robin—Milne claimed his own childhood as much of the inspiration for his writing. In “The End of a Chapter,” Milne explains his decision to end his short stint as a children's writer and insists that

Now there is something about [*When We Were Very Young*] that I must explain; namely, that the adventures of a child as therein put down came from three sources:

1. My memories of my own childhood.
2. My imaginings of childhood in general.
3. My observations of the particular childhood with which I was now in contact. (196)

From here Milne elaborates on the extent to which Christopher Robin is absent from the children's stories. Doubtless Milne's insistence on Christopher Robin's inconsequentiality in the children's books can at least partially be credited to the unforeseen international fame that had rapidly descended on his young son after the publication of *When We Were Very Young*, but this is not to suggest that Milne overstates his case. The same critics who enjoy pointing out Milne's overt sentimentalism also comment on his unusually pleasant life, his youth in particular. Knuth comments that “unlike many of his Victorian predecessors, such as Burnett, Milne enjoyed a happy childhood” (128), and Wullschläger contrasts Milne starkly with other children's writers

as having grown up “handsome and clever, well-off and well-liked” while others were “mavericks, lonely, eccentric, emotionally unbalanced or odd in appearance” (177). It seems evident that Milne enjoyed an idyllic childhood, which he depicts both in the children’s books and, more directly, his biographical writing. In his autobiography, he devotes 82 pages to its fond memory, making the section “The Child” by far the longest of seven in a 248-page volume. Childhood as it is depicted in the children’s books is idealized, yet familiar and comfortable.¹²

I agree with the general critical consensus that Milne’s children’s literature indicates a retreat to the past and view toward childhood, but I also find—simultaneously—a destabilized present as we see in his adult literature, particularly in the Pooh books. Wullschläger has commented that the “toys [of the Hundred Acre Wood] are breathtakingly simple figures who mirror typical child characteristics or moods—timid Piglet, bouncy Tigger, sulky Eeyore” (188). I recognize how this interpretation of the Hundred Acre Wood characters (barring Christopher Robin) might be tempting, but it does not probe Milne’s writing adequately. The animals in the Hundred Acre Wood do not act the way Milne’s children act in his literature, even on a reduced scale. There is a significant difference established between Christopher Robin and the animals; when they falter, Christopher Robin provides safety and direction. When

¹² Paula Connolly has suggested that Milne both criticizes and exemplifies William Wordsworth’s idea of the child in the Pooh books. Connolly finds a subtle parodying of Wordsworth in Christopher Robin’s position in the Hundred Acre Wood: to the animals, he occupies the intuitively connected space of a Wordsworthian child, yet readers are made aware through narrative clues that Christopher Robin is not nearly as aware as the animals believe he is (194). At times Christopher Robin is even at odds with nature in the Hundred Acre Woods. Connolly views Pooh as Milne’s “emblem of Romantic notions in childhood,” since he engages with his landscape through imagination and prizes feelings over knowledge; Christopher Robin, on the other hand, is a “very real boy” (196).

Tigger and Roo get stuck in a high tree, Pooh and Piglet helplessly try to comfort them from the ground until Christopher Robin and Eeyore arrive. “It’s Christopher Robin!” said Piglet. ‘*He’ll know what to do*’” (215). Pooh, Piglet, and the other characters defer to Christopher Robin to the point that action is not taken without his direction.

I do agree with Wullschläger that the characters may be “breathhtakingly simple figures,” but I find that they mirror Milne’s adults rather than his children. Like Milne’s adults, the Hundred Acre Wood characters navigate a (seemingly) changing and unstable reality, although in vastly simplified terms. Rather than confronting a false idol as the Blayds family does in *The Truth About Blayds*, the Hundred Acre Wood characters must prepare to deal with Heffalumps and Woozles that may or may not even exist. As George and Olivia Marden sort through a possibly invalid marriage in *Mr. Pim Passes By*, Pooh tries to make sense of a world where usually stable objects—such as donkey tails, houses, and even Christopher Robin—can be lost, relocated, or even redefined. Milne flips the traditional roles of adults and children, and casts Christopher Robin’s childish self-confidence as a leadership quality in the face of his anxious and unsure animal “adults.”

The destabilization in Milne’s children’s literature is not perfectly parallel to that which occurs in his adult fiction since it takes place within a context that Milne simultaneously sentimentalizes: childhood. Does Milne’s nostalgic look at childhood adequately accommodate the inclusion of a disrupted adult present? One way to reconcile these two aspects is in terms of communal and political morality. Niall Nance-Carroll suggests that the Pooh stories should be read as not primarily sentimental, but moral.

Specifically, and referring to Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of everyday ethics that prioritize flexible negotiation within specific situations over concrete moral boundaries, Nance-Carroll argues for a prosaically ethical interpretation of *Winnie-the-Pooh* (89). Instead of reading *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *House at Pooh Corner* as sentimental fluff, Nance-Carroll views both books as Milne's demonstrations of what prosaic communal ethics can look like from the vantage point of childlike simplicity:

The universality of [prosaic ethics] extends throughout the forest; all must be accepted within it on their own merits because so long as they have no malice, even if they are troublesome, they are [as Pooh says] 'all right really.' While Kanga, Roo, and Tigger all start as outsiders, they do not remain peripheral to the forest, but become central members. Eeyore's homelessness is alleviated, which ensures that everyone achieves some level of security. (91)

Christopher Robin, as the child figure in the stories, may even be the root of this ethical system. Nance-Carroll observes that "for Christopher Robin, helping others is an expectation; it does not require celebration. He makes proper and ethical choices and does not have to confuse them with heroism to make them worthwhile" (93). I locate Christopher Robin as the significant child figure in these stories, with the animals functioning as caricature adults. Yet, as the animals all turn to Christopher Robin for guidance and leadership, by emulating him they adopt his ethical system that Nance-Carroll has identified. It is possible for us to read Milne's prosaic ethics as more inherent to children than adults, yet still applicable and beneficial to both groups.

This idea of prosaic ethics can be seen in Milne's 1934 book *Peace with Honour*, outlining his pacifistic beliefs. A pacifist manifesto may seem to contradict Nance-Carroll's view that Milne's prosaic ethics is rooted in a rejection of systematized belief, but a closer look at *Peace with Honour* shows otherwise. Milne does prescribe a fairly rigid order of pacifism in the book, but much of the book is dedicated not to promoting pacifism per se, but to rejecting an even more rigid and detrimental belief system: nationalism. As a non-religious individual, Milne's pacifistic beliefs originate not with religious doctrine, but with a logical and pragmatic reality. In response to an increasingly nationalistic rationalization for war, Milne responds that "No nation can give its word of honour to another nation, because no nation has a word of honour to give. It is as meaningless for a nation to talk about its honour as it would be for a cholera germ to talk about its honour; or a bath-mat; or the Multiplication Table" (111). Milne's concern for pacifism is that it should replace illogical systems such as nationalism that inevitably lead to destruction and death. Just as Christopher Robin does not equate doing the right thing with heroism, so Milne does not assign heroism to pacifism and rejects any heroic association with nationalism; to him, pacifism simply represents doing the right thing. As Nance-Carroll points out, Milne himself is fairly flexible even within his own staunch pacifistic views, as he followed *Peace with Honour* with *War with Honour*, in which he advocated war in light of Hitler's growing threat.

What we can see in this construct of prosaic ethics and Milne's rejection of nationalism is a quiet response to his experience in the Battle of the Somme as well as to his personal destabilization resulting from that event. Milne's convictions both in the

primacy of peace and an untrustworthy reality are reconciled in the safety of the Hundred Acre woods. While both of these themes thread through many of Milne's works, it is in his adult literature that his questioning becomes most insistent and his conclusions fail to satisfy. Perhaps this is why Milne deprioritized his children's literature. Without the safe environment found in childhood, the questions of adulthood become increasingly pressing issues. Adulthood requires facing complex truths, uncertain identities, problematic relationships, and the reality of war.

The enduring allure of Winnie-the-Pooh serves as a testament, albeit an unwanted one, to Milne's insight into the heart of his audience; but the stories of *Pooh* or *House at Pooh Corner* and the poems of *When We Were Very Young* and *Now We Are Six* allow readers to revel only in the nostalgia of innocent childhood. Milne's less comforting work—always witty and quick, yet with disquieting tensions lurking underneath a veneer of cleverness—has, for the most part, been left on the shelf. While I do agree that Milne has earned his place among the canon of children's literature, I also believe that room should be made for him in the broader sphere of literary criticism. I have tried in these pages to indicate what one possible approach might be to Milne as not only a notable children's writer, but also as an adult author of scholarly interest. Within a broader view of Milne as a writer, particularly in light of his involvement in World War I, we find not only a more accurate understanding of his work, but a more nuanced reading of *Winnie-the-Pooh*, and a doorway into his forgotten writing for adults.

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