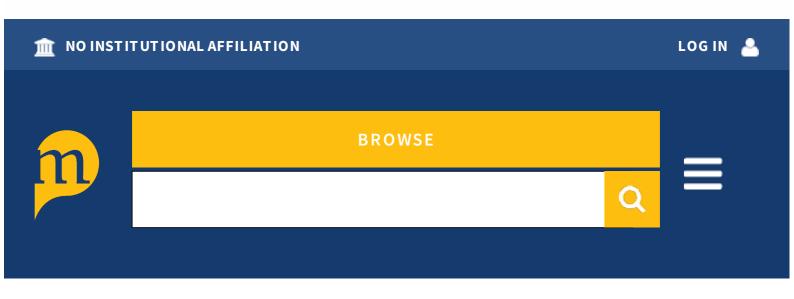
Beyond the apron: Archetypes, stereotypes, and alternative portrayals of mothers in children's literature.



Beyond the Apron: Archetypes, Stereotypes, and Alternative Portrayals of Mothers in Children's Literature

Lois Rauch Gibson

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Beyond the Apron:

Archetypes, Stereotypes, and Alternative Portrayals of Mothers in Children's Literature

Lois Rauch Gibson (bio)

As every school child knows—or, in any case, has surely been told by some well-meaning adult—books are our friends; books can take us on journeys of the mind; books are our windows on the world. But school children probably do not know and adults rarely tell them that books are also an important way for a culture to transmit its varied social values to its children. One set of social values children's books transmit involves attitudes toward certain groups of people: races, nationalities, classes, occupations, sexes, religions, and so on. Not surprisingly, a group frequently represented in children's literature are mothers, and the mother-figures children encounter vary widely, from the archetypal images of myth and folklore to the caricatures of Lewis Carroll, from the stereotypes of J.M. Barrie and many modern picture books to the welcome alternatives in such books as *Mary Poppins*.

By now, most of us recognize stereotypes fairly readily. Still, it may prove useful to distinguish clearly between archetypes and stereotypes before examining closely the portrayals of mothers in three of the more enduringly popular children's books: *Peter Pan, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and *Mary Poppins*.

To state it simply, archetypes provide foundations to build on and allow endless variety; stereotypes label and limit by assuming all members of a group share similar traits. Jung says an archetype is a "primordial image" somewhat like Plato's "idea," except that instead of existing in "a place beyond the skies," the archetype exists in the human mind (Four Archetypes 9-13). The archetype itself is just a form or idea—like the general idea of mother, or father, or spirit. The idea exists in all human minds, but the concrete manifestations, the representations or expressions of the idea, may vary from era to era and country to country. As Jung says, "Like any other archetype, the mother archetype appears under an almost infinite variety of aspects" (15).

In other words, archetypal images resonate and reverberate in the

richness of their implications while stereotypes flatten and stifle. A typical archetypal image appears in the Demeter/Kore (or Persephone) myth. It incorporates the image of mother as mother, as goddess, as daughter, as earth, as maiden, as creative nature, and so on. It suggests the flowers of spring and the fruits of harvest. It reverberates with suggestions of death in the daughter's sojourn underground as well as suggestions of sexuality in the union with Hades. It incorporates resurrection and new life in Kore-Persephone's reunion with Demeter in the archetypal spring.

In contrast, the stereotyped mother in children's literature wears aprons and bakes pies. In 1971, Alleen Pace Nilsen made special note of the preponderance of aprons on the comparatively few female characters in Caldecott Award winners and other selected children's books. Surveying representative recent books will leave readers surprised at how little this has changed since 1971. Like the stage Irishman defined by his red nose, or the little girl in a 1749 children's book by Sarah Fielding, who is defined by her name (Lucy Sly), the mother in children's literature is defined and limited by her apron. We move from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the multidimensional to the flat character.

This is not to say, however, that the apron-clad stereotype exercises exclusive control over all mothers in children's books. In fact, one may go beyond the apron in a variety of ways. An examination of *Peter Pan*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and *Mary Poppins* uncovers an array of archetypal images, stereotypes, caricatures, and alternative roles for the mother figure.

Like J. M. Barrie himself, *Peter Pan* is virtually obsessed with the figure of the mother. The central mother figure is, of course, Wendy—who agrees to go to Neverland in order to learn to fly and see mermaids, but mostly to be mother to Peter and the Lost Boys as well as to her own brothers. In Neverland, Wendy becomes a kind of Persephone, lured away from her own mother to...

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by Lea Royd, Chlora

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