

Ideological Drift in Children's Picture Books

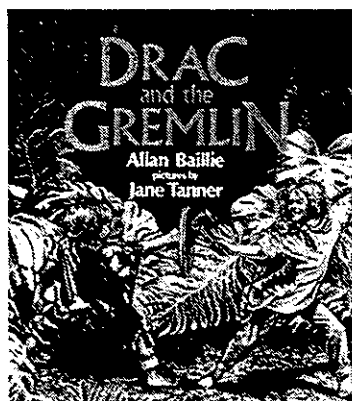
Beverley Pennell

Ideological assumptions about reality - how the world should look and function and the means by which we construct our identities - are so deeply ingrained in us that we often do not realise that they are in operation as we undertake the social practices of writing and reading. In *Shards of Glass* Bronwyn Davies says,

the storylines and images which inform the unconscious then, are historically and culturally specific. But because of the way identity is constructed we come to experience them as natural, timeless and our own
(Davies 1993, p.123).

Even when writers and illustrators of children's picture books earnestly desire to offer their readers texts which interrogate both the way society functions, and what society values and privileges, we find that the overt, or explicit, ideology of the text may be subverted by its covert, or implicit, ideology (Stephens and Watson 1994, p.20).

Peter Hollindale pointed out this possibility of ideological conflict in his seminal article, *Ideology and the Children's Book* (Hollindale 1988). Hollindale was not writing about picture books so it must be noted that the possibility of ideological conflict is compounded in a picture book because it is



frequently the work of two creative minds. As Perry Nodelman has stated,

any given picture book contains at least three stories; the one told by the words, the one implied by the pictures, and the one that results from the combination of the first two.
(Nodelman 1991, p.2).

As each of these three stories can have overt and covert ideological implications, the chances of ideological tension are greatly compounded. Even in the case of an author-illustrator it is possible to find ideological tensions between the verbal and the visual texts.

This paper focuses on picture books which Hollindale calls 'progressive' in their ideological stance as they are typically concerned with 'the three political missions which are seen as most urgent in contemporary society: anti-racism, anti-sexism and anti-

classism' (p.5). All the books I wish to discuss are thematically concerned with the second of Hollindale's progressive ideologies, namely anti-sexism.

In *The Widow's Broom*, (1992) by author-illustrator Chris Van Allsburg, there is an overt feminist theme, yet the careful reader finds that Van Allsburg's construction of the female point of view in the narrative only serves to confirm the inherent ideological problems in a world view that sees male and female as binary opposites. Even books which receive prestigious national awards are not free from the problem of ideological 'drift'. Allan Baillie and Jane Tanner's *Drac and the Gremlin* and Margaret Wild and Dee Huxley's *Mr Nick's Knitting* were both honoured by the Children's Book Council of Australia Awards in 1988 and both can be shown to suffer from this 'drift' which subverts the laudable 'progressive' intentions of the authors and illustrators. These books, like *The Widow's Broom*, make interesting attempts, on the level of 'theme', to reconsider the issues of gender roles and expectations and male/female relationships but close reading reveals that at the level of implicit ideology or unconscious cultural assumptions, the texts reinscribe a patriarchal world

view. The ideological 'drift' may occur in the written text or the verbal text or in both.

In a picture book the firm anchoring of the levels of ideology in the verbal and visual texts addresses only half of the problem of any text's successful interrogation of some aspect of ideology. Readers also come to texts with expectations about how they construct meanings. Misreading, or not reading, the ideological signs in texts is a trap that can catch even sophisticated readers. It leads readers to impose superficial or inaccurate significances on texts. A strongly feminist text with well anchored ideological implicatures like Susan Hill and Angela Barrett's *Beware Beware* (1993) can be dismissed by some readers as a narrative which reinscribes the view that girls are timid, physically restrained and easily frightened. However if the ideological signs are observed in both the visual and verbal texts, the reader finds that the book presents a clear rejection of Western patriarchal culture and its socialising practices that have circumscribed female lives and have hindered and devalued female creativity. Thus, in the discussion of *Beware, Beware* my concern is to show that readers may fail to fully appreciate Hill and Barrett's book because of the

artistic sophistication of their work. In the case of this text, Hollindale describes this ideological encoding as 'covert' but in a positive way, as signifying the complexity of the literary discourse rather than its being either duplicitous or unthinking in artistic intention.

The Widow's Broom is a clear attempt by Van Allsburg to present a feminist recuperation of the dominant ideas in Western patriarchal narratives about witches, widows and intelligent, independent women in general. Readers infer from such patriarchal narratives that there is something unnatural and undesirable about women whose lives are outside male control (Greer 1991, pp.390-412). The representation of place and costume in *The Widow's Broom* takes the reader into an historical setting in the Puritan world of the North American colonies. The layout of each opening presents one full page illustration, and one page of verbal text framed top and bottom by borders of mature pumpkins. The motif is one of everyday repleteness and stands in opposition to the hollowed-out pumpkin shell of the Hallowe'en mask which traditionally links witches to evil and black magic. This rigid framing of every page suggests the social inflexibility of the world being represented.

Van Allsburg's story, discourse and pictorial representations encode the widow, Minna Shaw, as well pleased with her triumph over the dominating, narrow-minded and superstitious men who would presume to know what is best for her. The visual text (Kress and van Leeuwen 1990, p.40) represents both Minna Shaw and the Witch as attractive, competent and emotionally complete. All of the illustrations emphasise the independence of the two characters as none of the illustrations invite the reader into a pseudosocial relationship by having the figure gaze directly at the reader. Thematically Van Allsburg's verbal and visual texts work well to show witches as women who have problems like everybody else:

On very rare occasions, however, a broom can lose its power without warning, and fall, with its passenger, to the earth below ... which is just what happened one cold autumn night many years ago.

(Opening 1).

and who count on their friends to help them through difficult situations:

Before long the witch could see a dark form circling overhead. It was another witch ... they sat side by side on the second witch's broom and flew off, over the treetops.

(Opening 4).

In Openings 1 and 4 we see Van Allsburg offering symbolic pictorial recuperation of the witch as he associates her with wisdom through light, with purity through white, and with power as she is viewed from a low angle so that the reader is placed in an inferior position to her. The left hand page of Opening 1 carries the full page black and white visual text depicting a towering white cloud as the most salient feature of the layout. A vector is formed across the foreground by the witch on her broom stick, flying through the evening sky, and the geese flying out of the right hand frame. The geese signify the witch as a part of the natural world rather than a part of the 'unnatural' world of the 'black' arts. In Opening 4 the witch is shown in long shot and is viewed by the reader from a very low angle. The representation here is of a powerful figure who is regal and elegant. The figure is bathed in light (from the signal fire that the verbal text tells us about) which highlights the witch's face, neck and hands, and delicately outlines the female body form. The witch's elegant, serene, upturned face shows none of the signs of the folklore witch's profile with its toothless gums that produce the downward curving nose and the upturned chin (Greer 1991, p.344). The final Opening of

the text represents Minna Shaw in a long shot viewed from an inferior position, seated and sleeping peacefully. She too is bathed in a warm glow of light which the verbal text tells us is from the fire tended by the happily earthbound broom:

'You play so nicely,' Minna Shaw said. The broom bowed, put a log on the fire, and played another tune.

Van Allsburg has taken care to represent the broom as non-gendered and asexual. The broom engages in outside 'masculine' work just as happily as it undertakes domestic duties. The final pictorial image is one of domestic harmony and comfort. Indeed Van Allsburg has used the pictorial codes to represent the non-threatening nature of the female characters while the verbal code depicts their intelligence and independence.

Thematically, then, *The Widow's Broom* is anti-sexist and so a socially 'progressive' text in Hollindale's terms. It attempts to resignify 'witch' and 'widow', to interrogate whether the female 'other' can be given a voice, and whether the previously marginalised female character can hold the subject position in formerly patriarchal narratives. Unfortunately when the reader moves to the next layer of

significance and asks how this new voice reflects a change in social values we have exactly the same dilemmas as those posed by the conventions of the folktale narratives evoked when the reader first comes to the book. After all, it is as a trickster, by deceit, that the widow triumphs. Lissa Paul points out, deceit or 'froda' (fraud, guile) 'is the traditional female survival tactic' of heroines whose stories 'resolve happily' (Paul 1987, pp.186-201). Paul sees no problem with deceit continuing to be the strategy for success in women's stories. Within her framework, Paul would applaud Minna Shaw's triumph just as she does that of Laura in Margaret Mahy's *The Changeover* (Paul 1987, p.198). Surely this is backward-looking in both Paul and Van Allsburg as they fail to provide a new, more positive vision of gender relations. Van Allsburg's text offers no possibility for male/female dialogue (Opening 12), no possibility for men's law being interrogated rationally by women as well as men (Opening 9) and no possibility of the harmonious coexistence of men with women who are independent, clever and 'brave'. Furthermore, through the symbolism of the broom, Van Allsburg's book is making visible that most destructive tenet of the patriarchal world view which holds that female

'otherness' is an impenetrable mystery and that female subjectivity is as irrational as magic.

In the recent work of the much published and much honoured Australian children's writer, Margaret Wild, we see a desire similar to Van Allsburg's, to construct texts which present readers with marginalised points of view and which interrogate life styles outside the mainstream (Wild 1989). Like Van Allsburg, Wild's interrogations are only thematic and do not embrace or recommend fundamental change to the socio-cultural practices or values of middle class Western society. In *Mr Nick's Knitting* Wild's story tells of an adult heterosexual friendship - indicated by their names, Mrs Jolley and Mr Nick - which has grown from their time together on the train each morning on their way to work and because of their mutual interest in knitting. Thematically Wild has attempted a recuperation of modern urban man as sensitive, caring, other-directed and as a responsible family member in an extended family situation. Wild has tried to undermine some stereotypical gender assumptions about male behaviours and roles. Unfortunately Wild's use of the Biblical intertextuality in the creation of 'the world in a quilt'



subverts this intention even at the level of overt ideology.

Wild encodes the character of Mr Nick as being just as physically confined as any female character in fiction; we never see Mrs Jolley in a domestic setting, but travelling (and presumably working) with as much freedom/entrapment as her male friend. The activity of knitting is stereotypically represented as a part of the passive domestic scene of women who 'don't like to sit idle', an aspect of the Protestant work ethic. Wild uses knitting metonymically to suggest everyday productiveness and creativity, and as an aspect of caring and being a responsible family member. Thus she encodes Mr Nick as a capable and useful parenting model, someone who engages energetically in domestic scenes. It seems regrettable that a literary device has

undermined this recuperation of the male but the intertextual implications of Mr Nick as 'God the Father, Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth ...' (Opening 9) are unavoidable: we again have gender difference emphasised, and notions of gender hierarchy and patriarchal authority reaffirmed, just as we did in *The Widow's Broom*. If we add to this Wild's construction of Mrs Jolley as flirtatious, childish and tearful (Openings 1, 2, 3, and 8) we may decide that Wild has achieved no more than Van Allsburg did in terms of offering real ideological change in the construction of gender in verbal texts.

In *Mr Nick's Knitting*, Wild's problematic verbal text is stabilised by Dee Huxley's robust, cartoon-style figures. Huxley's representations of the friendship is free of the gendered implications found in the verbal text and so conveys both the excitement of the friendship and the pain of separation in a much more 'politically correct' and emotionally satisfying way. The low modality illustrations - a palette of pastel watercolours - place the characters in a 1930s historical setting where all the women are wearing hats, the boys wear regulation school caps and the suburban steam train has timber carriages. Huxley's illustrations encode

the characters as well past middle age, with their abundant body shapes. She has deliberately worked outside stereotypical images of lovers (Openings 1 and 3) and yet shows the friendship/love affair of the two people as bringing joy to those around them because in all of the interior train scenes the other passengers, like the reader, are unashamedly observing and empathising with them (Openings 1,3 and 4). The illustrations encode the physical nature of their relationship as we see Mr Nick's blush as Mrs Jolley joins the train (Opening 1) and as their thighs and legs touch. Huxley uses the visual representation of their knitting to depict the mutuality of this interest and the loops of wool to encode images of enthusiasm and vitality: in Opening 2, the looping wool is used as a framebreaking device to indicate Mr Nick's frenetic creative energy and again, with the same effect, in Opening 10 where the four discrete illustrations are linked by the loops of wool which spill out of the frames.

Huxley depicts the pathos of Mrs Jolley's hospitalisation by having the reader view the hospital room from the extreme superior angle - like an aerial view. The white hospital bed with the white face upon the

pillow dominates the illustration. This, along with the white background, makes the hospital room appear decontextualised and thus alienating. This illustration stands as a complete contrast to the other illustrations with their coloured backgrounds and heightens the reader's sense of Mrs Jolley's isolation. The brown coloured figure of Mr Nick at the bottom right hand corner of the bed forms a vector with the bedside cabinet to ensure the shape of the outlined figure on the bed is the central image for the viewer's gaze.

Huxley's illustrations display firmly anchored layers of explicit and implicit ideology and offer a more satisfying representation of a heterosexual friendship between equals than does Wild's verbal text. Her images do not suggest ideas about power hierarchies operating in the relationship between Mr Nick and Mrs Jolley. Huxley's final illustration of the friends has them in separate frames in medium longshot, both in their separate environments of the train and hospital but mutually engaged in their knitting and, the reader infers, in their thoughts of one another.

While *The Widow's Broom*, and *Mr Nick's Knitting* may suffer from ideological drift, Baillie and Tanner's Drac and

the *Gremlin* suffers from ideological mismanagement. The verbal and visual text give conflicting messages about how socially 'progressive' the book is trying to be. The text is an example of the ideological conflicts that may arise out of a picture book having two creators. Baillie's verbal text seems at first (Openings 1 to 9) as though it wishes to present the theme of sibling play in which the female character, Drac, is given agency. Drac appears to be given the subject position by being the linguistically and imaginatively empowered character, but Baillie's characters are trapped in 'the confines of male-female dualism' (Davies 1993, p.149) by Tanner's illustrations which exemplify the operation of unconscious or naturalised ideology with regard to female appearance. It is disturbing to see the blatant way Tanner's illustrations reinscribe a patriarchal view of the female as an object for male aesthetic pleasure and physical appropriation. In Baillie's verbal text, the mismanagement occurs because of the gaps: we are not told how Drac felt when the Gremlin landed with his full weight on her back, or what it was like to have the dog pin her to the ground.

As John Stephens points out in *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (p.190) Drac

and the *Gremlin* is an example of a picture book where there is an absolute 'interdependence' of verbal and visual text in constructing the meaning of the book. Tanner (1990) has commented on the high degree of co-operation between author and illustrator (*Reading Time* 34, 1, p.6) saying the book 'evolved as pictures and text changed to accommodate each other' and 'Allan even changed the length of some text after the art work was completed which affected the design of those pages'. It is interesting to speculate about how much Baillie's accommodation of Tanner's close-up visual requirements altered or even undermined the verbal text.

As joint winner of the 1989 Australian Children's Book Council Award for Picture Book of the Year, *Drac and the Gremlin* has been deferentially treated by Australian critics and even academics. Stephens' analysis shows that the book fits a well known cultural schema for books written about children 'playing'. The two 'invisible' ideologies from this schema which are relevant to *Drac and the Gremlin* are firstly, the cultural assumption that it is 'a good thing for children to go outside and play', as the characters in the story do, and secondly that games of 'pretend' are the natural province of children.

Stephens says of the implicit ideology, 'The book effectively propounds an ideal of imaginative and co-operative play (with initial conflict play superseded by co-operation) (p.192). While Stephens is concerned that we become aware that we are reading an adult's construction of play, it is equally important to become aware that we are reading unconscious cultural assumptions which perpetuate the construction of gendered identities.

In Openings 1 and 4 Tanner's visual representations of Drac are in terms of Anglo-Saxon constructions of beauty: a very fair skinned child with masses of wavy blonde hair; almost a child version of 'Barbie doll'. Drac is the victim of physical aggression from her brother (Opening 2), yet she is not allowed to behave in this way (Opening 4). Drac is ultimately visually encoded as being physically dependent on males for her survival (Opening 12) and as inevitably a subject of rape in war (Opening 11). From agency in the initial game in the verbal text, the visual text encodes Drac, in the co-operative play, as the helpless maiden in an heroic quest story who must be rescued by the male - a character whose linguistic capabilities do not extend beyond, 'Gerroff!' and 'Brummn!'. Thus Tanner's

visual text moves Drac from the full page close up (Opening 1), engaging reader subjectivity with her direct gaze, to the background in the final opening, behind the 'hero' and the dog!

As a contrast to the ideological 'drift' in *Drac and the Gremlin* we can consider Susan Hill and Angela Barrett's *Beware, Beware*. Aspects of both books are about the powerful psychological effects of reading and viewing stories; about how children work within the various cultural constructs offered them by adults in books and films. Baillie's text sees the child subjects playing roles adopted from what Stephens labels the 'sword and sorcery' fantasies offered them in the spectacular settings constructed in the special effects department of the film studios, as well as in a long literary tradition. Thematically Baillie shows his subjects constructing what he wants to believe is a world of harmless fun. Hill and Barrett, on the other hand, are showing a subject whose 'cultural baggage' is working negatively, leading the child to encode certain territories as frightening and inhospitable.

In *Beware Beware* the historical nineteenth century visual text and the poetic discourse present the story of a small girl's fear of the snowy

landscape and deep forest outside her home. Superficial thematic reading of this text might lead to a decision that the book is reinscribing those conventional patriarchal constructions of the female which at first Baillie seemed to subvert in the verbal text of *Drac and the Gremlin*: thus the reader might see in *Beware Beware*, the representation of females as confined to domestic scenes of menial labour (Opening 1), as quiescent, easily intimidated, physically afraid and unadventurous (Opening 2), and tending to hysteria under emotional pressure (Opening 8) (Paul 1987, p.188). So in order to decode Hill and Barrett's well anchored, implicit feminist ideology and to understand the book's overt ideology, the reader may need an understanding of literary pretexts alluded to in the title of the book. All the layers of ideology in *Beware Beware* suggest that women actively need to resignify landscape with their own terms and to decide for themselves what is to be artistically significant. In the failure of readers to fully decode Hill and Barrett's firmly anchored ideology we see what Peter Hollindale refers to as the problem of 'the more gifted and talented writer' who tries to avoid 'superficial ideological stridency' by encoding a discourse which trusts 'literary

organization' to 'carry its ideological burden more covertly' rather than using 'explicitly didactic guidelines to achieve a moral effect'. Hollindale goes on to warn that 'Misunderstandings may follow if you are unlucky or too trusting (Hollindale 1988, p.11). In the context of the monograph, Hollindale's use of 'covert' conveys the idea of subtlety and sophistication of the literary text rather than any idea of duplicity or unconscious ideology.

The well known poetic pretext for the title of *Beware, Beware*, is Sylvia Plath's 'Lady Lazarus'. This is the first sign, in the verbal text, of Hill's purpose and ideological stance. It points to the fact that the verbal text is concerned with issues of poetry and artistic creation, for Sylvia Plath was concerned about the female poetic voice and its struggle to escape patriarchal discourses. The final lines of 'Lady Lazarus' contain the relevant allusion:

*Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware*

*Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.*

The informed adult reader can decode Hill's ideology as being particularly concerned about the female voice defining its own literary and artistic

landscape. To this end, we see that Hill has constructed a poetic discourse which should be read symbolically. The admonition to 'Beware, beware' (Opening 1), the last line of the verbal text in this opening, works ironically because it reminds the reader of the circumscribed nature of women's activities but also works through its intertextual meaning to indicate that female behaviour may choose to overthrow male interdictions. Hill avoids any use of gendered language in her text so the fact that the characters are female is encoded in the visual text. Thus as in *Drac and the Gremlin*, there is an interdependence of the pictorial and verbal codes. The female character transgresses the admonition to 'Beware, beware!' as she goes into the forest which Barrett represents as forbidding and alien. However, as Davies points out, 'transgression of the boundaries is dangerous and it is heroic' (p.147) and so the child displays great courage when she enters the forest which symbolises the patriarchal literary tradition.

The rhythm of Barrett's visual text is even more effective than Tanner's in *Drac and the Gremlin* for representing adventuring because there is less use of framing devices; most of the illustrations bleed

off the right page, adding a feeling of movement from opening to opening as the reader follows the subject's journey across the snowy landscape (Stephens and Watson 1994, p.28), into the forest and out again. Barrett's use of two half pages (Openings 6 and 7) also works very well to enhance the emotional tension of two points in the story - firstly, where the subject moves from seeing the forest as 'Quiet. Safe. Dry. / Good.' (Opening 6) to its imaginative transformation into a world of 'Trolls Goblins / Elves Sprites / Mysterious lights ...' and secondly, where mother and child are reunited (Opening 10). A pink glow highlights both interior and exterior illustrations except for the forest, linking the woman and child to the harmony of the natural, non-threatening landscape.

By a detailed analysis of Opening 1 of *Beware, Beware*, we can see how closely Barrett's visual text encodes the ideas of the verbal text. None of the other author/illustrators discussed in this paper manage to achieve this single-minded commitment to an ideological purpose. In Opening 1 the verbal text is minimalised in the layout, being placed on the far left hand margin. The visual images predominate, with the table in the

foreground. Separated on the table are two sorts of cultural artefacts, those to do with women and cooking, located centrally, and that traditionally belonging to men, the book, with the winged dragon on the cover, on the right hand end of the table. Barrett is representing the binary oppositions of male and female roles in our society. Propped up against the hand tooled leather volume is a small doll in a costume more elegant than the clothes being worn by the woman and the child. This image focuses on the 'otherness' of women in texts constructed in our masculine literary tradition and questions the possibility of women being the creators of texts. The figures of the woman, who has bright red hair, and child are in the background and they have their backs to the reader. The adult is engaged in slicing vegetables into a saucepan while the girl is gazing out of the window into a pink landscape. The verbal text tells of warmth and comfort which are being overridden by a desire for adventure. There is a small dividing wall between the kitchen and the sitting room which symbolises the division of self in the conventional life style of Western women: the domestic 'duties' on the one hand and the desire for adventure or artistic pursuit on the other. The latter is

represented by the landscape beyond the room which can be seen through the windows.

Of the picture books I have discussed only in Hill and Barrett's book does the reader find truly 'progressive', and well anchored layers of feminist ideology. Decoding the verbal and visual texts of *Beware, Beware*, requires readers who are well informed and who will be active in their reading and not just passive receptors of texts as authoritative and beyond interrogation. The text works actively to produce implied reader positions for both the child and the adult.

The problems of producing ideologically 'progressive' picture books are complex and challenging. There must be a clear mutual desire to do so on the part of the writer and the illustrator and, I suspect, the publishers too. Careful assessment must be made of the consistency of the levels of signification in the verbal and visual text to ensure that ideological 'drift' does not occur as we have seen in many of the books discussed here. The likelihood of the reader accurately decoding the layers of ideology must also be considered. Most of the texts discussed here have dealt in some way with the construction of gender and it is clearly not

easy to encode a progressive anti-sexist ideology when notions about gender are so much a part of our unconscious cultural practices that we believe them to be 'natural'. But writers, illustrators, editors and reviewers who are committed to change, must continue to work on the problem. Bronwyn Davies' social research in NSW schools has attempted to move students into 'reading and writing beyond gendered identities'. The task would undoubtedly be easier for children, if more models of such reading and writing existed.

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Margaret Wild and Dee Huxley, *Mr Nick's Knitting*, Hodder & Stoughton (Australia), 1989. The illustration is from the art work of Dee Huxley.

Allan Baillie and Jane Tanner, *Drac and the Gremlin*, Viking Kestrel, Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 1988. The illustration is from the art work of Jane Tanner.

Biographical Note

Beverley Pennell was Head Teacher of English for seven years in a co-educational comprehensive high school in N.S.W. Her special interests in literary theory and children's literature grew from her classroom experiences and motivated her further studies leading to an M.A. from Macquarie University. She is currently working towards her MEd (Hons) and lectures in children's literature.

