

LATIP 2021**International Conference on Language and Technology in the Interdisciplinary Paradigm****CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AS A POLITICAL WEAPON: THE
2018 "RABBIT AFFAIRE"**

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Marlon Bundo's, A Day in the Life of the Vice President and *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* are two children's books addressed to children aged 4-8 and 6-8 years old. They were published in the United States in 2018 by Charlotte Pence, the daughter of the former Republican Vice President, and by Jill Twiss, respectively, the latter also sponsored by Democrat activist John Oliver. Expectedly, the authors have antagonistic political perspectives. The first expresses a traditional and hierarchical view of power and the second – a pro-LGBTQ standpoint. Despite these differences, their speech is both dogmatic in the sense that they more or less explicitly influence the reader's opinion, without respecting children's right to think for themselves. The world both books present is a closed one in the sense that it has no complexity – as if everything was black and white. In this paper, I intend to discuss how both republican and democratic authors defend and publicize their different messages with similar speeches and how they verbally and iconically express their views in order to persuade their possible addressees.

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1. Introduction

Literature best-sellers can have a powerful influence on children. Especially when they are strongly and explicitly ideological, which, in my view, is the case of both *Marlon Bundo's, A Day in the Life of the Vice President* and *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* – the latter being a best-seller. The two books, published in the United States and aimed at children aged 4-8 and 6-8 respectively, relate to each other via a domino effect: this not only is the second book a reaction and an implicit backlash to the first, but this one also triggers subsequent reactions, as Pence goes on to write two other books about the pet. I called this episode the “2018 rabbit affaire”, as the two books I analyze were published broadly at the same time, illustrate the same character – a rabbit named Marlon Bundo which is the former Vice President grandson – but promote opposite ideological stances and were a media subject for a long time.

2. Problem Statement

One factor to consider when debating which books should feature in children's' education is the formative character of the literary works. With the corpus under study, one should question whether the pamphleteer dimension of children's literature – which makes it excessive and explicitly committed to an ideology – does not compromise children's reading capacity, narrowing their interpretive horizons due to the overuse of dogmas and didacticism.

3. Research Questions

One should therefore ask what is the effect that children's literature, especially best-sellers – which pursue a solid and ideological goal and are created to promote a very precise point of view – have on children. At the same time, it is important to assess what has the room independent reading got in such a compromised literature, especially if children and young readers are less prepared to realize/deconstruct the agenda they are being exposed and subjected to.

4. Purpose of the Study

In this paper, my aim is to discuss how the excess of ideology, whatever its political orientation may be, can compromise the aesthetic quality of a work in a basic and dogmatic way. The explicitness of the ideological component is usually intended to create a given reaction on the children, who – precisely because they maybe are unprepared readers – will lack the instruments to unmask this intended control and the work's pre-defined interpretation. By analyzing the context in which *Marlon Bundo's, A Day in the Life of the Vice President* and *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* were produced, I intend to show how republican and democratic authors alike promote their different messages and how they verbally and iconically express such messages in order to persuade their potential audiences.

5. Research Methods

By comparing the words and images of the two books, I will analyze each of the work's production context; their different references and ideology; and the way they express what Paul Ricoeur (1986) in *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique. II*, called (re)productive imagination products. I will use the French philosopher's distinction between ideology and utopia, as these concepts are very useful to clarify the relationship between the two books, the authors and their political ideas, also laying the groundwork for a discussion on potential speech differences.

6. Findings

Following children literature's tradition of making a rabbit the protagonist, the two children's picture books tell different stories about Marlon Bundo, the family rabbit of the former US Vice President, Mike Pence –with Marlon Brundo resembling the name of Marlon Brando, a 20th century's famous American actor. This “rabbit affaire” was so big at the time of the books' launching that the pet was honoured with a Wikipedia entry which proves its popularity!

6.1. Marlon Bundo's, A Day in the Life of the Vice President

Charlotte Pence, the daughter of the former Republican Vice President, launched her *Marlon Bundo's, A Day in the Life of the Vice President*, on March 19, 2018, during the Vice Presidency of her father; the book was illustrated by her mother, the artist Karen Pence (Fields, 2018).

In the story, the pet introduces himself by telling us his name, Marlon Bundo Pence”, and his nickname: BOTUS, which means, “Bunny of the United States” (Pence & Pence, 2018, p. 4). Invested with the same authority as real-life Botus, Marlon Bundo begins its one-day trip with “Grampa”, Mike Pence. Just like a tourist guide, the rabbit shows the reader Pence's house at the Naval Observatory, the places where he works (the White House West Wing, its Oval Office, the Capitol, the Eisenhower Executive Office Building) and his habits of a good American Christian, such as reading the Bible and praying together with the rabbit before going to bed. The story, told from the rabbit's fake naive perspective, ends up acting as an ideological propaganda that lectures readers on the Vice President's power supremacy. In addition –and strikingly– the end of the book provides three pages of didactic resources on power dynamics within the US administration and on the Vice President's national duties, namely his constant calls to President Trump and daily praying moments. Such cult of the leader is done in a painfully obvious way, as if the authors had a deep faith in literature's exclusive cultural and social formative power (Hunt, 1990, p. 2) and as if they believe a children's book would easily conserve the image of Mike Pence and of the Trump Administration in children' minds.

The “Rabbit affair 2018” first “moment” seems to create a collective memory of the former Vice President's role and of his responsibility ruling the nation. Since Mike Pence was part of the dominating power at that time, the ideology the book tacitly praises, with all the visits to the monuments of political power, reflects the then-President's slogan “Make America Great Again”. A slogan is highlighted by the rabbit's encomiastic speech expressing an admiration of Mike Pence's glory and his importance in the

Nation's destiny: "Grampa has a lot of meetings / And other important events, / But the most important meeting is first. / That's the one with the president!" (Pence & Pence, 2018, p. 13).

Therefore, based on Paul Ricoeur's (1986) study on the relation between ideology and utopia understood in a descriptive sense, I can say that Charlotte Pence's interpretation of real life and the belief in her identity group attribute this illustration book an ideological function. The imaginary representation she projects probably aims to legitimize her privileged worldview and to –perhaps more importantly – bring others into it, consequently disseminating her ideas and values to children. As Ricoeur recalls, following Karl Marx' *The Capital*, it is like if ruling ideas were universal ideas, not subjected to objection, as it is typical of reproductive imagination products like Pence's book.

6.2. A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo

Unexpectedly (or not), the reception of *Marlon Bundo's. A Day in the Life of the Vice President* provokes an extraordinary utopia. According to Ricoeur, utopia – as an imaginary representation – expresses the potential of groups that are censored by the dominant class. In this case, utopia is socially subversive. In fact, Pence's book gave birth to *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo*, a parody of *A Day in the Life of the Vice President*, also aimed at children and that presents a worldview sharply contrasting the one in Pence's work. It clearly is an opposing and utopic proposal because it challenges the dominant reality under Donald Trump's administration; expresses the capabilities of a minority group; and presents an alternative social solution. In this subversive way, the hypertext (Genette, 1982) compromises the Other's identity (Mike Pence), proposing a utopic as a productive imagination expression image (Ricoeur, 1986) regarding power and gender relationships.

Actually the authors of the creative *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* saw in Pence's work an opportunity to use children's literature as a political and ideological *medium* to stand for LGBTQ rights, which Mike Pence had violently censored. Instead, one witnesses a master-stroke move, favoured by the one powerful television network: an influential weapon to fight the opposing political side – in this case, the conservatives. When comparing the two books one might say, as Yoon et al. (2010), that the original inscribes mainstream representations and values, and an assimilation ideology with little complexity, whereas the parody deals with an opposite, liberating ideology.

In this second round of events, John Oliver, a Democrat American entertainer, emerges sponsoring the new version. Because Pence's story was made public before it was released, Oliver had the opportunity of publishing it beforehand, promoting the parody of Marlon Bundo's encomiastic and patriotic journey in his HBO (Home Box Office) late-night show, "Last Week Tonight with John Oliver" (John, 2018). The new Marlon Bundo rewriting is also an autobiography, and it is signed by the protagonist himself, Marlon Bundo, by Jill Twiss, and it is illustrated by Keller.

This entertaining narrative erases the protagonist family name Pence and the plot is not focused on the relationship between a talking animal character and an empirical one. The new story is reduced to a traditional setting in which animals' characters perform an allegory of human problems. Following the same literary communication protocol, the authorship is attributed to a woman and, in this parodic version, also to the pet. With this fictional gesture, in an ironic metalepsis (Genette, 2004), the character

breaks its natural fictional frontier and features and appears as a real author in the book's front cover. This shift gives the story an effective autobiographic status and allows the protagonist to achieve equal rights inside and outside the diegesis. This implied statement of equality hints at the story ideology and also at a reversed balance of power.

In fact, the title goes in this same direction because Marlon Bundo tells his own life as a rabbit, almost ignoring the Vice President's character. At the same time, it is him that explains the reason for his new leading role: "But this story isn't going to be about him [Vice President], because he isn't very fun. This story is about me, because I'm very, very fun" (Bundo et al., 2018, p. 5). In this break from the former Vice Presidency's entourage, the parody expresses its first implicit criticism of the regime, taking an opposite stance towards the Republican Administration.

The new Marlon Bundo is fun and the same feeling of joy can be observed when comparing the two rabbits' drawings. The "original" is depicted in black and white and has a serious look, whereas the parodic one is a cute, smiling and colourful bunny, with a colourful bow tie that maybe suggests the LGBTQ rainbow flag. Thus, with its imitation and ironic reversals, the parodic genre emphasizes, with critical distance, difference features—as Linda Hutcheon (1985) argues.

The political hostility felt towards the late Vice Presidency, and what it represented, can be found in the adjective that characterize the "stuffy house" (Bundo et al., 2018, p. 4), in the way the pet refers to his "Grampa" who "isn't very fun" (Bundo et al., 2018, p. 5), and in the loneliness Marlon Bundo feels at home: "I woke up all alone. Then I ate a fine bunny-breakfast all alone, while I watched the news... all alone. You see, sometimes old, stuffy houses are also lonely." (Bundo et al., 2018, p. 6). But a far more insidious portrait of the former Vice President can be seen in the opponent character of the story, "The Sting Bug", which has Mike Pence's (Baker & Haberman, 2020) caricatured face and hair, as well as an authorial, dogmatic, conservative and exclusive discourse.

Moving from the satiric target to the ideological one, Marlon Bundo tells the story of the "very special day" (Bundo et al., 2018, p. 5) he met Wesley, another male bunny, and when after a day of jumping around, they decided to get married to the joy of every animal in the garden, except The Sting Bug that forbids their marriage because "Boy Bunnies marry Girl Bunnies" (Bundo et al., 2018, p. 22). Actually, in the story, the ugly and repulsive Sting Bung is in charge, although "None of the other animals could quite work out why he was In Charge or how he was Important" (Bundo et al., 2018, p. 19). It seems obvious that Marlon Bundo's questioning reflects the perplexity of the empirical author and promoter regarding 2016 elections, where Donald Trump won with 62,985,106 votes (45.9%) and 306 electors, while Hilary Clinton had 65,853,625 votes (48.0%) and 232 electors.

As one might have guessed from what has been said in this paper, sentences become more doctrinal and ideological towards the story's end—in my view unnecessarily as it just underscores a stance that was already made clear. In fact, in his concluding remarks, in a very redundant compromised and didactic tone, Marlon Bundo states that "it doesn't matter if you love a girl bunny or a boy bunny, or eat a sandwich backward or forward" (Bundo et al., 2018, p. 31). Didactic sentences in this kind of verdict contradict subtle literary language that, *per se*, is non obvious and polysemic, even in children's literature. This topic, which is morally legitimate, has a different relevance from an aesthetics perspective, with literature coming close to a pamphleteer speech.

This story of acceptance, addressed to “every bunny who has ever felt different” (Bundo et al., 2018, p. 33), has its motivation on Mike Pence’s real homophobic stances. Thus, to reinforce their position, the author and promoter of *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* decided to offer all the proceeds to The Trevor project and AIDS United, which focus on LGBTQ population and HIV epidemic, respectively.

Despite of the enormous success of the best-seller *A day in the life of Marlon Bundo*, books with LGBTQ themes are still peripheral in children’s literature, as Even Zohar (1990) calls their place in his polisystem theory, that is in a heterogeneous and hierarchized system of literary systems which interact in a dynamic process of evolution within the literary polysystem. Yet, one should not ignore that, before this book stood by LGBTQ rights, other voices fought for the incorporation of inclusive children’s books in official schools programs (Knoblauch 2016; Wallace, 2018). It is exactly because John Oliver’s book and others with LGBTQ themes are not part of the national or school *curriculum* that Max Mutchnick, the creator of the TV show *Will & Grace*, donated copies of the Marlon Bundo’s story to all the schools of Indiana, the state where Mike Pence lived before coming to Washington D.C., another gesture of political and ideological fight through children’s literature.

7. Conclusion

My purpose in this paper was to debate the way that ideology keeps trumping aesthetics even in non-totalitarian regimes. Unfortunately, in my view, both Bundos lack literary subtlety. Thus I wanted to point out that both books are kind of pamphleteer, rather than discussing the suitability of gay themes in children’s literature.

In addition, one cannot forget that although it is true that today children’s cultural references go beyond literary works, they are not expected to be able to deconstruct these books’ messages, that is, the imposing ideology both texts develop. As much as one can be sympathetic to gay issues and condemn Mike Pence’s homophobia, if the quality of literature is to be judged and its formative dimension to be assessed, both books fall short of what is desirable. In principle, it is far more formative and smart to let children read and jump into their own conclusions, than giving them all the answers. Further, the lifespan of these types of work, deeply anchored in a particular historicity, seems to be short which could turn them into old-fashioned books relatively quick, making them ontologically ephemeral.

Yet, in spite of this critical judgement, based on the burden of the ideological speech, on its relationship to literary language and on the reader’s freedom, if I should compare the two books from a children’s literature perspective, *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* is clearly a better work and slightly less ideologically explicit.

On a more general note – and to sum up – it is worth quoting Anne Lundin’s (2004) emphasis on the responsibility that free democratic societies have in the difficult task of discussing “how to read and what to read” (p. 142) and in debating inherent conflicted ideological positions about childhood and literature. For the time being, and pragmatically-speaking, one may adapt to best-sellers what Griffith and Frey (1992) recommended: to teach “the canon more critically and the non-canon more seriously”. In doing so, it may be possible to incorporate both non inclusive and inclusive children’s literature in the curriculum in order to develop children’s critical reading. On the other hand, it is acknowledgeable that

children exposed to different realities in their childhood are more likely to understand all types of families (Knoblauch 2016) like LGBTQ supporters argue.

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