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Disagreeable, Villainous, and Wimpy: The Child as Antihero in Burnett, Colfer, and Kinney

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Disagreeable, Villainous, and Wimpy: The Child as Antihero in Burnett, Colfer, and

Kinney

by

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Abstract

Although children's literature is often dismissed as largely didactic and supportive of entrenched power structures, an examination of the antihero's development in children's literature reveals the genre's complexity and subtle challenges of social mores. Critics focus extensive attention on the redemption of a less-than-ideal character from social deviancy to normalcy in fiction for young readers, but more rarely do they discuss those characters that remain static in their lack of heroic qualities and fail as role models for children. The on-going discussion on conventional subgenres like the school story does not often include texts that subvert the form with bullying or "wimpy" protagonists. Most significantly, the debate over the role of children's literature in maintaining or questioning adult authority often passes over books that show children committing immoral actions usually reserved for adults.

In the following pages, I place the ironic mode and the antihero into the context of literature for children, focusing primarily on a close reading of three texts from British and American writers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, *Artemis Fowl* by Eoin Colfer, and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney. Each of the protagonists will be examined in light of the cultural contexts of the writers, the overall messages of the books, and the stories' relationships to existing genre conventions. My research draws conclusions about when the child antihero emerges in literary history, how the antihero helps communicate the writer's message about a particular issue or society in general, and why a writer chooses for the antihero to find redemption or not. Together, the three novels provide a fascinating look at how children's novels depart from tradition yet remain very much a part of a literary canon.

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Children's Literature and the Changing Protagonist

Children's literature has long been associated with the socialization of young readers and the equipping of them with cultural capital. Some scholars, however, contend that literature for children also provides a threshold for radical ideologies and an opportunity for authors to subtly promote controversial viewpoints (Reynolds). Regardless of its function, children's literature undoubtedly influences future culture-makers and mirrors many of the movements studied in adult literature, including the shift away from the traditional hero to the antihero. Understanding the antihero provides a key to interpreting much modern fiction, but one must first recognize the heroic traits found in the earliest forms of literature production.

Joseph Campbell in his pioneering work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* claims that the essential elements depicted in classical mythology of the hero and his journey exist in every civilization and can be found even in modern literary works. Northrop Frye expands on this idea in *Anatomy of Criticism* and identifies four narrative patterns he believes recur throughout literature. The arguably most modern of these narrative forms, the ironic mode, features ordinary rather than supernatural protagonists and a world in which heroism cannot fully exist (Sloan 78). One character type of this mode can be termed an antihero. Although critical identification of the antihero in children's literature does not emerge until well into the twentieth century, the character makes appearances in every genre of literature for readers of all ages, and some attribute its prevalence in modern works to the problematizing of traditional heroes (Jones and Watkins 1-2).

Critics differ on the specific definition of an antihero. Lisman contends that an antihero, at least as explored in many works of adolescent literature, exists as a victim of society rather than a tragic hero brought down by his own flaws. Libby conversely characterizes the colonial antihero as a “great” but villainous person who commits unspeakable evil while possessing gifted minds or unattainable ideals. For my purposes, I will identify an antihero as “a protagonist or notable figure who is conspicuously lacking in heroic qualities” (“Antihero”). I distinguish this type from the unlikely hero—who may be kind, brave, and generous but lives in obscurity or has few opportunities to exhibit heroism—as well as from the sympathetic villain. While early works may introduce characters that conform to this description, modern fiction further develops the type and children’s literature adapts it for younger audiences.

From realism to fantasy to science-fiction, every genre features stories about laughable or disturbing characters that act stupidly, choose wrongly, and struggle to make sense of a confusing and sometimes arbitrary world. The antihero proves a compelling and unique figure in literature, and its introduction to children’s literature adds additional layers to the often complex process of separating meaning intended for child readers from that directed toward probable adult readers. Much research exists on the supposed demise of the traditional figure in modern fiction. William Walker, for example, characterizes a type of antihero particularly relevant to children’s fiction, the comic “little man” attempting to overcome authoritarian powers; but although Walker’s antihero usually fails in his resistance, research by Kay Sambell and others indicates that children’s literature often does not follow through on the pessimism and meaninglessness depicted in the ironic mode.

Numerous studies examine texts through the lens of archetypal criticism like that of Frye and characterize different heroic types according to Campbell, but few studies specifically focus on the antihero's development in children's literature. Critics also focus extensive attention on the redemption of a less-than-ideal character from social deviancy to normalcy in fiction for young readers, but more rarely do they discuss those characters that remain static in their lack of heroic qualities and fail as role models for children. The on-going discussion on conventional subgenres like the school story does not often include texts that subvert the form with bullying or "wimpy" protagonists. Most significantly, the debate over the role of children's literature in maintaining or questioning adult authority often passes over books that show children committing immoral actions usually reserved for adults.

Critics often associate children's literature with acculturation and socialization of children into the expectations of the adult world they will eventually inhabit. This connection to indoctrination or stasis often leads to a dismissal of children's literature as largely didactic and supportive of entrenched power structures. However, both Alison Lurie and Kimberley Reynolds persuasively argue that the low profile of children's literature allows the genre to explore controversial issues and employ covertly negative social commentary. Lynne Vallone also points out that the entire genre of fiction for children, not just individual books, now rejects the trend to universalize childhood and instead focuses on unique stories of particular children. I propose that these contradictory processes occur in nearly all books for children—all authors write out of particular and often subconscious cultural contexts, but all authors also have messages they deem important enough to bring before their audiences. The antihero in children's literature

likely grows out of dissatisfaction with some stereotype of childhood or education and a desire to correct the mistaken perceptions.

In the following pages, I place the ironic mode and the antihero into the context of literature for children, focusing primarily on a close reading of three texts from British and American writers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, *Artemis Fowl* by Eoin Colfer, and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney. Each of the protagonists will be examined in light of the cultural contexts of the writers, the overall messages of the books, and the stories' relationships to existing genre conventions. My research draws conclusions about when the child antihero emerges in literary history, how the antihero helps communicate the writer's message about a particular issue or society in general, and why a writer chooses for the antihero to find redemption or not.

These three texts span the time frame of children's literature, beginning with a Golden Age British novel for children, whose protagonist appears to fit the type of an antihero before the type became pervasive in the second half of the twentieth century. My second text comes from the twenty-first century and features a protagonist with a more clearly defined role as an antihero. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* also represents the latter end of the children's literature chronology but provides an example of fully-developed realism to counter the magical elements of the two previous novels.

The currency of *Artemis Fowl* and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* dictate that few or no critics have examined these pieces in light of my main arguments. This lack of research may also indicate a dismissal of children's literature compounded with distaste for low fantasy, questionable role models, series, and popular fiction. Similarly, the limited

numbers of critics who examine *Artemis Fowl* as a character discuss how he fits into his multi-genred novel as a super-genius, a human in a fantasy world, and a criminal rather than as the ambiguously-portrayed protagonist of a work for children. Sources abound on the significance of Mary as a Victorian female, her independent self-salvation through nature, and her active role in rehabilitating her cousin Colin; nevertheless, fewer analyses focus on her extended presence as a highly-unpleasant “hero” and the reasons why Mary must undergo transformation. My research attempts to bridge the scholarly gap between the antihero and children’s literature.

I focus primarily on the ways each character displays the traits of an antihero and how this type of protagonist contributes to the overall message of each novel. Particularly, I discuss why an author might choose to feature a non-traditional hero in a book of children’s fiction, a genre historically associated with didacticism and socialization into adulthood. Antiheroes rarely present children with role models and therefore must serve different purposes when used in texts for young readers. Some critics propose that social commentary often escapes scrutiny within the context of children’s literature. Because of the unique position of children’s literature as a highly influential and commercialized genre still on the critical margins, evidence of social subversion emerges in all three texts. My research also covers the concept of redemption or transformation of the protagonists; not all of the characters explicitly undergo growth into traditional heroism, but they do appear to experience varying levels of moral development consistent with their maturation into adulthood.

The earliest text, *The Secret Garden*, focuses on the transformation of a disagreeable girl into a typical Victorian female. Unlike many writers from the period

who offer children role models through their texts, Frances Hodgson Burnett begins with a highly irregular protagonist. Mary Lennox embodies traits antithetical to traditional heroes, such as selfishness, indifference, arrogance, and irritability, although Burnett cultivates sympathy for Mary by explaining her wretched upbringing and showing her inability to form relationships. As the novel progresses, Mary learns through the influence of nature and new friends that hard work, contentment, and concern for others bring happiness and meaning to life. Consequently, she matures into a young woman who understands her place in the world.

In asking why Burnett chose to feature an antihero, I consider the prominence of transformation as a theme in the text. Burnett struggled through various hardships in her personal life and desired to bring hope and optimism through her writing. Without portraying Mary's growth from unpleasant to morally upright, Burnett cannot demonstrate her belief in the power of positive thinking or the importance of physical activity. Establishing Mary as an antihero also situates the text within certain subgenres of children's literature that demand character growth over time. Finally, Mary's antiheroic characteristics provide children with an imperfect and relatable protagonist and the reasons behind Mary's flaws allow Burnett to critique the society in which she lives.

If Burnett indeed desires to challenge traditional perspectives, then one must study the text in relationship to the writer's cultural setting. As previously mentioned, critical marginalizing of children's literature allows writers freedom to express ideas considered deviant or unconventional by mainstream culture. Burnett challenges gender roles and stereotypes through Mary Lennox, both in her initial unpleasantness and her later moral development, and elevates motherhood and nurturing. However, the text also

upholds contemporary views about other issues like imperialism and the relationship between England and foreign colonies.

I conclude with the question of maturation in the novel, asking whether Burnett willingly molds Mary into the pattern of Victorian femininity or feels compelled by the conventions of children's literature to soften the character. Evidence exists for both sides, but the most persuasive argument maintains Burnett's authorial control while acknowledging the influence of audience on content. A thorough understanding of Mary as an antihero and the contributions that her negative characterization brings to the text helps account for *The Secret Garden's* enduring popularity and Mary Lennox's captivating presence.

In the century since Burnett published *The Secret Garden*, the antihero has become a perennial character in much modern fiction and made further appearances in children's literature. Rather than merely possessing ignoble qualities, however, Artemis Fowl actively works to commit crimes and obtain finances through unethical means. His greed, ruthlessness, and villainous enterprises outweigh the occasional concern he expresses for his family, and writer Eoin Colfer does not labor to win his readers' approval, which sets his text apart from other current children's fiction featuring antiheroes.

Colfer's reasons for choosing to feature an antihero unsurprisingly differ vastly from those of Burnett one hundred years previously. An end of heroism in literature, as posited by Jones and Watkins, leaves a vacuum filled by irony and pessimism. Colfer accordingly responds to this changing attitude among children by presenting a knowing, disaffected genius as a protagonist. Artemis's forays into crime point towards the less

commonplace but still serious problems that adolescents face regarding authority and power. The text also shares patterns with genres well-suited for an antihero and increasingly prevalent in children's literature, like science fiction and thrillers.

Just as Burnett employs Mary's past as a means to critique Victorian society, Colfer channels the absurdity of a twelve-year-old criminal mastermind into a challenge of modern Western cultural values. Capitalizing on long-time youth involvement in environmental conservation, the text moves beyond issues of human waste and pollution towards more radical ideas about interspecies understanding. Conversely, *Artemis Fowl* upholds norms about mental illness and depression by marginalizing suffering characters and depicting depression as frightening.

Artemis Fowl provides an appropriate foil for Mary Lennox in that he does not obviously reform through the course of the novel. However, *Artemis Fowl* begins a series spanning several years in Artemis's life and an analysis of his status as an antihero is incomplete without considering the implications of his maturation and reformation in subsequent novels. Furthermore, Colfer repeatedly hints that his protagonist learns some kind of lesson and gives up his immoral practices in order to help his loved ones. Like Burnett, concerns other than traditional conventions of children's literature seem to motivate Colfer to undermine the antiheroic qualities that he at first establishes.

The most recent text under exploration, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, depicts the protagonist as both realistic and truly static in his immaturity. Jeff Kinney's novel in cartoons has no connections to fantasy or magic, but readers discover his antihero Greg Heffley to be as selfish and uncaring as Mary Lennox and Artemis Fowl. Kinney uniquely exaggerates the typical mischief-making and melodrama of adolescence to

hilarious proportions through illustrations depicting Greg as victim and all others as tyrants. Greg's continual struggles with bullies, big brothers, and best friends show him in a wholly unflattering, if highly realistic, light.

Greg as antihero greatly contributes to the text's interest for twenty-first-century children, by creating irony and exploiting the humor of middle-school experience. Kinney's emphasis on realism helps young readers relate to his troublemaking protagonist and links the novel with genres like the school story. As education in America changes, the expectations for writing about school-age characters must keep pace, and Kinney masterfully portrays the snarky, disillusioned adolescents of today.

Both the ironic mode and the school story often become vehicles for social commentary, and Kinney likewise addresses contemporary cultural debates. Despite Greg's less-than-admirable behavior, Kinney empowers young people and undermines traditional views of adult authority in the home and the school. Readers unconsciously side with Greg in his fight against larger forces, even while they condemn his rule-breaking and harsh treatment of others. Nevertheless, the text remains surprisingly conventional in its gender dynamics by focusing on Greg's wimpiness and his obsession with gaining approval from his female classmates.

Even the most modern texts doubtless feel pressure as novels for children to present some positive characteristics in their antiheroes and to alleviate the potential pessimism of a story without a role model. Of the three authors, however, Kinney offers the most uncompromising portrait of an antihero. He refuses to apologize for or change his protagonist's attitudes but still shows the consequences of bad behavior. Readers,

like Greg, must make their own choices about morality and social norms, although they may receive punishment for deviating from convention.

The similarities among these three texts help define the antihero in children's literature and provide guidelines for finding the type in other works. The differences show the importance of cultural context in shaping authorial intent and determining genre conventions. Together, they provide a fascinating look at how children's novels depart from tradition yet remain very much a part of a literary canon.

Growing Up Contrary

Although many critics invest their energies in attempting to determine the motives for an author's work, Frances Hodgson Burnett directly states her intended literary goal: "to write some happiness into the world" (qtd. in Muller xv). Unsurprisingly, Burnett's writings contain elements of the fairy tale and always end happily; in fact, her best known works contain many of the same plot elements. *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, *A Little Princess* and *The Secret Garden* all feature children who exchange obscurity for prosperity and belonging. However, only *The Secret Garden* remains widely-read and beloved by modern children, a timelessness that Jill Muller attributes to its comparative emotional depth and psychological complexity. By focusing on a protagonist "whose behavior is often unlovable" (Muller xvii), a character I identify as an antihero, Burnett brings happiness to readers without glossing over real suffering.

Mary Lennox stands apart from *Little Lord Fauntleroy*'s Cedric Errol and *A Little Princess*' Sara Crewe because of her obvious flaws as well as her carefully-drawn inner transformation that contrasts with a superficial rags-to-riches tale. Mary as an antihero not only reflects the ideas of regeneration, positive thinking, and maternal love on which Burnett centers this novel but also complicates social issues like the relationship between children and adults and the roles of gender and class in England and the larger British Empire. The unpleasant, imperious young girl appears to change from an antihero to a more traditional one, but Mary Lennox nevertheless defies simple classification and exists as an unusual Victorian female whose maturation neither removes all of her faults nor resolves all of the novel's conflicts.

As evidence for Mary's identification as an antihero, at least in the beginning of *The Secret Garden*, I refer again to Merriam-Webster's definition of the term as "a protagonist or notable figure who is conspicuously lacking in heroic qualities" ("Antihero"). *The Secret Garden's* omniscient narrator wastes no time in describing the less-than-ideal traits of the protagonist, beginning with her "disagreeable-looking" appearance (Burnett 7). Lacking physical beauty may not immediately strike a modern reader as a disqualification for heroism, but Burnett believed in a spiritual connection between outer and inner ugliness (214) and a Victorian audience understood the further relationship between ugliness and foreignness.

In addition to physical unattractiveness, the narrator adds bossiness and egotism to her character description, supporting Burnett's belief that bodily ailments reflect mental and emotional instability and indicating that Mary acts as disagreeably as she looks. Twice the narrator calls Mary "languid," another characteristic unfit for a traditional hero, and connects physical indolence with emotional callousness. When the girl takes interest in stories of Dickon related by his sister Martha, the narrative voice bluntly announces that Mary had "never before been interested in any one but herself," a pronouncement of almost unfathomable self-absorption and indifference (28). Mary must replace her inner and outer unpleasantness with "healthy sentiment" and healthy exercise in order to develop into a caring, active individual who channels her strong will into healthy relationships (28).

Besides the narrator's evaluative commentary, the reader can also observe Mary's contrariness through her own words and actions. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator relates how Mary frequently abuses her servants, beating them or shouting

bigoted insults. She usually chooses “Daughter of pigs” because of its uniquely offensive nature to Indian natives (8). She considers this course of action with Martha but decides against it purely out of self-interest, as the housemaid would probably slap her back. She repeatedly becomes enraged when she feels slighted, as when soldiers find her alone at her house in India, and treats everyone around her with arrogance and imperious authority. Perhaps most significantly, Mary refuses to appreciate anything at Misselthwaite, despite the immediate improvement in her circumstances. At least eight times Mary thinks or speaks of her hatred for someone or something, even for nature. She later acknowledges her initial arrogance and negativity, confessing to Colin that she would have “detested” him if she had met him earlier (146). Mary’s haughty manner and impossible-to-please outlook prevent her from feeling affection for her caretakers and greatly delay her assimilation into English society, but fortunately she learns to rethink her repellent behavior and soften her harsh words.

Other characters also unquestionably identify Mary as deficient in heroic characteristics, beginning with the Crawford children labeling her “contrary,” an appellation that follows her through the remainder of the novel (13). Martha Sowerby finds the girl’s inability to care for and entertain herself disturbing, despite the reality that upper-class children generally had attendants, but moreover she feels indignant at Mary’s waste of food and general lack of initiative. She constantly compares Mary unfavorably to her own brothers and sisters, who develop independence from a young age and never turn away a meal. Martha’s observation that she acts “soft in th’ head” leads Mary to become self-reliant and even base her standards for living on the young Sowerbys (45).

Ben Weatherstaff also judges Mary critically, although he recognizes his own tendencies toward contrariness. Calling her a “sharp old woman” instead of a human child (36), Ben honestly assesses Mary’s character and tells her frankly how he thinks of her: “We was wove out of the same cloth. We’re neither of us good lookin’ an’ we’re both of us as sour as we look. We’ve got the same nasty tempers” (35). This kinship allows Mary to form a sort of friendship before she fully casts off her irritability, but their shared sourness also creates friction in their encounters. When Mary questions him about Mrs. Craven’s garden, Ben immediately bristles and does not speak to the child again for several days. He warns her not to be a “meddlesome wench” and refuses to speak about the secret garden, considering her curiosity excessive and offensive (37). Even when she meets someone with similar character defects, Mary cannot build a lasting relationship or open the door for meaningful communication until she ceases to be disagreeable.

If Mary did not possess so many negative attributes, some would still class her as an antihero. C. David Lisman offers an alternative definition that views antiheroes in general as “victim[s] of society” rather than their own flaws, for great tragic heroes often owe their downfalls to imperfections (16). Mary’s story contains elements that link her to both traditional and alternate definitions of the antihero, as Burnett attempts to render the various factors that affect the protagonist. The author does not hide the life-long neglect or the uncaring indulgence that Mary suffers from her mother and Ayah respectively, but the narrative voice still expresses disapproval and places a measure of blame on the child for her choices. In fact, the novel states that the protagonist’s isolation stems from her being disagreeable rather than the other way around, and loneliness only partially causes Mary’s sour disposition. Nevertheless, the complex intermingling of

nature and nurture is perhaps what offers Mary the opportunity to change herself with her circumstances and creates sympathy and interest in the reader even before Mary finally emerges as a mature and decent individual.

None can deny the unheroic and downright hostile picture that Mary Lennox at first presents to the reader, but Burnett chooses to transform Mary as dramatically as the children transform the secret garden. The natural world and physical activity unsurprisingly play a major role in Mary's transformation into a more traditional hero, given Burnett's deep belief in the healing power of nature and the benefits of healthy thinking and living. The narrator initially lists four things that benefit Mary and help her change her behavior, three of which relate to the outside world: "She had felt as if she had understood a robin and that he had understood her; she had run in the wind until her blood had grown warm; she had been healthily hungry for the first time in her life" (42).

The novel expands this relationship between nature and character development by explaining how Mary exchanges her hate of her new home for "liking" (55), beginning with Ben Weatherstaff's robin. The young girl first admits her deep loneliness to the bird and experiences true happiness trying to communicate with it, considering the robin her first true friend. She only feels happiness again after discovering the secret garden and beginning to work in it, and her exposure to the growth of spring teaches her to appreciate the wind and sun which she had previously loathed. The garden becomes almost a surrogate mother for Mary, showing her how to nurture and encourage life, a skill she later uses to restore Colin (Silver 193). All of Mary's initially forced encounters with nature lead her towards a path of positive identity formation that distances her from her contrary beginnings.

The garden not only introduces Mary to healthy outdoor activity but grants her opportunities to successfully interact with the fellow inhabitants of Misselthwaite. Jill Muller points out the significance of Mary's transition from a secreted child to a secret-keeper and that the shared secret of the garden helps the girl form healthy relationships with people as well as with the earth (xxx). Mary credits the robin for her new-found ability to feel affection for others, including individuals she hasn't yet met like Dickon and Susan Sowerby. Before she experiences the healing power of nature, Mary feels nothing but contempt for others and struggles with the basics of interpersonal communication. Through discovering the garden, she forms lasting relationships with Colin, Ben, and the Sowerbys based on mutual respect and trust.

The Sowerbys strongly influence Mary's development as well, in part because of their close connection to nature. Numerous critics attest to the unique power of Dickon as a pseudo-Pan figure or magical spirit because of his associations with nature and wildlife (Vallone, "Ideas of Difference" 185). Associating him with the god foreshadows his healing effect and his role in reawakening Mary and the garden. Mrs. Sowerby's influence comes from her motherly role and her encouraging of sympathy with all living things. She consequently impacts her children and other community members, offering advice accepted by social superiors like Mary and Archibald Craven and providing a mother-child bond the protagonist never knew with her own mother.

The unlikeliest catalyst comes in the form of the surly gardener Ben Weatherstaff, whose only positive traits center on his affection for plants and animals. The similarities in temperament between Mary and Ben Weatherstaff in addition to the latter's blunt pronouncements allow Mary to see her own unpleasantness reflected in another and to

take steps to improve her disposition (Keyser 5). Ben's journey from surliness to "liking" mirrors Mary's in that he develops a meaningful relationship with the late Mrs. Craven through a shared love of flowers. His positive experience with the garden and his sorrow over Mrs. Craven's death demonstrate to Mary most effectively the advantages of shared passions among friends and the continuing importance of nature to the inner emotional life.

The most significant factor in Mary's conversion is Mary herself—to fully develop into a traditional hero, she must elect to cast off indifference and passivity and embrace those qualities most fundamentally associated with heroes: courage and personal achievement. Outside influences like the garden and her friends unquestionably help shape Mary, but the discovered strength of her own independent spirit proves the decisive factor in her heroic emergence. Unlike many fictional orphans of the period, Mary does not achieve good fortune and happiness primarily through the work of adult benefactors but rather through her determination to discover and later care for the secret garden. Her decision to reveal that secret to Dickon, Colin, and eventually Mrs. Sowerby comes from judicious forethought and proves to be a wise choice indeed.

To further contrast Mary's early unpleasantness with her later virtue, *The Secret Garden* can be read as a quest story, with Mary taking the initiative to uncover the hidden depths of Misselthwaite and her own humaneness (Parsons 256). Immel, Knoepfelmacher, and Briggs suggest that children often provide a necessary link between the worlds of reality and fantasy in fiction, and the true potential of the magic in the garden cannot be recognized by Ben Weatherstaff, Mrs. Sowerby, or Mr. Craven until Mary and the other

children first unlock it (239). In fact, the cumulative power of nature and her new friends only change Mary because she actively lets them:

When her mind gradually filled itself with robins, and moorland cottages crowded with children, with queer crabbed old gardeners and common little Yorkshire housemaids, with springtime and with secret gardens coming alive day by day, and also with a moor boy and his "creatures," there was no room left for the disagreeable thoughts which affected her liver and her digestion and made her yellow and tired (Burnett 214).

Thinking of and interacting with her world grants Mary a more generous spirit and the wisdom to forsake disdain and embrace joy.

Mary relinquishes the irritability, indifference, and imperiousness that characterize her life before Misselthwaite and develops contentment, industriousness, and concern for others. However, becoming an acceptable hero does not fully disassociate her from the "Mistress Mary, quite contrary" persona. Elizabeth Keyser argues that Mary remains contrary in some respects as she matures in others, countering the conclusion that Mary grows out of her personality and contending that she still represents little of the Victorian feminine ideal (2). From the beginning of the novel, Mary displays determination and willpower, even in determining not to be happy in her new home, and these traits grow rather than diminish as the story progresses.

Thanks to her isolated upbringing, Mary sees no difficulty in willfully ignoring the wishes of Mr. Craven and Mrs. Medlock in exploring the secret garden and the manor, which at least partially contributes to the disagreeableness observed by adults (Keyser 1). Mary obstinately challenges anyone who dares to deprive her of the secret

garden, becoming as “contrary as she had ever felt in her life” (Burnett 82), and she directs the rage once unleashed on her Ayah at Colin in their altercation over Dickon. As social superiors welcome the advice of Susan Sowerby, supposedly wiser adults encourage Mary’s painful honesty and uncompromising harshness because of their positive effects on Colin. By distinguishing between the qualities that mark Mary as an antihero by modern standards and the “emotional honesty and reliance on one’s own judgment” that set her apart from other child protagonists of the era (Keyser 6), the reader can study Mary’s character development and acknowledge the persistent challenges to convention that Burnett presents.

After following Mary’s antiheroic beginnings, extended moral growth, and final heroism, I now turn to the reasons why Burnett selects an antiheroic protagonist only to reform her. Strictly speaking, *The Secret Garden* could have been written in the vein of numerous Victorian orphan tales, seen through the eyes of an admirable protagonist like Oliver Twist or Burnett’s own Sara Crewe. Despite the prevalence of this Romantic trope, Burnett chose to build her narrative around a sullen, sickly child who must herself undergo transformation before restoring anything or anyone else, evidently believing that the story she wanted to tell required an antihero rather than a traditional hero. No one can name with certainty the prevailing motivation for this decision, but critics like Jill Muller persuasively argue that Mary’s at times painful regeneration results from Burnett’s personal anguish and her conviction that emotional and spiritual poverty poses a greater threat to the individual than physical deprivation (xvii).

Burnett experienced financial hardship as a young woman and her early stories emphasize the importance and benefit of economic independence, but *The Secret Garden*

demonstrates that wealth misused can damage the souls of children and adults. An unpleasant protagonist also allows Burnett to present the theory that individuals possess a greater power over the experiences and emotions they understand: Mary's contrariness gives her a unique insight into Colin's mind and her disregard for convention leads her to voice the harsh truths that adults fear to acknowledge. Showing transformation rather than static goodness elevates virtue and explores the frightening consequences of lacking it.

As demonstrated by theme and plot, the author also places greater value on the inherent goodness and purity of the earth rather than in the Romantic emulation of innocent childhood. Burnett must show the effects of nature on an unwholesome character to adequately communicate this message, and who better to prove the benefits of the natural world than a girl devoid of childlike innocence and curiosity restored by a garden? Burnett convincingly illustrates that unhealthy environments adversely affect children and teach them poor habits in contrast to the nurturing classroom of nature.

Writing about "Mistress Mary, quite contrary" rather than an angelic Lord Fauntleroy or Sarah Crewe also aids the novel in conforming to fixed genre conventions. The change in Mary from dour and miserable to healthy and kind-hearted in many ways represents an extreme form of the coming-of-age story, or what Lynne Vallone describes as bringing the child "out of the vulnerable, incomplete state of childhood and into maturity or proto-adulthood" ("Ideas of Difference" 175). I particularly note the term "proto-adulthood" in this case because Mary does not physically mature more than a year in the course of the novel. Mary stands out as a particularly "vulnerable" child in her susceptibility to the influences of parental neglect, as well as the languid atmosphere of

India, but her later self acquires the maturity to react independently of her environment and find happiness in an English home when it eludes others.

The garden itself includes the elements of a “conversion narrative” (Vallone, “Ideas of Difference” 175). What begins as a sacred space for children to interact and grow, “a secure mini-Arcadia” (P. Hunt 76), ends as a classroom for expected social roles with the welcoming in of first Ben Weatherstaff and then Mrs. Sowerby and Mr. Craven. Although the later portions of the story focus on Colin as the restored heir of Misselthwaite, the majority of *The Secret Garden* concerns itself with Mary’s maturation by tracking her moral progression and predicting her future development into a young woman and mother as she nurtures the garden. Even so, this reading of the text does not fully account for the presence of an antihero, considering that Mary’s bad habits do not intrinsically belong with childhood nor do all the adults around her exist as paragons of virtue.

Burnett’s artistic choices regarding Mary may also suggest a desire to conform to conventions found in girls’ adventure stories, a genre increasing in popularity during this era. As Peter Hunt points out, the early twentieth century saw growing agitation over issues of equality, especially for women and the lower classes (73). Around the time of *The Secret Garden*’s publication, Parliament debated but failed to pass two Conciliation bills offering partial women’s suffrage, and two U.S. states battled over similar amendments (Walsh). These movements greatly affected literature as well, leading to greater criticism of the traditional passive heroine in fiction for girls, and even the greatest proponents of Imperial patriarchy began to recognize the pitfalls of refined feminine domesticity. Sources ranging from *The Colonial Magazine and East India*

Review to the autobiographical works of Catherine Parr Traill confirm that Victorian women could not easily survive as colonial settlers (Bratton 208).

Victorian women played the vital role of preserving the nation through raising healthy children to contribute to imperialistic endeavors, but lack of exercise and vigorous activity did not aid child-bearing or survival in foreign climes. Writers like Bessie Marchant therefore created adventurous colonial settings where semi-independent young women acquired domestic values like economy and nurturing in an attempt to reconcile separate spheres philosophy with the need for feminine strength on the home front. In Marchant's hundred-odd novels, including *A Heroine of the Sea*, *No Ordinary Girl*, and *The Gold-Marked Charm*, a new young woman surfaces who braves the frontier while patiently awaiting a successful marriage (Bratton 215-216). Mary Lennox does not conquer a foreign kingdom or even the Yorkshire moors, but she does possess strength of character and her shift from indifference in India to activeness in Britain reinvigorates her spirit. At the same time, the skills she develops arguably reinforce the social order and restore her to more pioneering but still submissive female roles.

Besides depicting positive transformation and conforming to certain generic standards, *The Secret Garden* gives readers a realistic and relatable protagonist as opposed to a woodenly moral example. As addressed earlier, children's literature began primarily as didactic writings that impress on young readers the benefits of virtue and the consequences of wickedness. Even when authors wrote to entertain children, they often depicted imaginative situations and characters unlike their readers that could not easily transfer to real-life application. In fact, Northrop Frye represents an antihero as "inferior in power or intelligence" to, and therefore very unlike, the average reader (34).

Nevertheless, children can recognize their superiority to Mary and disregard her as a role model, while still relating to her convincing portrayal and pitying her for her unwholesome upbringing.

Compared to the perpetually happy and innocent Dickon, Mary displays a range of emotions that a child can understand and empathize with. Writer Madeleine L'Engle celebrates the fallibility of characters like Mary, considering them true heroes because of what they teach about the human experience, in this case that an emotionally fragile girl can learn to relate to the world (121-122). Other characters like Sara Crewe achieve happiness after enduring loss, but they have no realistic flaws and consequently lack Mary's enduring appeal. The unpleasant qualities that Mary embodies at the novel's beginning, qualities that children inevitably tap into on occasion, give hope that anyone can overcome a difficult past and emerge as an admirable, productive individual.

Drawing Mary as an antihero helps Burnett depict transformation and maturity, conform to genre conventions for coming-of-age and girls' adventure stories, and present a relatable protagonist to young readers. However, another significant facet of the antihero's role in fiction as a whole illuminates other potential purposes woven into *The Secret Garden*. Frye identifies the antihero as most often found in the ironic or satiric modes, and satire as a genre requires an "object of attack" (224). Burnett clearly attacks individual characters like the frivolous Mrs. Lennox, cruel Mrs. Medlock, and weak Archibald Craven, but the extent to which she challenges or conforms to contemporary social norms is less certain. The amount and variety of criticism suggests that Burnett undermines some and upholds other values of her time period.

Traditional interpretations of the novel follow the progression of Mary Lennox from ornery child to proper Victorian young lady, noting how the novel emphasizes her improvement in appearance, kindness, and nurturance and supplants her as the protagonist with the dominant male figures of Archibald and Colin Craven. Despite Mary's initial sullenness, transformation, and later characterization, the novel depicts a complicated web of gender dynamics that by turns liberates and subordinates women. The text primarily elevates the role of women as mothers, supported by the unhappiness of Mary and Colin and the stability of the Sowerby family. Nevertheless, both male and female characters in the story mother, indicating the potential success of the Craven family were Mr. Craven to accept his parental role. In a similar contrast, Burnett firmly advocates rigorous activity for women to match their male counterparts, but Mary never escapes the enclosed, domestic space of the garden, even as Dickon frequently explores the moors. Despite these and other disparities, Mary's status as an antihero more than any other aspect of the novel provides the strongest evidence that Burnett frequently undermines gender stereotypes.

The novel begins with parental neglect, one of the clear reasons behind Mary Lennox's contrariness. Although in this case mother and father could be blamed equally, the stereotypical association of women with child-rearing and other household duties subtly shifts the greatest responsibility to Mrs. Lennox; the reader actually never sees Mr. Lennox, presumably because he has no place in the nursery or colonial parenting. This emphasis on the importance of mothers in shaping their children becomes more apparent with the addition of motherless Colin because the existence and occasional presence of a living father only worsens Colin's hypochondria and petulance. Here Craven utterly fails

at his Victorian parental duty to lead his children, particularly sons, into maturity. Burnett paints a world without mothers as chaotic and unhealthy for children regardless of their other adult influences. In contrast, Martha and Dickon enjoy stable familial relationships as well as emotional and spiritual well-being despite their lack of a father. By demonstrating the profound effect of poor mothering on her antihero, Burnett treats the stereotypical female role as essential to the healthiness of children and society as a whole.

Those mothers who do feature significantly in the story succeed in shaping the moral characters of those around them and exert a surprising amount of autonomy. Susan Sowerby has a positive impact on the growth and transformation of both Mary and Colin, since her belief in freedom and outdoor activity for all her children teaches Dickon about communion with nature and Martha about self-reliance, characteristics they pass on to the two disagreeable children. Craven even defers to Mrs. Sowerby in matters regarding the education of his ward, although he could easily seek the advice of women or professionals nearer to his own class. Mrs. Sowerby's status as a mother evidently outweighs her position as a subservient peasant, and her maternal instincts lead her to care for unwanted creatures that Craven and Mrs. Medlock shun. She becomes in essence a mother to all, with full power over her own offspring and the motherless children at Misselthwaite.

Although the text repeatedly mentions Lilius Craven's death and the emotional disorder that ensues, she remains almost a physical presence throughout the novel in the garden and in the portrait Colin keeps. The children, particularly Colin, ascribe the healing power of the secret garden to a nonspecific Magic equated with life-giving

energy and goodness. However, Susan Sowerby indirectly associates this force with Mrs. Craven, saying “Thy own mother's in this 'ere very garden, I do believe. She couldna' keep out of it” (213). The idea of a loving maternal spirit watching over her son and guiding him towards rehabilitation converges convincingly with the characterization of the pseudo-pagan Magic. Colin himself creates a stronger correlation between his mother and Magic when he explains why he uncovered her portrait: “I felt as if the Magic was filling the room...She looked right down at me as if she were laughing because she was glad I was standing there...I think she must have been a sort of Magic person perhaps” (205). The future scientist and master of Misselthwaite can only strive to understand and control the Magic, not produce it. That ability lies with the women in the novel, perhaps eventually even with Mary herself.

Besides elevating literal mothers, Burnett celebrates the qualities associated with femininity and praises males who embrace their feminine sides. Anna Krugovoy Silver notes that Dickon nourishes and protects plants and teaches Mary the proper ways to care for them herself, fulfilling the duty of mother to his friend and the garden as well as supplying expertise in a traditionally domestic space (195-196). Additionally, he adopts stranded creatures of all types, providing the young with milk from a bottle. Surly Ben Weatherstaff similarly functions as a mother figure by befriending the robin abandoned by its brood and sustaining life in the garden when all others abandon it (Parsons 262). Expanding conceptions of motherhood grants further value to the task and deemphasizes the differences between the roles of men and women; Archibald Craven, the only prominent male figure who does not nurture, appears as an impotent character and a pernicious influence on Misselthwaite in comparison to men identified with the feminine.

In addition to the veneration of mothers, the text presents alternatives to traditional gender roles; Elizabeth Keyser goes so far as to call Mary “free from sex-role stereotypes” (9). Although Victorians associated gardens and flowers with feminine virtues and the domestic, opinion varied on the amount of direct involvement women should have with the dirty side of gardening (Price 5). Middle-class and especially aristocratic women had gardeners, like Ben Weatherstaff, to take care of the unseemly work of planting and weeding. In contrast, Mary Lennox immediately throws herself into the difficult labor of gardening, finding great pleasure in giving the plants room to “breathe” and working up an appetite in the process (67). This willingness to abandon gentility for the sake of activity and excitement preserve Mary as a nontraditional protagonist compared to the Victorian view of female heroines based on passivity and submission (Bratton 209).

As Mary improves in temperament through exercise and cooperative play, she does not embrace acceptable girlish preoccupations. She discovers with relief that Mr. Craven has sent her books, games, and a writing desk, “wondering what she should do” if he ever sent her a doll (135). Never in the course of her maturation does Mary decide to abandon the outdoor work of the garden and begin learning housekeeping or playing with dolls. Instead, she follows in the footsteps of Dickon and Ben Weatherstaff by working the soil and develops a sense of nurture not limited to the home and conventional nuclear family (Silver 199). Mary also flouts the instructions of those in charge of her upbringing, including Mrs. Medlock and Ben, in searching for the garden and the crying voice in the house. She presumably has some authority over the servants as an upper-class child, but she repeatedly disobeys instructions knowing they come from her absent

Uncle Craven. Though she learns to respond to the world with appropriate emotions, Mary's independence and her burgeoning belief in her own value thrive in the garden apart from fixed gender roles.

The Secret Garden addresses other relevant ideologies besides those pertaining to gender roles, particularly imperialism and colonialism. Melanie Eckford-Prossor proposes the intriguing theory that the concept of childhood embraced by nineteenth-century Britain rose out of its Imperial mindset rather than the other way around (238). She says that, just as colonial administrators and Orientalists offer imperfect perspectives about those they subjugate, child psychologists attempt to "translate" childhood into something adults can analyze and define (239). The translation process inscribes adult desires and beliefs onto children themselves in an attempt to understand and thereby control them, essentially constructing childhood as a "colonized" state. In this sense, Burnett rejects Imperial childhood by creating a child protagonist who does not possess the desired characteristics of a silent and obedient child or present an appropriate role model to real children. She does, however, enter the more explicit colonial discourse of the British Empire and uphold the dominant mindset on the East.

The Secret Garden begins in India, depicting an estate riddled with disease and inhabited by natives viewed as inferior. While the text does not celebrate the abuse that Mary Lennox inflicts on her native servants, it does imply that the constant indulgence and submission of her Ayah and other attendants contributes to Mary's domineering personality. Burnett goes even further, stating in the opening pages that Mary's sickly sullenness develops "because she was born in India," and the climate contributes to her continuing unpleasantness (7). In one of the novel's most poignant scenes, Mary finds

herself alone and forgotten in a house consumed by cholera and then abandoned by the Indian staff as soon as the British owners die. Burnett maintains that India as much as Mary's absent parents stunts her growth and creates chaos.

When Mary comes to Misselthwaite, she must not only learn how to conduct healthy relationships with others but also adjust to an unknown culture. Though undoubtedly marked as British in India, Mary does not initially realize how different her new home is from her birthplace. She discovers her "imperious little Indian way" to be entirely inappropriate in dealing with independent English servants like Martha and Ben Weatherstaff, who refuse to *salaam* or obey her unquestioningly (Burnett 24). The returning colonial subject presented a unique problem for British society, and Burnett identifies the solution to poor health and poor manners as a strong dose of English life, where citizens feel pride in their stations and the soil produces a good harvest.

Ironically, Phillips points out that the text rejects Indian ways only to reconstitute Yorkshire as a microcosm of India. Colin Craven's "home grown" despotism does not disappear but arguably increases as the story progresses, shifting from total control in his bedroom to a kingly reign in the secret garden (Phillips 179). The portrayal of Colin as a rajah continues until the novel's conclusion, where he leads a procession of sorts that places all of the characters into their proper spheres, with Ben Weatherstaff ahead only of the animals. Ben's submission to Colin marks another transference of Empire to England and belies the earlier claim that "a cross, sturdy old Yorkshire man was not accustomed to salaam to his masters, and be merely commanded by them to do things" (Burnett 74); on the contrary, the reader finds that in regards to Master Colin, Ben Weatherstaff can salaam with the best.

Mary herself grows increasingly awed of her cousin and his mysticism, but this contradictory response to the culture of the colonized reflects both the scorn for the subaltern and the fascination with the exotic that characterize imperialism. She also willingly shares stories of India and songs from her Ayah despite an entirely miserable existence there, embracing the attitudes of imperialism wherever she lives. So long as dominance over British subjects remains safely hidden, like the ivory elephants that Mary discovers in a private room, Burnett finds no problem adopting and promoting British superiority and the despotic domination of male heirs.

So far this analysis has examined the author's reasons for writing an antihero into the text and the relationship of that antihero to social conventions. A crucial question remains for studying the antihero in *children's literature*: can the protagonist remain flawed and irredeemable or do adult concerns for child readers necessitate that the character undergo at least some moral development? In the case of Mary Lennox, the character does leave behind antiheroism to display kindness, initiative, and nobility. Determining why sheds light on whether Burnett truly directed her conversion or bowed to expectations for the body of children's literature.

Kay Sambell in discussing dystopian works produced for younger readers maintains that authors generally do not follow through on the pessimism and meaninglessness found in similar books written for adults. A measure of hope seems important for children because of their unique potential to heed the warnings of these texts and respond with constructive solutions as adults (377). *The Secret Garden* appropriately focuses on hope through the "psychological miracle" that Mary and Colin

experience (Lurie 141), with Burnett gladly functioning as a “fairy godmother” that offers children an imaginative escape from real suffering (Keyser 10).

Comparing the novel to other related works further supports the idea that Mary’s transformation from antihero to traditional hero comes from a desire to placate implied adult readers. Several scholars note the similarities in theme and location between *The Secret Garden* and the works of the Brontës, and Susan James analyzes specific commonalities between Burnett’s text and *Wuthering Heights*. She notes, for example, that both books deal with strong emotions of love and loss, connecting Heathcliff and Archibald Craven in their anguish over lost love and conflicting feelings toward the children who resemble them (65-66). Nevertheless, James equates the deemphasizing of turbulent emotions by Burnett and the positive resolution for Craven and his family with the task of adapting complex topics for the young. If Burnett labors in these instances to soften adult themes and restore her characters from near tragedy for the sake of protecting her readers, then Mary’s growth from disagreeable to amiable likely stems from comparable motives.

Although some authors undoubtedly lessen the cynicism of texts directed at young readers, other factors besides the intended audience offer more compelling reasons for Mary’s eventual conversion. Based on Burnett’s consistently conflicted authorial relationship to contemporary problems, I suspect that the need to uphold entrenched cultural values would compromise Mary Lennox as an antihero in a novel directed toward any age group. Furthermore, Stephen Roxburgh examines the text in terms of larger archetypal storylines, noting common tropes like the presence of a doppelganger for the protagonist (Colin) and a descent into and return from a lower world (his dark and

suffocating bedroom). Mary's path aligns with the romance genre, following her inner transformation and ending in a symbolic Eden; from this perspective, the rehabilitation of her double and the cultivation of her garden brings her story full circle and leaves no room for immorality in her behavior.

Frances Hodgson Burnett wrote prolifically during her career, but no text remains so much beloved or so widely read among contemporary audiences as *The Secret Garden*. Opinion varies widely regarding Mary Lennox, with some readers dismissing her as merely "unlikeable" and "unattractive" (Keyser 1) and others refusing to consider her as antiheroic at all (L'Engle 124). Though I disagree with L'Engle's understanding of the antihero in literary tradition, I concur with Keyser that Mary's complicated character forces readers to grapple with her regardless of their feelings. She stands out as the most memorable of the novel's characters and creates uncertainty about Burnett's socio-cultural views.

As an antihero who develops a conscience, Mary Lennox joins the tradition of the coming-of-age story, the Imperial adventure story, and the romance; she challenges Victorian gender dynamics and upholds the colonial mindset; and she does so because Burnett truly believes in the power to change and the possibility of happiness for children and adults. Whether creativity or conformity carried a greater influence on the writer's pen, the contrariness of Mistress Mary embeds her in the hearts of children and the young at heart more deeply than perfection ever could.

Scheme If You Believe in Fairies

Since Burnett introduced the disagreeable Mary Lennox, numerous authors for children have created protagonists similarly “lacking in heroic qualities” but possessing destructive urges. In recent years, Eoin Colfer introduced young readers to an antihero who commits not only immoral actions but also true crimes in the legal sense. Certainly the celebration of the rebel or outlaw in popular culture has flourished throughout the last century, but the increasing inclusion of traditionally adult genres like detective fiction in children’s literature has accelerated the shift from young hero to young antihero. Writers for the young face greater challenges in presenting an antiheroic character deemed acceptable by adults and those willing to undergo such scrutiny probably have something important to say. Children’s author Francesca Simon expresses genuine fondness for “people who swagger through life with a fierce edge and a stubborn refusal to behave themselves,” and notes that two-thirds of her favorite antiheroes come from children’s books (Simon). Colfer evidently agrees, remarking that *Artemis Fowl II* began as a minor antagonist in his book but eventually emerged as the protagonist because the author “enjoyed writing about him” (Colfer, “Crime Pays”). Like Burnett, Colfer builds his narrative around a cold, cynical child for specific and deducible purposes, at least some of which spring from personal reasons.

Much like in *The Secret Garden*, the author wastes no time in enumerating the antiheroic qualities of the protagonist. The very name Artemis Fowl comically alerts the reader to his foul nature and more subtly alludes to his role in hunting vulnerable prey. The framing prologue directly establishes Artemis as a criminal and a genius, though those two characteristics are not directly linked. The unknown narrator identifies the

main event of the story as a “villainous venture” and juxtaposes Artemis against the “victims” of his enterprise (Colfer, *Artemis Fowl* 1). The potentially global ramifications of the scheme, overtly stated in dramatic, suspenseful language, indicate both Artemis’s ability and his willingness to risk harm to others in order to achieve his mercenary ends. Of course, the frame contrasts this ruthlessness with Artemis’s age, twelve years old during the events of the novel. As some teens might sit down to play video games, Artemis Fowl cracks his knuckles and begins to “plot dastardly acts” (30).

Money does indeed form his primary motivation for illegal activities, as Artemis seeks to restore the fortune acquired by his father through organized crime and lost in risky business ventures. Although the text points out that “the Fowls were not left destitute” (29), Artemis cannot bear to possess any less than the billions he views as rightfully, if not legally, his. Artemis sees gold as the answer to his financial problems, the objective of his exploitative missions, and the best reason to exert his energy, resources, and vast intelligence. Together Artemis and his long-suffering bodyguard Butler trek across the world in search of the proverbial but in this case quite literal “gold at the end of the rainbow” (7). Eventually, Artemis will kidnap a mysterious otherworldly creature, sustain serious damage to his mansion, and risk his life and the lives of his closest associates for the chance to irrevocably attain a fairy cache. One might expect that the protagonist would learn his lesson and choose decency over wealth, but at least initially Artemis prefers to marvel at the gold ingots he obtains with an awe approaching worship.

In addition to his formidable intellect, Artemis possesses the arrogance of someone much older, doubtless because of his long experience with solving puzzles in

general and committing daring crimes in particular. A code printed along the pages of some editions of the novel reveals the foiling of a plot against the mayor of Dublin by a six-year-old Artemis Fowl (“Artemis Fowl Code”). The narrator frequently invokes the overweening confidence of the protagonist, declaring firmly that “a new empire would rise, with Artemis Fowl the Second at its head” (Colfer, *Artemis* 14) and expressing certainty that the boy will succeed in obtaining fairy gold. Only when a troll begins destroying his mansion does Artemis experience doubt, and like a character in a Greek tragedy, his intellectual vanity nearly ruins him. The centaur Foaly aptly remarks, “Confidence is ignorance. If you’re feeling cocky, there’s something you don’t know” (44). These words apply to Artemis despite his formidable intellect, and he must work harder to again turn the tables on his adversaries.

Artemis Fowl’s words and actions also support his negative characterization. The first major act of villainy he commits involves the blackmail and near-poisoning of a weakened fairy. Artemis learns the details of the underground fairy community and how to exploit them from an ancestral tome he steals from an alcoholic sprite. In his negotiations with the sprite, Artemis suggests a bargain for her copy of the book, an offer she refuses. Undeterred, he secretly administers a lethal substance to the creature and offers an antidote only if she surrenders her knowledge. This new and crueler plan succeeds but it also confirms what the seemingly exaggerated prologue depicts: an amoral youth whose resources match his ambition. Artemis secures both his book and the antipathy of the reader, occupying an unusual position for the protagonist at the conclusion of the first chapter.

The novel as a whole revolves around the kidnapping and imprisonment of the fairy Holly Short. Artemis and Butler kidnap Holly fairly humanely with sedatives, but they shortly progress to increasingly heinous crimes. Artemis lays a trap for Holly's superior officer, Commander Root, by rigging a rickety whaler with explosives; the trap intends to send the message that the humans must not be trifled with, but Root barely escapes the ship alive. Rather than reveal his possession of the Book, Artemis deceives Holly when she wakes up in Fowl Manor into believing that *she* confessed the secrets of her people under coercion. At this point, Holly "found him so evil, she couldn't even find the words" (122). After later defeating the forces of the Lower Elements Police, Artemis submits a final demand for his ransom money. He recognizes that his enemies intend to detonate a biological weapon rather than give up their gold, but he knows how to escape and declares he will leave Holly Short to die if his demands are not met. Artemis's effective mind games help persuade the fairies to rethink their options and eventually send in the ransom.

Additionally, Artemis exercises dominance over his employees despite their repeated demonstrations of allegiance. The massive Butler submits to his master in everything, shocking witnesses and increasing their respect for Artemis. The child criminal frequently resorts to such elaborate schemes because he expects that Butler will save him from danger and intimidate his opponents. Butler only leaves Artemis once to save his sister Juliet, but Artemis expresses little loyalty to the man who has served him since birth. When a troll mortally wounds Butler, Artemis merely expresses anxiety that his bodyguard cannot protect him from future attacks.

Juliet also serves the Fowl family faithfully, enduring the whims of the mentally ill matron Angeline Fowl, but she and her brother frequently must drop their duties and attend to the manual labor necessary to complete Artemis's illegal ventures. When Artemis risks their lives by drugging them all to escape the time field, Butler truly believes that they will not survive. Artemis frequently acts against the wishes and expectations of those closest to him as well as those he considers enemies, preventing the reader from viewing the novel as a simple battle between opposing sides.

The harshest opinions of Artemis Fowl unsurprisingly come from the fairies, but their opinions are for the most part justified. Fairies generally view humans with disfavor, as they blame them for the forced seclusion of the fairy community and the destruction and pollution of the natural world. The deep affinity between fairies and the earth classifies industrialization and expansion as terrible crimes. This connection also creates a bond between fairies and minerals (like gold), though the fairies' desire for them does not reach the selfish extreme of what many humans feel. Magical people hesitate to harm any other creatures, even the most dangerous like trolls or humans, and they especially resent the harm that humankind brings on other creatures. Artemis represents for them the worst about humanity: he exploits those weaker than himself, he intends to steal their precious gold, and he feels no remorse for the environmental consequences.

More particularly, however, Artemis represents a threat to the secrecy of the fairy world. For their own protection, fairies jealously guard their separate existence from the above-ground world. Much like with Muggles in J. K. Rowling's wizarding world, fairies frequently resort to memory wipes and other magical techniques after a fairy

sighting among humans, and Foaly shares the responsibility of protecting the underground world from mining and monitoring. With the acquisition of the book, Artemis Fowl obtains many of the secrets of fairy life and the ability to expose fairies for profit or continue to exploit them privately. Top fairy officials recognize the power Fowl holds over them primarily because of his knowledge rather than his kidnapping of Holly, and this leaves them willing to deploy a biological weapon despite their usual reluctance to destroy life. This hatred of their “most feared enemy” paves the way for future clashes between fairies and Artemis Fowl, as hinted at in the novel’s epilogue (279).

Although his actions alone leave little room for a sympathetic interpretation, Colfer clearly indicates the disparity between Artemis’s outward persona and his inward emotional turmoil. Mere pages after he brutally blackmails the feeble sprite, Fowl visits his bed-ridden and unstable mother. When she fails to recognize her own son and speaks absentmindedly of his likely deceased father, the boy tries to ignore his “rebellious tears” (23) and the “uncharacteristic” lump in his throat (21); their display may be uncommon, but feelings of grief clearly haunt Artemis Fowl, do what he might to suppress them. He also carefully hides expressions of amusement and triumph behind a cold and cynical façade, refusing even to make jokes or laugh at his opponents. His solution to blocking the fairy Mesmer, wearing sunglasses, also conveniently hides his face from those who would try to interpret his feelings. Once during hostage negotiations Artemis even has to remind himself to “put on his best sinister face” (152), and at these moments the reader recognizes a child playacting in a situation far beyond his depth. Most portentous for his future, Artemis secretly feels guilt over his treatment of the captive Holly Short and doubt regarding the necessity of his actions. Fowl frequently ignores his better nature,

but he decidedly has a conscience and this factor adds much greater dimension to the young criminal.

Similarly, his treatment of Butler and Juliet does not strictly reflect his concern for them or his respect for their opinions. Colfer directly states that “Butler was the closest [thing] Artemis had to a father” (16), and although the bodyguard trusts his charge implicitly in matters of planning, he also offers valuable advice to Artemis that the master considers thoughtfully. Although he does not have the kind of intimate relationship with Juliet that he does with Butler, Artemis also displays a subtle affection for her. He permits her to question his ideas, address him on terms of equality, and even call him by a rather embarrassing childhood nickname. Artemis even hesitates to kidnap Holly initially when he discovers she is female because he thinks of Juliet. He nevertheless continues with plans that endanger Butler and Juliet, but in fairness Fowl also risks his own life on each of these occasions; in short, he cares for them as much as he does for himself.

The implied emotional depths of Artemis Fowl may not sufficiently tip the balance when measured against his behavior, but one additional factor gleaned from the epilogue adds further weight to his potential goodness. Colfer reveals the narrator to be the fairy psychologist Dr. J. Argon, mentioned briefly in the body of the text. He persuades the reader to agree with his prognosis, that Artemis Fowl poses a continual danger to the fairy world and his own race, and dismisses “the tendency to romanticize” him (279). The discovery that the narrator is unreliable challenges negative assumptions about the protagonist and increases the likelihood that a totally unscrupulous Artemis

oversimplifies the situation. One even wonders in hindsight if Dr. Argon conceals additional details of the saga that could place Fowl in a more complimentary light.

On occasion, Artemis's actions and conversations also indicate his recognition of personal ethical principles, even if he typically disregards them. These moral qualities emerge most plainly when he speaks with his mother. In her fragile state, Angeline sinks into contented delusions and painful depressions by turn. Artemis always addresses her with gentleness and respect, attempting to make her as comfortable as possible and enduring rejection when she fails to recognize him. He chooses to maintain her illusions rather than to force her to accept that his father probably will never return, even pretending to be his grandfather for the sake of her happiness. Before the fairies attack the manor to retrieve Holly, Artemis ensures his mother's safety, protecting her even from the dangers of the bio bomb that Artemis, Butler, and Juliet face. Few of Artemis Fowl's actions can be viewed as entirely selfless, but although Dr. J. Argon believes otherwise, the boy obviously still needs and desires his mother's care.

As previously mentioned, the text identifies gold as the main objective of the kidnapping scenario, as Artemis intends to restore his family fortune to untold billions. However, the narrator also gives the story of Artemis Fowl Sr., his ill-fated business deals with the Russian mafia, and his disappearance after an explosion at sea. The text additionally alludes to his son's attempts to find him. Even after launching his kidnapping plan, Artemis stops everything when he believes his father has returned: "Lately, since he'd hatched this fairy scheme, it was almost as if his father had shifted to the back of his mind. Artemis felt guilt churn his stomach. He had given up. Given up on his own father... What was he becoming? His father was the priority here, not some

moneymaking scheme” (114-115). The identification of Fowl Sr., rather than wealth, as “the priority” seems to belie the narrator’s earlier assertion, indicating that Artemis either lies to himself as well as others or intends to spend his profits on something other than more dastardly schemes.

Artemis Fowl’s final action conclusively supports the previous assumption: after achieving an irrevocable victory over the fairies, Artemis exchanges half of the ransom money for one wish. The appearance of a sound and healthy Angeline Fowl on the stairs in the final pages reveals the nature of this wish. Despite his earlier misgivings about hiding his criminal activities if his mother recovered, Artemis considers her restoration worth tons of gold and the necessary evil of returning to school and a fairly normal childhood. In fact, he realizes that the harrowing escape occurs on Christmas Day, making the granted wish surprisingly sentimental. Artemis for a moment becomes “a boy again” (277), grateful for the gift of his mother’s health. Dr. Argon maintains that Artemis made his decision because “Social Services were already investigating his case” (279), but no attentive reader can believe him.

In addition to his more ambiguous inner workings and actions, Artemis often commands the respect or even admiration of those around him. If Fowl views Butler as a surrogate father, then Butler views the child as one of his only friends. Butler watches the kidnapping plans unfold with pride and occasionally glee, consistently placing his trust in the much younger Artemis to rescue them out of the direst circumstances. He marvels that the boy is always “two steps ahead,” rarely offering suggestions and frequently appreciating his master’s intellect (17). The fairy officials also express awe that Fowl and his companions manage to outwit them and survive the bio bomb, holding

to the ancient rules that dictate a human can keep any gold he successfully obtains and leaving Fowl Manor without further attack. And despite hours of captivity, Holly herself pleads with Artemis to return the gold and save himself and begs her superiors to employ other tactics besides the bio bomb. After learning that Fowl and the others survived, she anticipates the chance to face Artemis again and hopefully outmaneuver him, and the reader likewise looks forward to future confrontations between the two.

Celia Keenan notes that *Artemis Fowl* attempts to merge numerous genres, like science fiction, detective fiction, and thriller, into a successful whole (258), genres still fairly new for adults and virtually non-existent for children in Burnett's era. The even larger cultural chasm separating Burnett and Colfer leads to vast differences in narrative structure, style, and content; nevertheless, the blatantly unheroic Artemis still does not represent the majority of protagonists in the twenty-first century. Although the frequency of antiheroes in children's literature has increased over the past one hundred years, the same questions remain pertinent regarding the role and function of these characters for young readers. Just as Burnett wrote out of a long-standing tradition of worthy orphan stories, Colfer joins a long list of writers fascinated with the potential of the child genius. As Burnett moves away from the saintly orphan, Colfer recasts the child genius character type as evil rather than pure-hearted. Several intriguing possibilities can account for Colfer's choice to shift his protagonist from virtuous fairy Holly to villainous pre-teen Artemis.

For modern child readers, Artemis better reflects their increasing understanding of irony and ambiguity in real life. Gienna Sloan in *The Child as Critic* discusses the four narrative patterns identified by Northrop Frye and how they apply to children's

literature, contending that the satirical/ironic mode dominates adult fiction of the last century and appears clearly defined in fiction for young people after 1950 (55). Here the antihero finds his true home as an inferior or at least fallible protagonist who frequently communicates powerlessness against the world or the failure of morality (79). While high romance and larger-than-life heroes continue to thrive in much fantasy literature for children, modern writers more frequently address topics considered taboo for child readers and acknowledge the often harsh realities of an urbanized, post-modern society. Some go so far as to herald the end of heroism in life and literature (Jones and Watkins 1). *Artemis Fowl* emerges out of an age where children consciously embrace irony and often lose interest in the traditional. To fully engage today's cynical young readers, Colfer offers an exaggerated portrait of a bored adolescent searching for new ways to exercise his intellect and support his personal spending habits.

By offering an ironic perspective on the child protagonist, Colfer succeeds in interesting a generation who enjoy a virtually limitless availability of information. Today's children share the same speedy and convenient access to television and the Internet as adults do and make use of them as frequently. Consequently, writers must adjust the way they approach material to succeed in reaching young readers. Joshua Meyrowitz notes that the development of digital media has greatly impacted the socialization process, diversifying the information available to children and weakening their reliance on adults for that information (27). The early exposure to the adult world through television and the Internet leads to a growing sense of mistrust and a youthful acceptance of the gap between appearance and reality, a combination of "urban disaffection, snarky wisdom, and 'been there, done that' distance" (Lerer 307). Colfer

gives these young people a protagonist like them. Artemis finds nothing impressive beyond his own intellect and remains a step ahead of his antagonists by anticipating their responses. He excels in bluffing and double-talk because he fails to see a sufficient difference between truth and fiction and possesses the imagination for half-truths rather than outright lies (Lerer 315). The “self-consciously post-modern” perspective of *Artemis Fowl* humorously acknowledges real concerns about the deceitful adult world while showing that a child can succeed and even triumph over it. (Keenan 267).

Colfer also develops his plot with an ironic perspective because his story is only one of many books that feature a young protagonist dealing with magic or family troubles. Overflowing libraries, numerous lists of prize-winners, and a growing canon of children’s literature evoke a sense that everything that needs saying has already been said. Writers retell adult stories for children and allow the popularity of other books to dictate their ideas. To enjoy lasting success, literature for children must therefore reflect the desire for originality in the face of predictability. Eoin Colfer personally experienced this phenomenon when he set out to write a collection of Irish myths and legends. After conducting research, he decided that too many excellent works of this kind already existed and promptly began to rethink his plans (Keenan 260). *Artemis Fowl* accordingly draws on folklore but drastically departs from traditional fairytales by featuring a protagonist who exploits fairies and escapes punishment for his crimes.

Additionally, Colfer addresses conventions of traditional children’s literature from an ironic standpoint, knowing that irony succeeds in transforming the old-fashioned and clichéd into the fresh and witty. For example, the ancient mythological hero possesses greater power, intellect and strength of character than mere mortals. Traces of

this figure can be observed in early children's literature, where a weak and inexperienced child nevertheless instructs her elders in purity and natural wisdom. Artemis Fowl certainly possesses the superior intellect of a hero but also presents an equivalently distorted moral compass. Like the late-Victorian antiheroes of a decaying empire, Artemis embodies a vast potential for heroism in his adultlike autonomy and genius, but a potential wasted in "power unmoored from its ethical base" (Libby 10). Colfer mockingly distinguishes Artemis from ideas of childhood purity and superhuman heroics, claiming the attention of readers who think they know what to expect from a juvenile novel.

Despite the developments in children's literature since its explosive growth in the nineteenth century, the writer for children faces the same challenge of creating a protagonist with whom readers can relate and sympathize. Like the increased reliance on irony, the growing number of antiheroes in children's fiction reflects a more ambiguous view of childhood. Lynne Vallone argues that all children's literature falls into two categories: conversion narratives view childhood as essentially universal and focus on the maturation process while resistant narratives understand childhood as diverse and focus on the individual differences between children ("Ideas of Difference" 175). Despite his atypical activities, Artemis Fowl shares much common ground with modern adolescents and his story represents a reshaped conversion narrative for the twenty-first century, featuring a fresh look at traditional narrative cycles and addressing issues deemed most important for many modern adolescents.

Even the most radical of children's books must deal with traditional ideas "in our conceptions of childhood and the process of maturing...[and] deal with freedom and

constriction, home and exile, escape and acceptance,” as Perry Nodelman delineates (qtd. in P. Hunt 71). Artemis the criminal genius must still manage his own problems with “freedom and constriction” as he wreaks havoc on the fairy world apart from the watchful eyes of his parents. The boy revels in his independence but struggles with conflicting emotions over the events that lead to that independence. Artemis unquestionably desires the discovery and return of his father, pouring all of his resources into surveillance and rescue operations, and he likewise worries over his mother’s mental disturbances. Nevertheless, he knows the return of his parents to health and authority will “signal the end of his own extraordinary freedom” (Colfer, *Artemis* 20). Only after the success of his money-making enterprise does Artemis decide to save his mother and sacrifice a portion of his autonomy. As real life reveals, obtaining one’s desires usually proves less appealing than imagined, and Artemis’s triumph over the fairies leads him to conclude that a cache of gold brings him no closer to happiness. In fact, sacrificing his enormous freedom for his mother’s health brings him more emotional fulfillment and an understanding of the purpose of freedom: to enjoy the things that truly matter.

The novel does not follow the common home-away-home pattern of much of children’s literature, but it does address the topics of home and acceptance. Artemis travels extensively to enact his plans against the fairies, but Fowl Manor provides a sense of security and control for the grieving child. Artemis takes full tactical advantage of his estate and possesses a decided edge over his adversaries who do not know the terrain. This symbolic seat of power for Artemis protects him from the worst of the physical assaults and contributes to the promise of happy domestic life at the story’s conclusion. Since Artemis has no real friends apart from his family and employees, Colfer in many

ways evokes the traditional images of safety and the home found in children's literature by depicting the manor as a fortress and emotional refuge. Any child, villainous or otherwise, can understand the deep attachment to familiarity and the struggle to balance freedom with the protection of home.

Artemis Fowl also addresses the strong connection between young people and technology, a relationship that the adult writer may only partially experience himself. While any child of the millennial generation has grown up with smart phones and the Internet, their parents must learn to adapt to new technologies. Peter Hunt remarks that science-fiction for children often paradoxically expresses adult fears of technology that do not apply to children "for whom technology is a given" (72). Colfer succeeds in escaping this pitfall by lovingly describing imaginary advances of fairies and frequently emphasizing his child genius's affinity for technology. An *Artemis Fowl* could stand no chance of triumph in the contemporary fiction of a century ago because access to computer surveillance, hacking skills, and modern weaponry make his criminal empire possible.

The characters make mention and use of "computer technology, laptop and mainframe, mobile phones, DVD collections and the world of cinema," and the primary text includes a variety of other documents and media to further the story (Keenan 266). Rather than fearing the formidable equipment of the fairies, Artemis embraces it for his own ends. Despite the danger of some innovations, the reader cannot help but observe the delight for gadgetry that Colfer expresses. For Millennials and future generations, Artemis's command of electronics is cause for admiration and excitement, as art imitates life and technology dominates the literature and experiences of modern children.

Returning to the point made by Vallone, that all stories for children can be classed as conversion or resistant narratives, *Artemis Fowl* also shares characteristics with a resistant narrative in its portrayal of a child criminal prodigy and tech-savvy fairies distanced from their more traditional depictions. All children struggle with similar issues in growing up, but each child also endures particular troubles. Colfer concedes this fact by depicting mature situations once deemed inappropriate for children or shielded from their knowledge. Artemis must cope with his mother's mental deterioration, for example, a far from universal problem among adolescents but an increasingly relevant one when more people are diagnosed and treated for mental disorders than ever before. Artemis also deals with the absence of his father, not necessarily through death, another situation that numerous children encounter and that children's book authors frequently depict. More than other media, books have the opportunity to explain in detail the emotional effects of mental illness and loss, allowing for "more empathy to develop with the characters" among readers (Wykes 308).

Of course, Artemis's most distinguishing characteristic is his intellect, which not only aids him in his criminal enterprises but also presents its own challenges. He purposely removes himself from those he considers inferior but he unintentionally alienates himself from even his friends by talking beyond their understanding. His overconfidence also handicaps him on occasion and only by learning from his failures can Artemis defeat his opponents at last. Colfer respects and acknowledges that his readers face particular obstacles and consequently crafts a character who engages with unique but relatable struggles. The hiccups in Artemis's outlandish plans offer a humorous outlook on the trials of life, but the presence of realistic problems like

Angeline Fowl's illness and Artemis Fowl Sr.'s absence lend dignity to those who survive and overcome them.

Besides providing a relatable protagonist, Colfer describes a world in which a child holds as much power as any adult on earth. Although the average child probably has no desire to run a criminal empire, she occasionally must feel the chafe of adult constraints and long to have greater power and influence regardless of her age. The unrealistic degree of control Artemis exercises over his affairs affords young readers some wish-fulfillment because to support Fowl, with all his flaws, is to assert the potential superiority of the child over his elders. Adults in the real world may not be as oblivious and impotent as those in *Artemis Fowl*, but the novel encourages children to take charge and develop their skills in order to prepare them for a future where they have greater autonomy.

Colfer moreover seeks to empower young readers by making explicit the underlying changes in Western culture that grant children more autonomy and blur the distinctions between childhood and adulthood. Meyrowitz explains that the rise of alternative media, among other factors, confuses the notion of maturity; for better or worse, what the world expects of and offers to children increasingly overlaps with what it brings to adults. Topics once deemed inappropriate for children now gain admittance not only in school hallways but also in classrooms, and many adults now discuss the parenting process with their children. The rights of children in the legal process have also changed, allowing them greater input into their families and futures. Some even propose giving children full equality under the law: the rights "to vote, to privacy, to own property, to sign contracts, to choose sexual partners," etc. (23). No longer do stories that

depict powerless children fully reliant on adults for education and responsibilities accurately reflect reality.

While Colfer may not advocate this sweeping equality outside of his novels, he understands the appeal to children of empowerment and accordingly gives full imaginative reign to this possibility in *Artemis Fowl*. When Artemis meets a contact in Ho Chi Minh City, passersby marvel at the deference with which Butler addresses his young employer. The contact Nguyen knows the Fowl family by reputation but learns with surprise that the younger Artemis rather than the elder hired him: “a pale adolescent speaking with the authority and vocabulary of a powerful adult” (5). Artemis’s determination and ingenuity surpass those of most children and many adults, making him the first human to interpret the fairy language Gnommish and a shrewd hostage negotiator. The point should be acknowledged that many children’s writers portray empowered children accomplishing herculean tasks and outwitting adults, particularly fantasy writers. Indeed, children in reality occasionally perform feats thought impossible for them or demonstrate human spirit beyond their years. Colfer stands out because he allows his protagonist into a much more carefully guarded world of immorality and gives him preeminence in activities almost never associated with children.

Colfer grants Artemis power not only through his gifted maneuvering of adult environments but also through the unique perspective he brings to crime as a child. Artemis capitalizes on others’ expectations about his limitations and abilities. Routledge highlights that early child criminals in literature, like the band of pickpockets in *Oliver Twist*, act confidently knowing that “as children they are less likely to be suspected or even noticed by their victims” (323). Artemis likewise depends on his opponents

underestimating him because of his age and assumed inexperience. When the fairies inevitably do so, they lose gold to a boy of twelve and must accept that a human child bested a millennia-old civilization.

Artemis also possesses the necessary credulity to persevere in the search for fairies in the first place. He exercises adult foresight and discernment in determining the relative truth of wild claims about aliens, monsters and fairies, but his conclusion that the latter actually do exist would not receive consideration from an intelligent adult. The text correctly identifies him as “the only person alive” who could make use of this knowledge: “he still retained a childlike belief in magic, tempered by an adult determination to exploit it” (19). Colfer demonstrates how characteristics considered childish and undesirable to adults undergird Artemis’s achievements, thereby encouraging children to accept their youth and draw on their unique qualities as young people. As a child and an antihero, Artemis flourishes on the plane “where neither innocence and experience nor the real and imaginary have drifted into opposition” (Immel et al 226).

The interweaving of magic, gadgetry, and international intrigue form the skeleton on which Colfer builds his narrative. In “combin[ing] genres that had heretofore been distinct,” Colfer must constantly juggle tropes and conventions in order to successfully mesh their often disparate qualities (Keenan 257). The child antihero provides the glue that holds the endeavor, sometimes precariously, together. Artemis accepts and manipulates both magic and technology with equal aplomb when he encounters fairies, and his exaggerated personality incorporates elements of the juvenile detective and the Bond villain. Each facet of Artemis Fowl’s character serves to unify the richly

imaginative genres that the author explores, creating the sense that a new hybrid genre has been born.

Although much of the novel involves magical fairies, the protagonist does not bear much resemblance to those of fantasy novels. Far from an idealized hero, Artemis more closely approximates the evil that characters like Bilbo Baggins and Harry Potter fight in their pursuits of adventure. Although Farah Mendlesohn maintains that fantasy purposes “to make moral judgments” (291), the text intentionally confuses the dichotomies of right and wrong when considering the actions of fairies and humans. Nevertheless, the ambiguous nature of Artemis Fowl’s character and his dealings with fairies do harken back to the earliest fairy tales enjoyed by children and adults, with comical figures who often attempt to exploit magic to their detriment, and Artemis certainly suffers for similar presumptions before he ultimately triumphs. The unusually intelligent protagonist also preserves the conflict between fantasy and reality sometimes lost in children’s fiction, for Artemis more than the average child expects reason and intellect to trump magical forces.

In fact, the way Colfer characterizes magic in his novel better suits an antiheroic protagonist than a traditional hero of children’s fantasy. Magic typically interferes with the domestic concerns of child protagonists, like in the works of Edith Nesbit, but Colfer’s fairies have no desire to interact with humans and need an impetus to venture above ground. Thinking like a criminal, Artemis chooses to draw the fairies to his home rather than journey to their world, preserving his tactical advantage and promoting entertaining scenarios where the familiar and unfamiliar mix—Artemis translates a magical book with advanced computer software, a dwarf burrows into the family wine

cellar, and Butler dons medieval armor to fight a troll in the foyer. Children's fantasy also tends to grant greater power to young questers and allows readers to fulfill dreams of control over their spheres. Likewise, the elements of fantasy in particular add to Artemis's already uncharacteristic autonomy. Not only does gaining fairy technology allow him to defeat fairy combatants, but also the knowledge of fairies' existence gives Artemis an edge over adult criminals and businesspeople in general.

Fantasies featuring animals possess some unique conventions, which *Artemis Fowl* shares. Copeland notes the subgenre's importance in offering "social satire of the human community" and increasing empathy for other creatures (289). Colfer certainly criticizes human excess through his nonhuman characters and their somewhat utopian society, but he also strives to portray fairies as significant and valuable to the world in their own right. A human protagonist maintains the link between the reader and the primary narrative point of view, but an immoral human protagonist highlights the positive characteristics of magical beings who only wish to be left in peace. Beneficial relations between species offer hope that humans and other animals can coexist, but destructive contact with humans at fault presents a stronger case for the worth of nonhuman animals.

In many ways, *Artemis Fowl* more closely fits the parameters of science fiction than of fantasy. Many contest the ability of children's literature to truly conform itself to standard science fiction conventions (Mendlesohn 284), but Colfer succeeds to varying degrees because of his unique protagonist. In a basic sense, *Artemis Fowl* resembles the traditional isolated protagonist of science fiction. Though not alone in another world, Artemis's behavior and extreme intelligence alienate him from his family, friends, and

peers. He may also be the only human to know of fairies, as most who encounter magic have their memories wiped. In addition, Colfer includes four characteristics of pure or “hard” science fiction identified by Mendlesohn that rarely thrive in books for young readers: dissonance, rupture, resolution, and consequence. By incorporating these elements, Colfer successfully adapts science fiction for young readers and provides an example other writers can emulate.

The four qualities Mendlesohn recognizes help scholars classify and distinguish exemplary works of science fiction. Dissonance comes from the event or object that triggers change and creates initial unfamiliarity, known as the novum (Mendlesohn 287). Rupture is more commonly known as cognitive estrangement, the continuing sense of unfamiliarity that comes from immediate immersion into strange worlds with little explanation. The resolution in science fiction differs from other forms in that it brings closure but may not solve initial problems. Perhaps most essential, the resolution brings lasting consequences beyond the individual to the society.

Writers for children typically compromise on the latter three, choosing to subsume the setting or the scientific information beneath coming-of-age stories or domestic dramas. The novum often enters for novelty rather than as a necessity to the plot, and the resolution and consequences remain centered around the home. This text succeeds where others fail because it preserves cognitive estrangement in *Artemis Fowl* and leaves open the consequences of his tampering with the fairy world. A twelve-year-old criminal mastermind presents a character as strange to a child reader as an alien or futuristic invention. The text does not directly explain most of Artemis’s thoughts and actions but jumps into the complicated plot he enacts to steal fairy gold. His nemesis

Holly Short provides a similar point of view on the fairy world, for she does not approach it as a stranger but as a resident. Colfer's refusal to punish Artemis for his immorality also means that the consequences of the boy's kidnapping and thievery still have global ramifications for fairies and humans: the most powerful child in the world knows the existence of fairies and flouts that knowledge to them, making future confrontations inevitable and explicit (Colfer, *Artemis* 280). Unlike fantasy and consistent with science fiction, *Artemis Fowl* does not resolve ethical dilemmas but confuses and maintains them even through the novel's conclusion.

The juxtaposition of scientific speculation and folkloric tradition marks a new trend among some children's writers, especially Irish writers, that Patricia Kennon terms "science fantasy" (147). However, Colfer layers even more genres into *Artemis Fowl*, genres that developed most distinctly apart from children's literature. Christopher Routledge writes of the growing prominence of mystery and crime fiction for young readers. Colfer depicts the flip-side of this emerging children's literature genre, a more cynical viewpoint that focuses on a child criminal just as likely to pass undetected as a child sleuth. Keenan also points out the similarities between Artemis and James Bond, with his globe-trotting expeditions, well-tailored suits, and witty dialogue. Although a young audience places limitations on the thriller/spy genre usually associated with high living and sex appeal, Artemis the rogue conspirator matches wits against an opposing government against the background of sci-fi, fantasy, and detective fiction. Through the melding of fantasy elements, scientific progress, crime, and surveillance, Colfer displays his mastery of diverse genres.

As adults revise their standards for appropriateness in children's literature, fiction for young readers continues to address social and political issues with even greater frequency. Books for young readers can teach adults about messages "censored from establishment culture" (Lurie 15), and writers capitalize on the tendency to minimize the scholarly value of children's literature by including subversive ideas that face scorn or ridicule in the public marketplace of ideas. Colfer evidently believes in the power of literature to shape future generations because he embeds socio-political commentary into a narrative superficially preoccupied with lighthearted adventure.

One pressing issue that Colfer returns to again and again in *Artemis Fowl* is the destruction of the natural world and the treatment of nonhuman species. Numerous authors throughout history, including Burnett, have believed in a unique bond between children and nature and appealed to them to preserve it. Keenan goes so far as to call this a "safe theme" that does not threaten adult readers (266). Nevertheless, this text takes environmental activism beyond what many comfortably espouse and Artemis's villainous characteristics contribute the irony needed to impress Colfer's opinions on the reader's mind.

Carolyn Sigler identifies two branches of environmentalism, anthropocentrism and biocentrism (148). The former views nature as beautiful and valuable but subservient to man and his needs, as much of Romantic literature and children's works like *The Secret Garden* depict. Though this perspective still seeks to conserve the environment, it falls short of biocentric "deep ecology" and the belief that humans form but one of many interconnected species that should interact on terms of essential equality (Lenz 159). Artemis Fowl at the beginning of his series falls into the first camp; although villainous

in many respects, he considers himself superior to many criminals because he employs clean energy, avoids pollution, and grows natural produce. This humorous self-evaluation nevertheless drives home a pointed if unrealistic observation: if an evil child feels concern for the environment, then upstanding citizens should as well.

Despite acknowledging the problems with misusing resources, Artemis finds no problem with exploiting other species. Eventually when he feels guilt over his treatment of Holly, it mostly revolves around his recognition of her “human” traits (Colfer, *Artemis* 113). Colfer proposes an alternative through the fairies that reveals the limits of Artemis’s anthropocentric philosophy. Holly Short repeatedly functions as a mouthpiece speaking against environmental degradation by humans, and while her sentiments may appear as melodramatic to some readers, the harsh imagery Colfer unleashes provokes unsettling thoughts for others: “Holly flew low, skipping over the white-crested waves. She called out to the dolphins and they rose to the surface, leaping from the water to match her pace. She could see the pollution in them, bleaching their skin white and giving them red sores on their backs. And although she smiled, her heart was breaking. Mud People had a lot to answer for” (68). The magical abilities of fairies give them unique empathy with all living things and the earth itself, and the gift of tongues connects them further to humans and other animals. Colfer clearly portrays the fairies, or at least Holly, as holding the moral high ground in an emotional style even young children can perceive.

The epithet “Mud People,” though unflattering, gives hope that humans can regain a sense of communion with the natural world. Regardless of their master’s narrow-minded perspective on other species, the Butlers share views more in line with

the fairies, as Juliet expresses disgust when Holly jokes about eating dolphin and scornfully assures her that Fowl Manor avoids pesticides. Artemis himself begins to develop respect for the fairy race as he observes their advanced civilization and unique empathy. And as the series progresses, Artemis joins the fairies in championing environmental conservation and green technology. Colfer joins a wide tradition of involving children in environmental activism, from the earliest periodicals and organizations of the nineteenth century (Rahn 157). Children cannot mistake the message that they have a responsibility to act when adults fail, in caring for their own domestic environments as in *The Secret Garden*, or in fighting pollution and exploitation of other creatures in *Artemis Fowl*.

If undermining traditional norms about humanity's relationship to nature is a safe choice for children's literature, then discussing the impact of mental illness is decidedly risky. Children often form their conceptions of mental illness from a young age, though these conceptions may be vague or skewed depending on the child's exposure to the subject. Psychologist Til Wykes notes the opportunity for books to increase empathy for sufferers of mental disorders, but they must compete with the overwhelmingly negative stereotypes portrayed in other media (308). Moreover, authors who attempt to force mental illness, or any other controversial issue, into a narrative merely to prove a point may unconsciously reinforce prejudice. Colfer expresses his desire to show the depressed Angeline Fowl sympathetically and to examine how "Artemis's own development suffers because of" her distress (qtd. in Wykes 311). By emphasizing the frightening and strange symptoms of Angeline's condition, however, he inadvertently

teaches children to fear differences and to associate all mental illness with exaggerated behavior.

Wykes collects a variety of perspectives on *Artemis Fowl* in her review on mental illness in children's literature, including comments from Colfer, young readers, and readers undergoing mental health treatment. A clinical academic, Dr. Dominic Lam, points out the rather minor role Angeline plays in the narrative, hinting that she only serves to further Artemis's development. He also tracks the progression of grief from "credible" to "unusual and deranged" (qtd. in Wykes 322), bringing her depiction to nearly comic proportions. Matthew Green, a user of mental health services likewise takes issue with the "colorful" and "unreal" nature of depression and fears that children will consequently view mental illness as equally frightening and fascinating (322). In fairness to Colfer, these readers approach the text from the standpoint of their adult expertise and do not accurately represent the intended readership, but they raise legitimate questions about the portrait of Angeline that could potentially confuse children.

An adolescent reviewer demonstrates that in at least this case, Colfer achieves his previously stated purpose for including mental illness in his story. Anna Mueser insightfully concludes that Angeline's distress and distance directly contributes to Artemis's cruelty and she also understands that the healing of Angeline reveals his often suppressed humanity and familial affection (qtd. in Wykes 322). However, Green criticizes the implication that only magic can cure mental illness, stigmatizing it as "otherworldly" and unnatural (qtd. in Wykes 322). Older children may discern the larger motivations behind how Angeline functions in the narrative, but Colfer unintentionally

minimizes the struggles and strength of sufferers of depression by using the character solely to humanize his antihero.

A variety of reasons compel Colfer to center his narrative on an antihero rather than a traditional hero, but equally important to consider is how the character may develop in the context of children's literature. Unlike Burnett, Colfer does not make explicit in the text whether Artemis Fowl undergoes any moral improvement in the course of the novel. To fully understand the significance and function of this antihero, we must consider whether or not the protagonist moves toward traditional heroism; if he does, then we must also determine if the demands on children's literature led to this compromise in the antiheroic standard. These reflections influence one's views of the author and his work, which lead either to celebrating artistic choice or lamenting the undue power of convention.

As previously mentioned, Colfer originally intended for Artemis to function in a smaller role and receive comeuppance for his crimes but eventually changed his mind. Indeed, fairies willingly or reluctantly heal any physical or emotional damage he and his companions sustain. Additionally, Colfer does not downplay Artemis's faults or demand favor from readers. The thoroughly likeable Holly Short aids her kidnappers several times but continues to regard Artemis with contempt, and a trained (though probably biased) psychiatrist deems the boy beyond redemption. Moments of guilt or emotional honesty are few and do not meaningfully change his actions. Artemis does give up crime in the strictest sense as the series progresses, but he maintains his arrogance, resorts to secrecy, and manipulates those closest to him, qualities that identify him as an antihero nearly as much as his direct villainy.

Although he does not answer many questions about Artemis's future reform in the first novel, Colfer frankly admits that he intended for the character to mature morally from the series' inception (Colfer, "Crime Pays"). A structuralist could argue from the text, as I attempt above, that Artemis does not inherently change in character, but prudence dictates that researchers take seriously Colfer's evaluation: "It is a classical story in which a boy becomes a young man and learns that avarice is not as important as family" (Colfer, "Elf and Happiness"). Here the author affirms the character development that the novel subtly suggests and supports the theory that the changes reflect concern for conventions of children's literature

Taking each part of the quoted claim individually, Colfer first identifies *Artemis* as one example among many predecessors. Clearly the exploits of a child criminal genius do not fill the early pages of the genre, so Colfer must refer to other aspects of his text. He next identifies it as a coming-of age tale that demonstrates growth even in the first novel of a series. Artemis certainly progresses intellectually, learning from his mistakes and adapting his techniques to better encounter his magical enemies. He also matures emotionally, recognizing "perhaps for the first time, the service provided by the Butler family" (Colfer, *Artemis* 241). Finally, Colfer refocuses the conflict on family loyalties. As Mendlesohn points out in her survey of children's science fiction, adapting that genre for children more closely involves "the family as either context or motivation," aligning global concerns with domestic ones (285). The final compassion Artemis demonstrates for his mother and the lengths he traverses to restore his parents to their positions of authority display how the boy eventually adjusts his priorities. What he once views as weakness serves as motivation for his moral evolution.

A final option remains: that the antihero does mature, but not directly because of his presence in a work for children. By tempering Artemis's antiheroic persona, Colfer allows for the possibility of a series where the protagonist grows and changes. The novelty of an extended story written for any age group dissipates without continual reworking, but the potential transformation of Artemis draws readers into a long-term imaginative commitment. In short, compromising the antiheroic standard guarantees a readership for future novels and lengthy success for Colfer.

Series books repeatedly dominate children's best-seller lists and frequently outdo award-winning books in popularity at libraries (Ujii and Krashen, 35). Colfer gratefully acknowledges J. K. Rowling for popularizing series books, and though he considers Artemis more of an anti-Harry Potter, he must realize that the love for upstanding Harry reveals a society that still appreciates traditional heroism (Measure). Desiring popularity does not make Colfer a villain in a burgeoning industry, nor does planning a series equal overweening avarice. He rejoices at the rise in reading among children and recognizes the role of series reading in this trend, and popular literature for all its stereotypes offers numerous benefits to children and society at large.

Though often maligned, popular culture greatly influences young people. Participating in that process ensures the views Colfer puts forward in his text help shape society. Dustin Kidd attempts to rescue popular culture from overly harsh judgment in his study of the *Harry Potter* series. Borrowing language from research on the societal benefits of crime, Kidd concludes that popular culture "produces norms, establishes boundaries, provides rituals, produces innovation, and leads the way for social change" (71). *Artemis Fowl* functions along these lines: Artemis demonstrates the continuing

importance of stable families and other social norms; readjusts the boundaries between childhood and adulthood; gives fans shared rituals to build relationships and trust; encourages children to participate in technological invention; and promotes a society where young and old work together to end environmental degradation and other problems. Would *Artemis Fowl* be judged a hero if Colfer ended the boy's story in book one? Likely not, but moving towards a "classical" hero model allows Colfer to leave his mark on young minds and to seek to impact the society they will eventually form.

Artemis Fowl occasionally suffers from comparisons to other popular children's series like *Harry Potter*, but these judgments unfairly neglect the real innovations Colfer offers in his antihero. Artemis breaks the law and exploits the innocent while displaying emotional depth and ingenuity. The text engages children adept at irony, vicariously gives children authority over adults, and mixes diverse genres to form an original work suited to an unlikely criminal. Colfer deftly critiques anthropocentrism by revealing Artemis's minimum standards but inadvertently encourages fear and misunderstanding about mental illness.

Some adults might question the wisdom of focusing a narrative on an immoral child, noting like Dr. J. Argon "the tendency to romanticize Artemis [and] attribute to him qualities that he does not possess" (Colfer, *Artemis* 279), yet child readers overwhelmingly express their approval through sizable book sales and growing fan communities. Furthermore, Artemis's moments of humanity reveal a character likely to reform without becoming insipid or boring. One can only wonder if Artemis will endure lasting scrutiny as *The Secret Garden* has, but I suspect that the compelling contradictions in this boy genius will continue to attract rather than disgust readers of all

ages for the next hundred years, as *Mistress Mary* has for the last. The final text I examine shares the popularity of *The Secret Garden* and begins a series as *Artemis Fowl* does, but Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* may surpass them both in lasting impact internationally.

Antiheroics in a Cartoon World

Mary Lennox matures in a semi-magical world of romantic sensibility; Artemis Fowl battles fairies and trolls to gain finances for his criminal enterprises; Greg Heffley in *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* inhabits ordinariness. His adolescence resembles that of an average child in twenty-first-century America, the exception being that millions of children read his story in over thirty languages and that his creator Jeff Kinney stands among the most influential contemporary writers for children. Though living a very different childhood from Mary and Artemis, Greg similarly embodies characteristics adults consider problematic in children and inappropriate for a child protagonist. As one reviewer notes, “All you can do is pray your children understand irony. And that they don’t view the Greg Heffleys as role models. And that they read long enough to see that bad behavior does have consequences” (Jacobs). These considerations may prove unrealistic, as the unreliable first-person narration and occasional come-uppance of Greg do not lessen his appeal or compromise the hilarity of his often amoral conduct.

Jeff Kinney initially intended his novel in cartoons to function as nostalgic comedy for adults, but marketers immediately and rightly recognized Greg’s authentic voice and representative middle school experiences. Though some find Greg selfish and despicable, and though I consider him an apt portrayal of a realistic and comic antihero, Greg shares common traits with other fictional boys as he navigates friendship and fickle popularity. Through Greg’s childish exaggeration of daily trials, Kinney validates the awkward prepubescent years and addresses matters that cause children anxiety with wit and not a little compassion. He also confirms that children enjoy the exploits of antiheroes as much as virtuous protagonists and irony as much as straight didacticism.

Unlike the previous two novels, *Wimpy Kid* does not feature an uninvolved narrator commenting on the story. Instead, Greg reveals his own unflattering characteristics while personally relating his daily exploits. The novel begins with Greg defending himself against potential accusations of being emotional or a “sissy” (1). While wimpiness can be morally neutral, strength naturally accompanies the traditional hero of myth and legend. Greg, on the other hand, struggles through exercise and athletics. He laments the structure of middle school that places defenseless weaklings alongside oversized bullies and identifies himself as particularly vulnerable in gym as the lightest of his class. As a boy who feels humiliated playing football and only half-heartedly attempts to gain muscle, Greg stands for the everyman of childhood rather than the typical physically fit and morally upright protagonist of boys’ books.

Despite misgivings about his athletic abilities, Greg clearly puts forward his own intellectual superiority to many around him, a fact the reader may not necessarily affirm. Rather than merely recording his hopes and dreams, he predicts his future success while denigrating the “stupid questions” that the adoring masses will tender him (Kinney, *Diary* 2). Moreover, he resigns himself to the predicament of being “stuck in middle school with a bunch of morons” (2). These assertions come in spite of his lackadaisical attitude towards education and his inability to gain popularity. This superiority also extends to his attitudes toward best friend Rowley and occasionally his parents and teachers. He knowingly assesses the habits and weaknesses of authority figures to exploit them, but these endeavors almost always fail. Greg also shares many foolish superstitions with his supposedly moronic classmates, receiving a D in handwriting in order to avoid the

dreaded “Cheese Touch” (9). Justifiable pride can sometimes find a home within the breast of a true hero, but unwarranted arrogance only draws laughter and disbelief.

Fortunately for Greg, antiheroes need not endure a perilous journey or complete various trials, and what Greg lacks in immoral actions he makes up for in sheer laziness. His lethargy extends to work and play, leading him to sabotage his placement to avoid the advanced reading group and to prefer muscle-building shakes to healthy exercise. Greg signs up for the safety patrol, not for the chance to boost his popularity but merely to miss class and enjoy hot chocolate privileges. Even those activities he most enjoys, like drawing and money-making schemes, suffer from a large dose of Heffley apathy, as when his elaborately-planned haunted house amounts to a baby pool filled with ketchup and his award-winning anti-smoking poster comes directly from a magazine. Greg rejects the strong work ethic promoted by parents and teachers for his own mantra: “set people’s expectations real low so you end up surprising them by practically doing nothing at all” (15).

Besides his direct statements, Greg’s actions expose his unheroic qualities and emphasize his less-than-admirable mindsets. Many of his flaws emerge when he fails to act, but Greg also consciously disregards school and parental authority, sometimes even when submitting to either requires less effort. He frequently lies to his father about his whereabouts, not out of malice but simply because he prefers playing video games to engaging in outdoor activities. Greg not only deceives his own parents but Rowley’s as well, finding ways to wriggle around their smothering parental presence and leaving Rowley to face their anger when they discover the truth. Like many kids, much of Greg’s rule-breaking takes place at school where he stands a greater chance of going unnoticed.

Sneaking in forbidden objects and cheating (or attempting to do so) on tests may not be heinous crimes, but they do not elevate Greg's status as a role model for young readers. Furthermore, his misbehavior takes a troubling turn when Greg avenges himself against a classmate and humiliates her in public. His "harmless" offenses usually do hurt others besides himself and appear in an even more uncomfortable light in the context of supposed friendship.

Though oblivious to much abuse, long-suffering Rowley Jefferson most often endures the results of Greg's selfish and cruel streak. Greg repeatedly degrades him out of a desire to build himself up, even remarking that their relationship is "definitely subject to change" (17). Greg portrays Rowley as dim-witted, a fact the reader has no way of verifying, and turns him into a guinea pig for pranks and a workhorse for unpleasant tasks. Even in Greg's rare moments of industry, he convinces Rowley to take on the heavier and more dangerous labor. Greg at one point blatantly abuses his friend while playing with a Big Wheel and takes no responsibility for the accident that breaks Rowley's hand. Perhaps Greg understandably bemoans Rowley's limited understanding and revels in the opportunity to feel successful, but he crosses the line from venting frustration to abusing a vulnerable boy who only wants to be liked.

The novel builds to the climactic safety patrol incident and the two friends' subsequent break, a situation for which Rowley bears little if any blame. From the beginning Greg acts reprehensibly and only implicitly expresses any remorse. He receives the rebukes of Mrs. Irvine knowing that she believes him to be Rowley; he fails to confess to terrorizing the kindergartners; he quashes his qualms and misleads his mother into rewarding him for lying; and he expects his innocent friend to accept the

punishment and grows angry when Rowley refuses. The authorities eventually discover Greg's guilt and he loses his position, but Greg persists in claiming ill-use and almost physically fights Rowley over another pointless disagreement. Although the two boys resolve their differences, Greg never persuades the reader of his virtue or that Rowley will benefit from their continued friendship.

Unsurprisingly, adults disapprove of Greg's antiheroic actions and other children ridicule his misbegotten efforts to impress. He frequently exasperates his father with attempts to subvert parental authority, and Greg's "wimpiness" and failure to conform to expectations for mature males especially cause Mr. Heffley grief. Mrs. Heffley usually displays greater patience and understanding with all her children, but she brooks no mistreatment of spoiled Manny and at times abandons her endeavors to encourage Greg when he surpasses his usual degree of misconduct.

As the novel progresses, Greg offends nearly every teacher he encounters by disrupting recess, misusing his authority as a safety patrol, contributing to the overthrow of independent study, and submitting newspaper comics deemed inappropriate. Unfortunately, Greg does not gain credibility through his troublemaking but endures a similar bad standing with his peers, especially girls. The reader laughs at Greg's self-assessment of his popularity (52nd most popular in his year) but does not wonder at his mediocre reputation. His awkward attempts to capitalize on Rowley's growing fame and his misplaced confidence only further alienate him from the highest social ranks.

With these unpleasant, though in some ways realistic, characteristics, why do children devour and librarians promote a novel that spotlights unprincipled adolescent exploits? As in the cases of Mary Lennox and Artemis Fowl, Greg Heffley interests

readers in spite of and because of his childish immorality while encouraging them to read between the lines to find a more uplifting message. Greg can usually justify his errors with good intentions, occasionally attempting, however unsuccessfully, to make amends for wrongs he commits against Rowley. When Greg explains why his class completed a list of swear words instead of an assignment, the reader recognizes a partially innocent misunderstanding. Occasionally Greg even demonstrates integrity, as when he readies Manny for school in the mornings and recognizes the real struggles of the “Giving Tree guy” (129). Kinney offers some hope that Greg could mature into a creative, stable adult if given the opportunity but also denies readers that assurance.

As both a middle-schooler and a middle child, Greg inflicts injustice and suffers unjustly in equal measure. The reader’s first introduction to Rodrick comes from the elaborate hoax he perpetrates against Greg during summer vacation; Greg endures a lecture from his father and Rodrick escapes without punishment by feigning innocence. This belittling undoubtedly leads to Greg’s desire to play similar tricks on Rowley and finally achieve dominance. Greg faces a perhaps greater challenge from little brother Manny, as Greg claims that he rules the house and “never gets in trouble, even if he really deserves it” (21). Manny evidently possesses mischievous ingenuity like his brothers, at least in Greg’s eyes, and succeeds in presenting small offenses as tyrannical attacks. False accusations accompany Greg almost as often as deserved punishments and reflect the uncertainty of adolescence.

The clearest chance at redemption occurs in the last pages of the text when Greg resolves his conflict with Rowley. Kinney dangles several opportunities for Greg to “do the right thing” and confess his mistake with the kindergartners (182), but each time his

baser instincts conquer him and Greg experiences few regrets or drawbacks for his treatment of Rowley. At last, Greg stands up for his friend against their peers, accepting the Cheese Touch to protect Rowley from worse shame and losing his chance at prized popularity. Though Greg never consciously admits his fault, the two boys consequently make peace and renew their problematic but resilient relationship. Greg proves that he has a conscience by channeling his skill at telling tales into positive rather than negative behavior.

Perhaps the most significant difference between *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and the two previous texts is the inclusion of cartoon illustrations purportedly drawn by Greg. These pictures provide additional insight into Greg's mind and help show him in a kinder light. Greg seeks sympathy in how he draws himself in comparison to other characters. On a basic level, Greg does not give himself any defining physical characteristics, good or bad, while he depicts bullies and teachers as over-sized or unattractive. Greg assumes that readers will react negatively to unpleasant-looking characters and accordingly draws "morons" with unkempt hair, acne, or piercings to demonstrate their greater physical maturity and to reinforce stereotypes about troublesome teenagers. Several pictures also feature Greg favorably when juxtaposed with his family: Greg draws Rodrick with slightly menacing eyebrows and a mischievous smile and himself as a hapless victim; he also includes numerous pictures with his irate father yelling and Greg cowering or weakened. These cartoons emphasize the few instances of Greg as a victim, give readers an inner look at his perspective, and explain his perceived wimpiness.

Greg presents himself positively in his illustrations of imagined events as well, reassuring readers that he can contribute meaningfully to society in the proper

environment. Certainly Greg's expectations do not match reality, but they indicate his ability to visualize goals and his surprisingly sophisticated understanding of the adult world. The reader laughs at Greg's proposed attempts to impress the cheerleaders if he becomes class treasurer, but his machinations resemble those of actual politicians. He dramatically depicts his hopes of building a record-breaking snowman, and Greg and Rowley in fact make admirable progress before nature intervenes. Greg does not claim to be perfect, but his illustrations point to future success and frequently-maligned innocence.

When the backbone of a novel does not differ dramatically from others in the genre, scholars must look elsewhere to explain uniquely phenomenal popularity like that enjoyed by the *Wimpy Kid* series. Many young readers share experiences like Greg's but few books for young readers allow an otherwise realistic protagonist to introduce an anti-authoritarian campaign against adult restrictions. Children still read stories about nice, ordinary kids maneuvering the waters of friendship and popularity, or unfortunate young people facing trials with fortitude, but Kinney gambled his writing career on a child antihero and won. *The Secret Garden*, *Artemis Fowl*, and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* all point to the appeal of disagreeable, rule-breaking protagonists. The combination of irony, explicit humor, and narrative cartoons create the tale that only Greg Heffley can convey.

Diary of a Wimpy Kid essentially began as a web comic, a modified version of the novel serially published online (*WimpyKid.Com*). When publishers decided to bring Kinney's ideas to the mainstream writing market, they naturally believed in the selling power of Greg and his misadventures (Kinney, "I Didn't Think"). In attempting to engage modern adolescents, Kinney delved into the world of irony, a mode still

developing in children's literature. Children today suffer no lack of reading material and their adult influences consequently struggle to find fresh and inviting texts to interest them, so giving old stories an ironic twist can provide the necessary novelty to attract even the most reluctant readers. Writers like Phillip Pullman in the *His Dark Materials* series and Jane Yolen in *Sword of the Rightful King*, for example, rework classic and mythic literature for modern children. As technology continues to demystify adult authority, children obtain a greater understanding of adult expectations and successful protagonists must often share the same consequences of knowledge: dissatisfaction and mistrust.

Seth Lerer notes that children continue to mature in their sense of irony, recognizing the concept at earlier and earlier ages and developing a "knowing distance from experience" (307). In fact, Kinney identifies Greg's "slightly knowing, adult perspective" as a main factor in the popularity of his novel ("I Didn't Think"). Greg demonstrates total ignorance about some aspects of life, but in regards to teachers and parents he expresses keen insights into the adult mind. He decodes his school's hidden curriculum quickly and easily, realizing how teachers clandestinely categorize students and manipulating the system to his advantage. He also learns the differences between his parents' discipline techniques and attempts some control over his own punishment.

Lerer also discusses the unique tendency of male protagonists in the ironic mode to practice the art of lying (315), and Greg as both talented tale-teller and unreliable narrator influences the reader by what he chooses to disclose and conceal. One instance in particular perfectly illustrates this technique: Greg confesses to his mother, without specific details, that he is struggling to resolve a problem, decides on a course of action of

which she would not approve, and receives a reward on announcing that he has done “the right thing” (Kinney, *Diary* 183). In one sense Greg believes in the virtue of his actions, but in another he capitalizes on her good faith and tells Mrs. Heffley what she wants to hear. Children’s increased appreciation for irony and the realities of overabundant literature necessitate an antihero to bring readers into his world and offer commentary on our world.

Humor forms an important part of children’s literature, whether because optimism characterizes many young readers or because low comedy often requires less complex thinking than tragedy. Kinney employs straightforward humor along with irony to entertain rather than teach readers, and Greg’s antiheroic attitudes and actions greatly contribute to the hilarity. Greg as a largely unsuccessful adolescent “allows readers to believe that they’re a bit superior,” to laugh with him and at him (Giffard 44). Certainly his escapades also appeal to children thanks to Kinney’s employment of physical humor, disgusting situations, and practical jokes. Adults might look askance at these methods of injecting humor into the narrative, but children and their elders relish different types of humor for psychological reasons. Young children react most strongly to gross humor because it deflects anxieties about bodily functions that they still must learn to control (West 115). Nilsen and Donelson confirm that people of all ages frequently transform objects of terror into sources of amusement (194). Pre-teens unsurprisingly laugh at antics where Greg fails to achieve popularity or success, failures that preoccupy them as well.

However, antiheroes add subversive connotations to comedy, further appealing to children who chafe against adult restrictions. To some critics, humor creates “painful

recognitions about difference, division, disjunction, [and] dominance,” while others consider the optimism supporting humor as essential to “social reconciliation” (Huse and Alberghene 114). Humor for children intends to question social institutions and ridicule social norms so that children need not blindly enter adulthood. Popular writers for children like Roald Dahl mock adult authority figures through his adult characters’ actions and the perspectives of child protagonists, and Martha Wolfenstein maintains that children revel in proving that “grown-ups are not infallibly good” (qtd. in West 116). By directing his humor at adolescent rituals and cultural norm-makers, Kinney lessens children’s anxieties about maturing and frees them to figuratively absorb power.

Greg Heffley has few characteristics to endear him to the upper echelons of the middle school hierarchy. His athletic attempts come to nothing, his undeveloped communication skills miscarry, and his troublemaking even fails to win him approval. Greg does thrive as an artist, cheerfully illustrating his life or bending the truth with aplomb. The artist in literature typically goes unappreciated and undervalued, and while Greg often merits the poor opinions of others, he receives no recognition for the talent he actually possesses except from grateful readers. Kinney’s strategic pairing of text and cartoons not only catches the eye and supports struggling readers but magnifies the artist as antihero.

Unlike in picture books or some graphic novels, the cartoons from *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* “actually further the narrative” (J. Hunt 422). The text alone does not fully convey the message or even the plot, so illustrations reveal as much about Greg as words do. The cartoons show the contradictions that compose his character, alternating between obnoxious pride and crippling insecurity, and show that antiheroes in their pointed

amorality resemble the average and ordinary person more than traditional heroes do. Children understand why Greg draws his enemies as unattractive and yet refrains from drawing himself as superhuman and alluring: imagination can provide an escape without removing the dreamer from reality, and Greg's cartoons interest readers while upholding his antiheroic tendencies.

Crafting Greg as an antihero interests disaffected children of the modern era, but Kinney seeks to do more than entertain. Fantasy series like *Harry Potter* also have ways of attracting readers, through imaginative flight and archetypal struggles, but *Wimpy Kid* provides consistent realism that sets the novel apart from Rowling's magical school story. While Rowling elevates teenage life to an epic scale, Kinney purports to more or less accurately portray the indignity and discomfort of middle school. He initially planned his novel as a humorous and nostalgic look back on school days for adults, exaggerating the events in childish fashion but in essence distilling common experience into a representative text (Kinney, "I Didn't Think"). However, his compassionate and humorous tone also appeals to any child who needs to know that his adolescence, like Greg's, will pass.

Greg Heffley shares the "knowing" attitude of ironic children's fiction, but his novel does not follow the trend of popular culture where snarky children triumph over bumbling adults (Vallone, "Ideas of Difference" 181). Greg recognizes the failings of his parents, but he does not understand their errors any more than he does his own. His plans to subvert authority backfire more often than they prosper and readers appreciate Greg's exploits without condoning them. Moreover, any lessons learned proceed implicitly and naturally from the narrative, in contrast to didactic and unrealistic works. Kinney

considers his initial intention to write for adults an advantage, leading him to embed rather than enforce morals in the story and thereby influence children without “preach[ing] to” them (“I Didn’t Think”). Focusing on a realistic and morally indifferent antihero permits Kinney’s novel to relate to a wide audience of children and adults without being amoral themselves.

Critics classify *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* as a hybrid of the picture book and the graphic novel, but the text’s narrative falls more neatly into a much earlier genre, the school story. As explained above, Kinney strongly features realism in the character and situation of Greg Heffley, a characteristic long identified as a hallmark of the school story from Sarah Fielding’s *The Governess* to television’s *Beverly Hills 90210*. The development of the school story reflects changing cultural values over time, and modern versions particularly deal with more mature topics likely to affect contemporary children and teens. A traditional hero within a modern middle school demands an impossible suspension of disbelief from younger and older readers, so an antihero maintains the realism and contemporaneity required of the genre.

However, *Wimpy Kid* reflects another trait of the school story that modern adaptations often lose: the school represents a “little world” that prepares children for the future but keeps out larger socio-political issues (Reimer 212). Young initiates into the schoolyard master the rules of their new environment and ideally learn how to thrive in the wider sphere, although authors anticipate rather than directly relate the impact of childhood education on adults. Readers accompany Tom Brown of *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* from the safety of home to the danger and freedom of Rugby school, and children likewise experience the newness and ignominy of middle school from the eyes

of sixth-grader Greg. The genre effectively “defamiliariz[es] and dramatiz[es] the ordinary” (Reimer 213), a technique that Greg actively practices in equating his harrowing school experience to Darwinian survival of the fittest.

School stories also traditionally feature a wide cast of characters, from respected school heads to despicable bullies (both students and teachers), and move over time towards “a greater degree of social realism” (Grenby 106). Depicting Greg as wimpy rather than heroic provides a clearer viewpoint of the widespread and enduring problem of bullies, and brothers Manny and Rodrick fill the position of school rivals in the portions of *Wimpy Kid* that take place outside school. Greg’s comic resistance to well-meaning teachers offers a modern take on the “continuing struggle for power between pupils and their teachers” (Grenby 94) seen especially in classic British school stories. Greg’s less than admirable actions mimic those of Tom Brown and other school story protagonists, but Greg endures as an antihero because he does not assimilate school values or find a place of belonging in the educational microcosm.

The antihero does not naturally fit into the realm of the school story, but Kinney also borrows elements from a less notable but still distinct genre, that of the comic antihero. William Walker in his study of the comic antihero identifies “a discernible pattern in fiction” that connects modern works like Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* and Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* through three key characteristics: passive resistance against unconquerable forces, humor, and individual story-telling (8-9). These three characteristics accord well with *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* as well, although Walker only notes the prevalence of isolation and social crisis in adult literature from the twentieth century.

Walker describes the genre as centered on the “the insignificant, powerless individual who is confronted with specific threats of oppression” who “develops certain skills to maintain his meager existence” (7). The “little man” that Walker pinpoints appears miniscule in relation to the destructive cultural machine, but this term aptly fits Greg Heffley not only as a literally diminutive figure. The comic antihero specifically resists passively and comically, certain that he cannot defeat the oppressive forces against him but equally determined to resist the heroic ideal of a corrupt system. Kinney draws comparisons between his protagonist and Holden Caulfield of *The Catcher in the Rye* (Kinney, “I Didn’t Think”), young adult literature’s quintessential “little man,” and the addition of cartoons and jokes align Greg even more closely with the characters Walker analyzes.

Greg undoubtedly portrays himself as a victim of authoritarian rule, from the unjust punishments doled out by his parents to the school system conspiring against him. At one point when Rodrick convinces Greg that he slept through the summer, the cartoonist depicts his father shouting at him, with angry lines emanating from his face. In contrast, hapless Greg upends his cereal bowl in surprise, unaware of his mistake. Greg also clashes with school officials, who often punish him wrongly or overlook his actual offenses, and stands apart from the majority of his classmates who accept school rules. Humor becomes a coping mechanism for the oppressed protagonist, and Greg responds to his societal limitations by hilariously sabotaging the school play and parodying in his diary those he views as repressive. In turn, children find humor in the incongruities of a child successfully outwitting adults, knowing both “the rules that are violated” in

challenging authority and the subversive undertones of “deviations from...socially-accepted behavior” (Russell 117-118).

Walker reminds readers that the “little man” cannot fully destroy the authoritarian structure around him. Greg delights readers with his comic behavior and amusing cartoons, but comedy cannot free him from the pains of middle school. He creates a satirical comic for the school newspaper that adults transform into a farcical attempt to discuss educational subjects. He later sees a chance of achieving popularity but loses the title of class clown to his loveable but dense friend Rowley. In these instances, the comic antihero has one last recourse: artistry. Greg Heffley reluctantly begins his journal, revealing the idea to be forced on him by his mother, but the titular diary becomes his best defense for the unfortunate situations he undergoes and “a means for satirizing the system” (Walker 9). Embracing his own voice, Greg demonstrates the resilience of the “little man” and the growing significance of the comic antihero.

Greg in his fictional world exerts considerable effort to overturn the standards set for him by parents and teachers, intending instead to obtain his own desires and escape punishment if possible. This attitude mimics that of other protagonists from nineteenth-century boys’ fiction like Mark Twain’s Tom Sawyer, who live only to cut corners and play tricks. Characters like Greg “help us laugh at the ‘boy’ in each of us, at caricatures of people we all recognize” (Vallone, “Laughing with the Boys” 127). One must look deeper, however, to determine if the character merely undermines superficial rules or the profounder norms that buttress them. Based on his comic portrayal of Greg’s relationships to his parents and school officials, I contend that Kinney and his antiheroic

protagonist do challenge current views on parental and educational authority figures typically promoted in children's literature.

Changing media environments, as discussed in the previous chapter, increase the availability of information to children without discriminating between what is deemed appropriate for them and what is not. Greg Heffley does not possess the high-tech equipment of Artemis Fowl, but he represents the average child with easy access to the Internet, television, and video games. More significantly, technology exposes the "adult conspiracy" in which parents attempt to shield their children from certain kinds of information (Meyrowitz 34). In other words, children more frequently gain information apart from parental control and discover how and why adults exercise control.

Kinney does not suggest that children perfectly understand the grown-up world, nor does he necessarily criticize the teaching methods of ordinary adults, but he does question the stereotype of the benevolent overseer gently guiding the child. Rather than directly portraying parents as incompetent or imperfect, Kinney speaks through Greg's "simultaneously subjective and objective voice...with ironic, grown-up meaning as well as child-like feeling" to highlight flaws in society and deflate the adult assumption that they successfully hoodwink their charges (Stahl 120). Satire requires conscious choice, but this consciousness comes from Kinney rather than Greg, who casually notes adult failures but leaves judgment to the reader. When his teacher assigns reading groups, Greg decodes the supposedly secret ability classification behind them; he also senses the hand of his mother in insuring his placement in the advanced group. These and other examples validate clever children and warn presumptuous adults not to underestimate

young people, effectively satirizing overprotective parents and modern educational practices.

Numerous genres in their earliest forms, including both the school story and children's humor, divide sharply over gender lines. Boys' books from the nineteenth century focus on adventure, practical jokes, and male camaraderie at school, while stories for girls emphasize self-improvement, cooperation, and domesticity (Vallone, "Laughing" 127). Today, writers for children include a diverse array of comedy suitable for boys and girls and school stories feature students of both genders. While young male and female readers may enjoy reading Greg's views on life in middle school, Kinney does not challenge gender roles in the same way that he questions adult authority. In addition to characters' traditional attitudes towards masculinity and femininity, the ideas embedded in the novel support clear and nonnegotiable male/female distinctions.

Nancy Taber and Vera Woloshyn probe the tendency among several cartoon diary books to heavily stereotype gender, and *Wimpy Kid* as the first among many imitators bears the primary responsibility for beginning this unhelpful trend. Issues of popularity and belonging, bullying, and friendship cross gender boundaries but the ways the text explores these themes promote a one-sided interpretation of gender. A mystified Greg mentions the criteria by which girls judge boys and contends that he has always found girls intriguing, but the rest of his search for popularity aims for respect from classmates in general or other boys in particular. He laments his "wimpy" physique when wrestling or playing football because he does not measure up to more developed boys.

The kinds of bullying Greg experiences also closely align with expectations of male aggression. He does not suffer from cutting words or gossip associated with "mean

girl” bullying but from physical abuse and immature name-calling (Taber and Woloshyn 233). All of Greg’s leisure activities denote perceived maleness, from snowball fighting and bike riding to playing violent video games and reading comic books, while he ridicules friend Rowley for his overprotective parents and failure to understand masculine social cues. Greg often finds pleasure in the same kinds of aggressive teasing he undergoes, suggesting that the protagonist as well as his enemies prefer violence to other forms of harassment.

In a few instances Kinney laughs at the expense of Mr. Heffley, who strives inordinately to protect his son from the shame of wimpiness. He strongly discourages Greg from requesting a Barbie dream house, even though Greg desires it to house his action figures, because it represents a slide towards femininity. Greg imitates these attitudes about maleness, defending himself strenuously from accusations of sissiness by blaming his diary on female interference and dropping the home economics classes at which he excels.

One could reasonably argue that Greg’s obviously biased perspective actually seeks to topple gender stereotypes, but other aspects of the novel do not survive close scrutiny. In independent study, Kinney’s adolescent girls plans “to invent a robot that would give you dating advice and have ten types of lip gloss on its fingertips,” effectively splitting the class by gender (Kinney, *Diary* 148). Additionally, Rowley acquires popularity when he breaks his hand, but the accompanying illustration shows only girls expressing sympathy and maternal nurturing (141). These situational aspects of the narrative as well as Greg’s own assumptions confirm the “heteronormative reinforcement” the novel proposes (Taber and Woloshyn 239). Although he may not

consciously desire to promote traditional gender roles or oversimplify characteristics of males and females, Kinney clearly has no interest in challenging them.

This analysis has considered with all three texts the question of change, whether antiheroes in works for young readers can remain static or whether they must mature in order to preserve the optimism and moral structure associated with children's literature. Mary Lennox and Artemis Fowl both discernibly develop, although the latter grows most noticeably over an entire series. In the case of Greg Heffley, some would argue that his final actions continue the pattern of moral improvement begun with the earliest texts from children's literature, where the child protagonist learns a valuable lesson and resolves lasting conflicts. Greg eventually comes to understand that his treatment of Rowley brings consequences, including the loss of his safety patrol position and his best friend, and he demonstrates courage in defending Rowley in the novel's conclusion.

The school story features its own generic standards for concluding a text in which students master the rules of the new environment and prepare for adulthood. Kinney does not give any indication that Greg will ever belong in middle school nor that he has gained life skills for the future. Nevertheless, he makes surprising progress over the course of nine months. Despite his atrocious behavior and willing disregard of convention, Greg begins to grasp the rules that govern interpersonal relationships, including compromise and cooperation. Moreover, he sacrifices the popularity so sacred to adolescents for the sake of higher goals like friendship and reconciliation. Most importantly, he learns to use his questionable gift for twisting the truth to protect rather than harm.

The relative acceptance of *Wimpy Kid* by parents and educators lends credence to the theory that Greg matures from his antiheroic stance. However, I find more convincing the opposing view that Kinney's protagonist does not mature, nor must he as a character marketed for children. As Mavis Reimer mentions in examining the school story, "the critical attribution of realism to school stories has been a recurrent marker of value" (222). Consequently, the demands of realism placed on the genre compel texts to address issues of increasing depth and maturity as real children of all ages face increasingly complex social problems. The growing presence of irony and mistrust in the daily lives of children likewise encourages writers to portray wise-cracking, amoral adolescents among their characters. Unlike fantasy or science-fiction where heroic children still play a role in imaginative escape, realistic fiction should include the role of "wimpy" and otherwise imperfect children in shaping modern Western culture.

Although Greg sacrifices to preserve his friendship with Rowley, the continuing *Wimpy Kid* series reveals that very few of his attitudes and behaviors have changed. If Greg experiences an epiphany at the end of a novel, the following book begins anew with zany antics and reprehensible rule-breaking. These realities grant that children undergo years of mistakes and consequences before they adopt adult morals and further concede that social norms should not always be accepted. In a literal sense, Greg cannot mature like other fictional characters because he is a cartoon and his life primarily unfolds as drawings on paper rather than as images in the mind of his creator. Kinney "use[s] puberty as a metaphor," capturing the claustrophobia and frustration of adolescence through a protagonist with an inability to grow up (Kinney, "Love in the Wimpy Way"). Greg Heffley as pen-and-ink Peter Pan or *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* as metafictional musing

may stretch the imagination, but Kinney's intentions must guide interpretation and provide the greatest evidence for the novel's resistance to children's literature standards.

With several successful films and an ongoing book franchise, Jeff Kinney possesses the freedom to continue developing, though not maturing, Greg Heffley as an antihero. Like Mary Lennox and Artemis Fowl, Greg endears himself to a diverse audience even as he offers a mixed moral message to young readers. Kinney admirably raises expectations for his audience, trusting children to comprehend his ironizing of the school story and perhaps to acquire a more sophisticated understanding of accepted principles and the potential benefits of obeying them. His novel holistically addresses contemporary problems in education and parenting while fostering understanding and humor between children and adults. Greg in his selfish conceit lives only for entertainment, a gift he grants to his readers in full measure.

Gaining and Losing: The Future of Heroism

Examining any type like the antihero requires a diverse and expansive textual pool, beginning with its early development and continuing to more modern portrayals. The type as it appears in children's literature adds particular scholarly interest because of the persistent neglect of the genre and characters that contradict conventional didactic purposes. *The Secret Garden*, *Artemis Fowl*, and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* consequently range from the beginnings of children's literature to the twenty-first century and particularly exemplify the changing face of children's literature from the transformed Mary Lennox to the stagnant Greg Heffley. Nevertheless, choosing texts from different periods and genres allows the commonalities that bind these protagonists together to emerge more clearly: rejection of qualities associated with traditional heroes, failure to provide role models to young readers, and subtle critiques of cultural norms.

Each protagonist aptly fits the definition I propose for an antihero. In crafting their texts, however, Burnett, Colfer, and Kinney effectively present their antiheroes as antithetical to the heroic qualities most valued in their respective contexts. Mary Lennox's aggression and indifference directly contrast with the submissiveness and maternal attitude desired of Victorian women, and her imperious attitude aligns her with Indian rather than supposedly superior English ways. On the other hand, *Artemis Fowl* involves himself in organized crime at a time when violence increasingly characterizes Western culture and exploits the weak as the world grows more connected. Greg Heffley expresses apathy towards school, intensifying fears that American students are becoming dumber, and exhibits heightened immaturity when society places greater demands on

young people than ever before. The subtly changing expectations for heroes in children's literature consequently affect the development of the antihero over time.

Each of the texts also features a somewhat different outlook for exploring the antihero. Mary can be viewed as essentially a romantic antihero, as she makes an archetypal ascent from spiritual and emotional darkness to health and stability. Artemis closely fits the subtype of an ironic antihero, as his crimes immediately upset expectations initially established by his youth and his absurd degree of autonomy mocks adult concerns about children without parental control. Greg follows the pattern of comic antiheroes, who meet authority with pluck but fail to understand their inability to achieve their goals. Although these differences strongly distinguish the three antiheroes from each other, they do not overshadow the collective qualities that help define the figure in children's literature.

While the authors have a diversity of reasons for centering their stories on antiheroes, they share certain artistic impulses and structural elements. Each addresses themes skillfully articulated through an antiheroic protagonist, like the importance of transformation, the conflict between freedom and responsibility, and the desire for popularity. In addition, the antiheroes propel the texts into particular conventional subgenres of children's literature that require character development or character flaws. Perhaps most significantly, the three novels uniquely succeed in attracting young readers because imperfect protagonists more closely resemble real-world children. Whether the antiheroes provide moral examples to their readers or not, their centrality to their stories reminds children that they need not slay dragons or save the world to make an impression.

In the case of all three texts, the authors address socio-cultural values they find problematic and attempt to alter their readers' perspectives. Burnett challenges gender dynamics of the Victorian era by encouraging active lifestyles, featuring a strong-willed female protagonist (even after her moral transformation), and heightening the importance of motherhood. Colfer critiques human-centered views of the environment and other creatures, while Kinney empowers children to question their adult authorities. However, each text conforms to other equally questionable norms: *The Secret Garden* upholds the imperialistic mindset of turn-of-the-century Britain; *Artemis Fowl* promotes the fear of those with mental illnesses; and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* learns nothing from Burnett regarding gender roles, preferring to overgeneralize relationships between boys and girls. These three antiheroes reveal the dual nature of all literature, and children's literature in particular, as writers purposely present their messages and unconsciously reflect their cultural backgrounds.

The most divergent discoveries come in response to the final research area, the choice or necessity to develop a child antihero into a traditional hero or not. By her novel's end, Mary cannot truly be called an antihero. Readers recognize that her transformation has been completed when her character becomes overshadowed by that of her cousin. Artemis, on the other hand, does not undergo distinctive development at the conclusion of his first story, although further books in the series explicitly describe his reform. In contrast to both of the other protagonists, Greg unequivocally remains the same person through all seven books in his series. The varied conclusions of the works suggest a greater creativity and a lesser conventionality in children's literature than may have been previously supposed. The clear authorial choice demonstrated by all three

writers combats the notion that elements developed from adult literature must be significantly moderated for young readers.

Certainly questions remain about the antihero in general and its relationship to children's literature in particular. How the prevalence of the antihero in modern adult literature affected its growth in children's literature is still unclear. The presence of antiheroes in fiction for young readers does not define the boundary between those to whom the book is marketed and those who attempt to regulate what children read, nor does it clarify the difference between children's and young adult literature. Moreover, this study cannot answer whether the hero will disappear from literature as society becomes increasingly disillusioned with moral absolutes and the possibility for nobility. While recent texts like *Artemis Fowl* and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* indicate that the antihero finds a wider audience as years go by, other signs like the popularity of *Harry Potter* show a continuing desire to read of true heroic struggles against evil. Perhaps this study only succeeds in unveiling a new heroic paradigm that broadens its scope to include the pure of heart and the sometimes heartless.

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