

Gymnich, Marion, Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz, Gerold Sedlmayr, and Dirk Vanderbeke (eds.) 2018. *The Orphan in Fiction and Comics Since the 19th Century*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 316 pp.

The introduction to this substantial and wide-ranging study of the orphan trope in primarily British fiction from the 1800s to the present day is co-written, with each author producing one of the five chapters, and one author producing two.

Like scholars such as Nina Auerbach, Claudia Nelson, Laura Peters, and Diana Loercher Pazicky, the authors of this volume consider the orphan figure to be particularly adaptable to “negotiating a range of different social problems and anxieties” (3), especially in the Victorian period when orphaned children and half-orphans (children who have lost one parent) were not uncommon to the social landscape of a rapidly urbanizing and industrializing Britain. At the same time, the authors also view this figure as having an existential valence, with archetypal or universal significance. The study concerns children who have lost at least one parent, but it also concerns “functional orphans”, defined by Maria Nikolajeva as children who, for either social or aesthetic reasons, are represented as growing up *as if* they did not have parents.

The study opens, after a brief introduction, in the age of the literary orphan, Victorian England. It discusses the multitude of young orphans in canonized texts by Charles Dickens, the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Robert Louis Stevenson, Thomas Hardy, and Rudyard Kipling, classifying them into types which, by the end of the age, have become “prototypes”: the orphan as a pathetic figure, as a figure of hope, and as an adventurer. Each of these types, Marion Gymnich suggests, grows out of and informs particular social discourses, including those of social reform, self-improvement, and imperialism, which wax and wane during the Victorian era. The chapter successfully drives home the prevalence of the orphan as a literary figure, featuring in major works of nineteenth-century fiction. The readings of individual works primarily offer insight into the orphan as a literary phenomenon, rather than insight into the effect of the orphan figure on our understanding of the novels.

After Chapter One’s presentation of the multitudes of orphans in Victorian fiction, Chapter Two wrestles with the problem of the disappearing orphan, the “gap” in literary uses of this trope in the first 6 or so decades of the twentieth century, from about 1910-1970. Modernist

literature, writes Puschmann-Nalenz, makes oddly little use of the orphan figure, in spite of the countless children and youth orphaned during the First and Second World Wars. She identifies this gap and theorizes it in terms of cultural disillusion and challenges to traditional values of family and nation, as well as to the aesthetic aspirations of modernist writers. She shows that the orphan of Victorian fiction became increasingly understood as a stale literary convention which Modernist writers rejected in favor of the figure of the artist (as in Stephen Dedalus's self-orphaning in Joyce's work) and the interiority of ordinary people (such as Woolf's Mrs. Brown). Moreover, with the loss of innocence in the new century, romanticized views of children, family relations, national cohesion, and warfare were gradually displaced. Against this background, the relatively few Modernist literary orphans became instead exiles of their own making, frequently alienated and spiritually bereft. Eventually, she proposes, "the trope became dysfunctional" (104) as skepticism about the family grew and was coupled with unacknowledged feelings that actual orphans marked traumas all-too-close in time and place, too close to home and to the home front. Puschmann-Nalenz's complex argument is supported by readings of works by E.M. Forster, George Orwell, and Elizabeth Bowen, among others.

Puschmann-Nalenz turns to more recent fiction in Chapter Three, where she focuses on the orphan figures in later novels by Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, Jane Gardam, Graham Swift, Helen Dunmore, Margaret Atwood, Caryl Phillips, J.M. Coetzee, and Toni Morrison. Texts by these authors are examined in terms of theoretical insights provided by Julia Kristeva (the foreigner as orphan), Hans Blumenberg (the orphan as elemental metaphor), Luce Irigaray (maternal genealogy and the social order) as well as by Kazuo Ishiguro and critic Eva König. Puschmann-Nalenz's interest is in the contemporary orphan figure's relation to the picaresque genre, to the dead or absent mother, and to "postcolonial fiction, broadly defined" (138). The theoretical framework for this chapter is multi-faceted, and tensions appear in competing theoretical discourses which readers may perceive as somewhat problematic or simply intriguing.

Chapter Four examines orphan figures in contemporary fantasy fiction by J.K. Rowling, Philip Pullman, and George R.R. Martin, analyzing each author's series in terms of myth. This chapter makes

interesting use of both poststructuralists (Jacques Derrida) and structuralists or their precursors, from James Frazer to Northrup Frye, in order to argue that fantasy fiction engages myth and its truth value “in order to renegotiate and put into perspective the legacy of Western metaphysics” (184). Emphasizing the conservative character of much fantasy fiction, the author nevertheless proposes that contemporary fantasy at least sometimes uses the orphan figure as an “emancipatory sign” (235), with the backward-looking nature of the genre marked today by irony and self-awareness. Gerold Sedlmayr’s chapter provides interesting readings of contemporary and popular fantasy series.

Finally, Chapter Five extends its attention to the American scene in its discussion of comics and graphic novels. Dirk Vanderbeke provides an interesting and informative account of early comics such as *Gasoline Alley* and *Little Orphan Annie*, focusing on the form and its interaction with the orphan figure. He then turns to Disney figures in early short films and the comics, noting the optimism and ease of adaptation of these orphans and briefly contrasting them to the orphans in later Disney feature films. In superhero comics the contrast is also strong, with plotlines engaging loss, grief, and suffering. Super heroes have an origin suffused in tragedy (267), and display one of the thousand faces theorized by Campbell, as well as following mythic trajectories. After a discussion of orphanhood in *Superman*, *Batman*, and later comics like *Spider Man*, Vanderbeke shows how graphic novels and life writing increasingly accommodate real-life autobiographical and social conditions, in which orphanhood is, he says, less common. Vanderbeke discusses texts such as Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* and G. Neri and Randy DuBurke’s *Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty*. While I understand the author’s larger point about the realism of these works, it is difficult to agree that orphans play a diminished role in 20<sup>th</sup> century writing (292). The many examples from this volume demonstrate that orphans and functional orphans remain meaningful for autobiography and fiction; in another vein one might consider the life-writing emerging from a context of Native American child removal, for example, or from the Holocaust, which Vanderbeke does briefly discuss. Moreover, as my coauthors and I have elsewhere argued (*Making Home* 2014), orphans occur in twentieth- and twenty-first century US fiction—realist, postmodern, and speculative—which explores tensions and challenges to traditional views of family and nation. Vanderbeke’s turn to the US in

this chapter, but especially to later fictional forms such as the graphic novel, contributes significantly to the reach of the volume.

One of the strengths of this book is also a weakness. In many of the chapters, the ambition to demonstrate the prevalence of the orphan trope through time has been given precedence over deeper analyses both of the works themselves, and of the socio-cultural discourses from which they emerge and to which they contribute. Similarly, the many different theoretical approaches to the figure of the orphan in literature and popular cultural texts enhance a sense of the rich variations in this literary figure, at the same time as the diversity of approaches risks becoming confusing or contradictory. On the whole, however, *The Orphan in Fiction and Comics Since the 19th Century* does provide a comprehensive and thought-provoking introduction to a literary phenomenon which continues to engage writers and readers alike.

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