Beyond the words of a storyteller: The cine-semiotic play of the abject, terror and community in the Anti-Hunting Trilogy of Thornton W Burgess

Description

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Abstract: Thornton W. Burgess (b. 1874, d. 1965) was a children's writer who attained great popularity and commercial success, with stories such as Old Mother West Wind (1910) and The Adventures of Peter Cottontail (1914) published by Little, Brown and Company, and with reprinted titles now published by Dover Press. His stories have been read from their initial publication in the early 1900s until the present day, and numerous titles have been translated to languages such as Japanese, French, Italian, and Gaelic. However, at times his works were not well-reviewed by children's literary critics, and so his mixed reception creates a mystery around "What is it about Burgess that readers either loved or hated?" My conceptual framework grounded in ideas of New Historicism and cultural studies draws upon psychoanalytic concepts (after Kristeva, others) and film theory (after Bordwell, others) to explore the narrative appeal of three related Burgess works: The Adventures of Poor Mrs. Quack (1917), The Adventures of Bob White (1919), and Lightfoot the Deer (1921). I was able to trace
how Mr. Burgess conveyed his inner-most thoughts of primal drama (after Freud, Kristeva and Adler) of the lived and imagined stories of family and domestic affairs of friends and family, co-joined with a political message of the early 20th century show-down between nature and encroaching urbanization. I found that Burgess practiced an economy of storytelling known for cinema and film (after Heath). The result in his well-known stories was an emergent aesthetic experience of seeing/feeling/meaning I term the cine-semiotic, evoking notions of le semiotique = psychoanalytic semiotics and la semiotique = filmic or sign operation semiotics (Rosen, 1986). It seems that Burgess shares a visual aesthetic with other children’s writers such as Beatrix Potter, the English creator of Peter Cottontail (Carpenter, 1989). Through a close reading, documentation, and interpretation of three selected stories of Burgess which I term his Anti-Hunting Trilogy, this study seeks to understand the enigmatic nature of his mixed reception in early 20th century children's literature. I have used archival-historical primary research materials along with readings of his stories to provide data around the nature of his popularly appealing narrative aesthetic. I became aware of a mode of address to the reader that I have termed the “cine-semiotic,” which speaks to the language of Mr. Burgess's stories based in deep renditions of psychic dynamics which emanate through: (a) scripted movements of the abject and abjection, terror and anxiety, and community and wholeness; and (b) telling and showing aspects of narrative that play out through visual iconicity and other cinematic operations of the story language (after Bordwell, 1985). The results of my study provide a new means for interpreting, understanding and expressing the social, cultural and psychic effects resident within three stories written and published by Mr. Burgess from 1917 to 1921, and republished into the 21st century by Dover Publications for an avid and devoted contemporary readership. The implications of the study are that, under the conditions of language looking in at language, scholars looking in
at children's stories can begin to discern meaningful patterns of cultural discourse that may otherwise go undiscerned.

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