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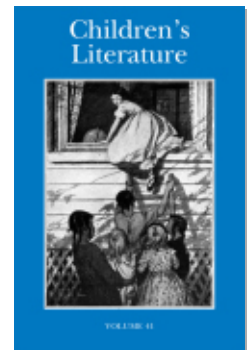
## The Devil's Own Art: Topiary in Children's Fiction

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## *The Devil's Own Art: Topiary in Children's Fiction*

Kathryn V. Graham

At first glance it seems a truth universally acknowledged: the juxtaposition of children and gardens is a wondrous thing. Whether fiction or nonfiction, children's books typically extol the advantages of getting close to nature, watching things grow, taking part in the nurture of plants, soaking up both the healthy benefits of fresh air and sunshine and the character-building rewards of honest physical labor. In children's literature, gardening becomes more than a hobby or leisure activity: it is a form of therapy and self-cultivation. In contrast, fictional literature for adults does not always give the same positive spin on gardens. We become aware of poisoned paradises and perverse Edens where the serpent and flowers coexist: to name but a few, the toxic retreats in Hawthorne's "Rappacini's Daughter," Tennyson's "The Lotos Eaters," or Swinburne's "Garden of Proserpine," the morbid gardens of Blake's *Songs of Experience*, beautiful and damned Manderley in Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca*. Fallen Edens even lose their verdure in texts such as Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden*.

Are there any comparably ambiguous or negative evocations of gardens in children's literature? This essay will argue yes—that children's book writers and illustrators have made use of the topiary garden to create an unsettling, surreal, and frightening twist on the concept of controlled yet benevolent nature under cultivation. A skeptic might protest this claim. Surely actual topiary gardens exist for the delight of children! From the grounds of the various Disney Worlds to a 1986 tour de force—*The Wizard of Oz* done in topiary tableaux at Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania—topiary must surely be created by adults to amaze and amuse the child. But is it, and does it? What is it about topiary that some children's writers have recognized to have an opposite effect, menace rather than amusement?

I aim to explore these and related questions in the essay that follows. In doing so, I'll consciously depart from the most familiar form of scholarly writing: choosing an ideological or critical lens, scrutinizing the literary texts from that perspective, and drawing the conclusions that result. Soon after noticing the suggestively sinister nature

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of topiary in children's books and attempting to account for it, I saw the over-determined nature of the phenomenon. Thus in this preliminary exploration of a fascinating and complex matter, attending closely to concrete specifics and acknowledging multiple and sometimes competing explanations seemed the honest, if messy, means of proceeding. To select one or more theoretical explanations from the many would, at this point in the investigation, be to enact on the subject what topiary art itself performs on plants: a gain in shapely clarity would be offset by a loss in natural complexity. Thus the following two-part piece of writing is something of an experiment in antimethodological methodology. The first and longer part of the essay will offer close readings of various appearances that topiary art makes in children's literature. A short, dense coda will then suggest, without choosing between, a range of potentially illuminating ways to explain the dark side of topiary.

In discussing and portraying topiary in *Gardens of Obsession*, Gordon Taylor and Guy Cooper spend considerable time on this gardening practice, because the careful pruning, clipping, and time-consuming maintenance of topiary is, by its very nature, an act requiring intense concentration. Taylor and Cooper offer a brief definition of topiary, "the ancient craft of clipping and training trees or shrubs to create living sculptures" (100), followed by a succinct history. Could children be subconsciously aware of the potentially obsessive nature of such gardens? Taylor and Cooper characterize gardens of obsession as "beautiful, bizarre, camp, cranky, delirious, dreamy, enchanting, eccentric, fantastic, grotesque, infatuated, kinky, kitsch, magical, odd, phantasmagoric, quirky, visionary, wacky, and . . . often simply witty!" (8) Three of the obsessively alphabetized adjectives listed above—"dreamy" (although one might be tempted to substitute nightmarish in some forms), "grotesque," and "phantasmagoric"—apply particularly well to topiary gardens as depicted in picture books or illustrations by Edward Gorey and Anthony Browne, as well as in text descriptions by Elizabeth Goudge, Lucy Boston, Lemony Snicket, and Janni Howker. In various ways these books for children underline the unnatural, unsettling, and surreal nature of topiary and tap into childhood fears of hostile animistic spirits in objects, mutilation, and rigid control by powerful adults.

The more benign of these literary and picture book topiaries are those designed by an author or illustrator to create a Gothic mood. Mel Gussow's *New York Times* obituary characterizes Edward Gorey as

“a grand master of the comic macabre,” who was known for “his spidery drawings and stories of hapless children, swooning maidens . . . threatening topiary and weird, mysterious events on eerie Victorian landscapes” (goreyography.com). An unusually suggestive little story featuring topiary is Gorey’s “The Remembered Visit,” in which a young woman wistfully recollects a call paid by her and her governess on an old gentleman “who had been or done something lofty and cultured in the dim past” (panel 11). To set a mood of decayed elegance, Gorey provides a panel with the caption, “They were shown into a garden where the topiary was being neglected” (panel 10) (fig. 1). The topiary in question, clipped to resemble a rather slim, stately greyhound sort of dog, has not reverted to a mere shaggy likeness of such an animal. Instead, only one or two long tendrils mar the perfection of the shape. A viewer might feel tempted to clip the “offending” little branch in order to perfect the shape in much the same way that a person might smooth a stray lock of hair. The cartoon panel’s implication that such a timely tweak could return the garden to elegance and order allows us to ponder an interesting paradox of topiary illustrations: though an impeccable topiary can induce feelings of admiration of or rebellion against absolute order, a flawed topiary is highly likely to stir the impulse to tidy or perfect.

A more typical Gothic representation of topiary appears in Lemony Snicket’s *The Reptile Room* (1999), second in his “Series of Unfortunate Events” presenting the mock-macabre world of the beleaguered Baudelaire orphans. From the naming of his heroes, villains, towns and houses to his novel’s exotic crimes and fiendish plots, Lemony Snicket ironizes the Gothic form for the entertainment of the sophisticated child reader. *The Reptile Room* includes a frontispiece illustration by Brett Helquist (fig. 2) foregrounding the serpentine topiary hedges of the newest temporary home Violet, Klaus, and Sunny will briefly inhabit while living with Dr. Montgomery, yet another absurdly distant relation shortly to meet a gruesome end. Helquist’s frontispiece corresponds to Snicket’s initial description, which gives only a brief sentence or two about Uncle Monty’s house before describing the grounds:

But in front of the house was what was truly unusual: a vast well-kept lawn, dotted with long, thin shrubs in remarkable shapes. . . . The Baudelaires could see that the shrubs had been trimmed so as to look like snakes. Each hedge was a different kind of serpent, some long, some short, some with their tongues out and



*They were shown into a garden where the topiary was being neglected.*

Figure 1. From Edward Gorey, "The Remembered Visit," *Amphigorey* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1972). Reprinted by permission of Donadio & Olson, Inc.

some with their mouths open, showing green, fearsome teeth.

They were quite eerie, and Violet, Klaus, and Sunny were a bit hesitant about walking beside them on their way up to the house. (8)

Illustration and text alike present the mock-Gothic mood that Lemony Snicket's fans cherish, although the children's hesitancy about walking close to the snake topiary underlines the atavistic fear of evil as represented by the serpent in the garden as well as a concern that these objects could be possessed by an animistic snake spirit that offers a threat.

Also within the range of fairly benign topiary in illustration are the surrealistic drawings of Anthony Browne. If surrealism in art and literature is most usually defined as the practice of producing fantastic or dreamlike imagery through unnatural juxtapositions and combinations, then one often looks to Lewis Carroll's works as among the



Figure 2. Frontispiece to Lemony Snicket, *The Reptile Room*, illustrated by Brett Helquist (New York: HarperCollins, 1999). Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins.

highest manifestations of the phenomenon. As one of the many illustrators since Carroll himself and his contemporary John Tenniel to illustrate the unnatural juxtapositions and playful yet sinister oddities of the text, Browne includes topiary in three panels of his 1988 *Alice in Wonderland*: His illustration of the White Rabbit's house imprisoning a giant Alice has a trimmed topiary shrub that disturbs the viewer who notes the unsettling lack of a connecting stem between the two pieces of sheared foliage. A topiary cat and rabbit can be seen beyond the garden wall where The Mad Tea Party takes place (fig. 3). Perhaps the cat prefigures the appearance of the Cheshire Cat, while the rabbit could assume a dual identity as the March Hare or the White Rab-



Figure 3. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, illustration copyright © 1988 by Anthony Browne. Used by permission of Random House Children's Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

bit. Clipped heart-shaped hedges with ornamental topiary decorate the Queen's Croquet Grounds. It is a ruthlessly groomed place equally apt to represent the Queen's autocratic and threatening control or the strict, if arbitrary, rules of the game. And lastly, though not, strictly speaking, topiary, a vignette of arched trees, ornamental folly, and a pair of stylized birds frozen in flight comprises the features of a surreal human face singing of "Soup, beautiful soup" (an odd, dreamy moment as voice and daylight die away).

In Browne's later *Voices in the Park* (1998), four separate narrators give accounts of an afternoon during which they all encounter one



Figure 4. Mr. Tailor Man from Heinrich Hoffmann, *Struwwelpeter* (New York: Dover, 1995).

another in the park. Perhaps the most obvious surreal touch is that the four speakers are Browne's trademark gorillas—including one, a well-dressed bourgeoisie matron in coat and high heels, perfectly accessorized with silk scarf, hat, and pearls. Her son Charles, the little girl Smudge, and Smudge's working-class Dad are also carefully costumed in signifiers of socioeconomic class. If the characters weren't surreal enough, the landscape of the park is pure Magritte and includes topiary shaped to mimic fruit as well as the heads of gorillas. But despite its surreal visual nature, the text evokes a series of simple and real human needs—the two adults long for control over the chaotic substance of life (Charles's mother wishes to maintain conventional appearances and corral her wayward son; Smudge's Dad needs a job and hope for a better future.) The children simply desire to find a playmate and have fun. All four characters voice their monologues; none of them notices the bizarre details of the park.

Whereas Gorey, Snicket, and Browne illustrate a comfortable, conventional Gothic or an entrancingly surreal world through topiary, other authors show a far darker, more menacing side of this gardening phenomenon. Of the three primary fears topiary evokes, the most severe must be a child's horror of mutilation or the snipping away of





Figure 5. The title character of Heinrich Hoffman, *Struwwelpeter* (New York: Dover, 1995).

a body part. From the outraged cry of the circumcised infant to the sobs of the child in the barber's chair, children have not appreciated a powerful, purposeful adult approach with knife or scissors. Adults in the past have frightened children into good behavior with threats like Heinrich Hoffman's Mr. Tailor Man, who will snip off their thumbs if children suck them. Hoffman's crudely horrific drawing shows the leering Tailor Man and his flashing scissors still aimed at the weeping child whose mutilated and bleeding thumbless hands are pathetically extended toward the viewer (fig. 4). But if we as adults look at Hoffman's primary figure, Struwwelpeter, in his grotesque collection of cautionary tales (1844), we can almost sympathize with the desire to trim the unruly hair and unclipped fingernails of Shock-headed Peter (fig. 5).

No doubt Hoffman's stories haunted film director Tim Burton, leading to his dark fairy tale *Edward Scissorhands* (1990). Edward, a master of surreal topiary design, dog grooming, and ladies' hairdressing, combines some of shock-headed Peter's distinguishing features with the memorable characteristics of Mr. Tailor Man (fig. 6). Like



Figure 6. Edward Scissorhands in a posture that echoes that of Strewwelpeter. From *Edward Scissorhands*, directed by Tim Burton. Distributed by 20th Century Fox, 1990.

Strewwelpeter's, Edward's hair is long and uncontrolled. Both boys' faces are scratched and scarred by their own razor-sharp appendages (nails in Peter's case, the scissors that replace hands in Edward's). Like Mr. Tailor Man's enormous shears, Edward's nervously flashing scissors cause instant recoil at first viewing. Burton constantly reminds the viewer of the simultaneous creative and destructive force inherent in scissorhands—even in moments of deep emotional attachment or frightened attempts to help others, Edward's "hands" accidentally slash and cut. They also serve as weapons to fend off a murderous attack. However, when Edward's feelings are less dramatically engaged, he creates topiary, beautifies women's hair, and makes complex paper dolls. Burton's film also shows differing attitudes toward topiary on the part of adults and children. When the adult female (Diane Wiest as the Avon Lady) first sees the surreal figures dotting the manor's lawn, she smiles, charmed. Later, as schoolchildren walk past Edward's topiary created in their suburban neighborhood, one declares, "I think they look weird; they give me the creeps." Perhaps the adult acceptance of artifice (after all, Wiest's character is a cosmetic

saleswoman) differs from the youth's sense of a weirdness in transforming nature.<sup>1</sup>

If Hoffman serves as an early model for adult control of the wayward child through the mutilation of males, "The Topiary Garden," Janni Howker's 1984 novella (shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal and the Whitbread Prize) uses topiary clipping as an overt metaphor for society's shaping and control of the female body. The story's protagonist Liz, an aspiring artist, escapes the male-dominated world of motorcycle design and racing enjoyed by her father and brother by strolling in a nearby country house's grounds with her sketchbook. She discovers an unsettling topiary garden "where there was a small, perfectly round lawn, upon which stood a marble statue of a nude woman. Her arms were broken off just above the elbow. And all round her stood black yews like newel posts, like pawns guarding the queen" (177). Liz finds herself sketching and interpreting the figure: "without thinking, Liz had given her arms and hands—and the chessmen weren't guarding her. They were keeping her in, like a pale prisoner" (177). She writes a caption beneath her sketch, "The stranger took her to the topiary garden and showed her a woman turned to stone" (178). Liz's own growing sense of female and artistic self in an all-male household has been constantly undermined by her brother's moronic graffiti in the beloved sketchbook she won as a school prize, and by her father's lack of support. Uncomfortable with the emerging woman and artist in their midst, the males in her family are clipping the wings of her self-esteem. She recognizes that they merely wish to guard her, but her sketch reveals her deeper fears of imprisonment and stony despair.

A meeting with a ninety-one-year-old woman, Sally Beck, who lives on the estate after years of service in the gardens, gives Liz insight into her own predicament and the comparable problems women dealt with in the past. Sally Beck begins her work at Carlton Hall as a twelve-year-old runaway in her brother's stolen clothes. Calling herself Jack Beck, she exults in her independence and work for nearly three years until her female body betrays her to the head gardener and other servants. Shortly before her disguise must come to an end, the head gardener Sam tells her, "'Topiary is the devil's own art! . . . Well, you reckon it up, Jack. Eight weeks every year it takes us to clip this lot—two whole months back and front of every summer. By the time you've been here six years, you'll have spent one whole year of your natural born days, clip-clipping these feckless articles!'" (186). Sam contin-

ues to fulminate, “I’ve been thinking of all the years of me four-score and ten that I’ve spent turning what’s natural into what’s unnatural, just for the pleasing of a gentleman’s eye. . . . Look at that yew—it should be a fine big churchyard tree by now. But oh no—our Sir William wants a wasp-waist of a useless article!” Sally eyed their work. “It’s like putting a tree in corsets,” she said thoughtfully. Sam laughed and slapped his knee. “Aye! It is that, Jack! Putting Mother Nature into corsets and stays—that’s our job in the topiary garden. And all so Sir William can glance up from his table and see her displayed for his pleasure” (187). As this passage illustrates, Howker’s views of topiary gardening as “the devil’s own art” and a woman’s place in a patriarchal and class-ridden society neatly dovetail. Nature is lush, green, and female, burgeoning with life and possibility and usefulness. The property-owning male wants her subdued into a shape that pleases his aesthetic eye, a “useless” article guarded, walled in, and maintained by the work of others.

Later the protagonist Liz has a nightmare after the visit to Carlton Hall: “She was in the topiary garden but now all the trees and bushes were really women, rooted to the soil. And a man with a thin nose and white gloves was walking among them, snipping off their arms with a huge pair of shears. He came towards Liz, and she suddenly realized that she was a topiary woman as well. ‘S-nap! Ss-nap!’ went his shears as he came at her. And Liz jerked awake” (196). One might imagine that Howker the novelist shares film director Tim Burton’s reaction to Hoffman’s *Mr. Tailor Man*; but despite the nightmare atmosphere, Howker’s novella concludes with a hopeful ending. Liz knows that Sally Beck’s own story turned out well—after her exposure as a girl and a regretted passage into skirts, she was allowed to keep her place on the estate and went on to become head gardener. The limited triumph that frees her, if only to serve as a patriarchal corseter of nature, is all that a first-wave feminist can possibly expect. But Sally’s example inspires Liz to assert herself and her own artistic talents. Like Sally Beck, Liz will not allow the devil’s own art to lop off her arms and keep them from a self-chosen life’s work of meaning and value.

Elizabeth Goudge’s 1946 novel, *The Little White Horse*, provides more conventional closure to a girl’s coming-of-age story involving topiary. *The Little White Horse* begins with a common trope in children’s fiction, the orphan introduced to his or her new home. Like *The Secret Garden*’s Mary Lennox or Anne of Green Gables, the orphaned Maria Merryweather stares with eager interest at her first sight of the place

that will become home to her. But like the Beaudelaire orphans, Maria feels an instant aversion to the topiary she views as the carriage approaches her uncle's house:

. . . and the beautiful park had given place to a formal garden, with flower beds and paved walks surrounding a water lily pool, and yew trees cut into strange, fantastic shapes of crowing cocks and knights on horseback. The garden, like the park, was all silver and black under the moon, and a little tremor of fear seized Maria as they drove through it, for it seemed to her that the black knights and black cocks turned their heads to look very coldly at her as she went past. (41)

The hostile animism of the yew figures stems from a magical curse put upon the trees years before. Two disputing knights, Sir William Cocq de Noir and Sir Wroff Merryweather, involve the entire community in their discord over property. Sir Wroff, realizing he can get "Black William's" land by marrying his only daughter and heiress, offers to end the warfare with a wedding. The marriage turns happily into a love match, but when Black William surprises everyone by marrying again and fathering a son to inherit the land, Sir Wroff's anger at the treachery and loss of property hurts the feelings of his bride, who realizes that she was not wooed for love alone. Her wounded pride and bitterness go into the topiary figures that represent the heraldic emblems of her estranged husband and father. Maria's spiritual advisor, Old Parson, aware of Maria's own tendency toward pride, tells the girl of her ancestress's mocking gesture: "They say it was she who planted those yew trees and had them cut into the shapes of black knights or black cocks, just to annoy her husband" (121). He continues his story with a warning as to how human spite can pervert nature: "Yet all attempts to cut those yew trees into any shapes but those of black knights and black cocks is doomed to failure; always they go back to their original shapes" (128). When Maria makes her own series of romantic decisions that lead to a happy and equal partnership, the curse that had lingered over the valley dissipates—old hostilities are forgotten, parted lovers find each other again, and Maria's view of the topiary figures is radically altered: "She found that as she looked at them that she was no longer afraid of the yew tree men and cocks. It was as though some living evil in them had been withdrawn and now they were not presences anymore but just yew trees clipped into amusing shapes" (261).

In both “The Topiary Garden” and *The Little White Horse*, topiary, an adult contrivance, loses something of its magical and psychic power when the protagonist grows to healthy maturity. In contrast, two works by Lucy Boston—her well-known text that introduced the Green Knowe series, *The Children of Green Knowe* (1955), and a lesser-known, now out-of-print work, *Castle of Yew* (1965)—offer topiary adventures that extend over a shorter period of time and remain enclosed in childhood so that the craft retains its potency. The house and gardens lovingly represented in Boston’s novels are based on her own home and grounds, the Manor House at Hemingford Grey, part of which dates from 1120. It is important to note that these two novels contain an intensely personal view of topiary gardens, first imagined, created, and maintained by Boston the gardener, then fictionalized by Boston the author.

The topiary in the less familiar text, *Castle of Yew*, closely matches Boston’s own garden. With its yews clipped to resemble chess pieces on a board, this garden is rather stylized and geometric. Perhaps the garden’s design partly explains the limitations of the story—the child’s encounter with topiary doesn’t have the same mythic and frightening power as does the topiary adventure in *The Children of Green Knowe*. In *Castle of Yew*, a curious boy, Joseph, insinuates himself into “the old lady’s” walled, secret garden that has been a source of curiosity for him. Though he has received permission to walk about in the garden, he has a faint sense of being there under false pretenses. He notices, in consciously articulated thoughts perhaps more characteristic of Boston herself than of a child, “‘Empty gardens often seem to threaten an intruder, more so even than the wildest country, because they are made to be private. And who can tell whether, for instance, a tunnel cut through a dense evergreen hedge will let you through, or close in and catch you in the middle? After all bushes are alive. They stand there and wait’” (18). Despite this faint uneasy suspicion of animistic spirits in bushes, Joseph is charmed by the chess piece topiary, particularly the castle with its battlements, cut windows, and tiny door in the bastion. An unexpected desire strikes him: “He felt a passionate longing to go in, one of those sudden impossible longings that bring tears to the eyes. . . . ‘All right’ he said angrily, ‘I’m going in.’ He walked his two fingers in at the door, and felt himself pulling in after them and gathering up into them . . . and found the fingers turn into his whole self and he was going in under the green arch” (24). Dream—or nightmare? Joseph finds himself miniaturized, a tiny figure in a

Broddingnagian landscape that poses a variety of threats—a moorhen nearly pecks him to death, food on his scale is difficult to obtain, a curious cat nearly devours him, any fall would be fatal. The heroic act of trying to frighten off a digging dog in the old lady's garden restores Joseph to his normal size, and his green-shaded adventures fade into the light of common day. The surrealism based on radically altered size and power ratios seems heavily borrowed from *Alice in Wonderland*. But the very nature of the surreal—the irrationality of a dream—is underlined as a device in *Alice* as she wakes up, whereas the surreality of *Castle of Yew* goes unexplained, and the reader remains unsatisfied as to the magic agency.

Boston delves much more deeply into the fearful myth and magic latent in topiary in *The Children of Green Knowe*. She provides a powerful example of the animistic power in topiary as “the devil's own art”: a plant figure cursed to wreak vengeance on human characters. Green Knowe possesses a thematic topiary garden, maintained for generations by the Boggis family, gardeners to the Oldknows. This garden fancifully depicts a shaggy evergreen Noah and his animals preparing for the Ark. Green Noah, whose name identifies the house, Green Knowe, is a puzzling figure. Part pagan Green Man, part Old Testament hero, he is a topiary no longer kept trimmed, for in the annals of Oldknow legend is the story of an angry gypsy's curse on the yew figure. “Snippet snappet/ Shapen yew/ Devil's image/ Take on you./ Evil grow,/ Evil be, / Green Noah/ Demon tree” (139–40). The malignant presence, still suggesting after all these years a grotesque human shape, supposedly has caused the early death of the young men of the family. When the young protagonist Tolly is frightened by the tale, his great-grandmother Oldknow consoles him, “We leave Green Noah alone and take no notice of him. He is growing into quite an ordinary tree. . . . Don't think about him” (143). The implication here seems to be that nature will eventually heal what human evil and the devil's own art have perverted.

However, in the novel's most frightening and climactic moment, Tolly, the only Oldknow male of his generation, is alone in the garden when a sudden storm blows up. Suddenly he is threatened by the malignant, moving figure of Green Noah. As Green Noah's grappling limbs wave and clutch, Tolly's screams are answered by the voices of the ghost children of Green Knowe as they call for help. The wind moans, and a huge fork of lightning zigzags out of the sky, followed by the smell of the burning yew tree. The evil presence of Green Noah is gone and the curse presumably lifted.

Neither morality nor causation is straightforward in Boston's Green Noah tale. The initial creation of the topiary is benignly intended for entertaining the Oldknow children; and the biblical figure Noah represents godliness rather than devilry. Yet the "snippet snappet" of the animating curse echoes the obsessive shaping and control that make a topiary of a tree or bush—and the landless gypsy's opposition to the local landowner enacts the class conflict also evident in other topiary tales considered: *Voices in the Park*, *Alice In Wonderland*, *The Little White Horse*, and "The Topiary Garden."

From its beginnings, topiary has been a craft associated with patriarchy, leisure-class privilege, and willful human domination of nature. Due to the slow-growing nature of many of the choicest topiary shrubs, investing in a topiary garden is a long-term, often dynastic, matter. When the long-term commitment to a topiary garden involves a municipal vision and public benefit, the garden's representation typically seems more benign (as in *Voices in the Park*) than when an individual's willful, private, prideful, or even vengeful vision is perpetuated over generations (as in *The Little White Horse*). Most often, the topiary garden is maintained by someone other than its owner, someone with special training put to the service of a horticultural project whose object is pleasure rather than use and whose aesthetic depends on repressing, rather than displaying, a plant's natural form. Thus the art form could evoke class envy in viewers of any age, but the literary representation of topiary seems calculated to evoke particularly strong conscious or unconscious unease in the child reader, who values autonomy and stands in perennial fear of losing it to controlling adults. In an age or society that values egalitarianism or promotes ecological awareness, this unease may be closer to the surface. But at all times the metaphor of control—whether its particular representation emphasizes domesticating the wild, disciplining the unruly, or gentrifying the common—holds great intuitive or intelligible power; for the child, in Rousseau's famous formulation, is "a young plant."

#### *Postscript: Branching Out*

Apart from the expository material drawn from Taylor and Cooper, the preceding survey of topiary as represented in children's literature has been empirical. My main intent has been to foreground and characterize the literary representations and responses topiaries evoke rather than to account for why the topiaries depicted have the effects



that they do in the minds of the children portrayed. Nonetheless, it is fascinating to try to explain why topiary has such a strong and complex power over the child's mind. Below, a number of possible explanations are offered as suggestions rather than prescriptions. What becomes clearest from probing the matter is that the power of topiary is a prime example of what Freud would call over-determination.<sup>2</sup> There can be more than one convincing explanation of why topiary might prove frightening and fascinating. Consequently, in any given case it might not be possible to sort out which of the multiple plausibilities is the true cause—or, if more than one factor contributes, to discern what the relative, shifting proportions of the different influences may be at any particular time. Possible explanations seem to branch out in three directions—toward the psychological, the ecological, and the metaphorical. The branch analogy is perhaps as misleading as it is illuminating, for the three categories overlap, with some explanations even falling into all three categories. Nonetheless, it does seem true that most of the many fruitful explanations stress topiary's relevance to the human mind, emphasize the topiary's place in nature, or foreground the phenomenon's potential to stand for something beyond itself.

From a psychological point of view, the act of cutting with a knife or scissors often equates with the intellectual function of being analytical or rational. Jung is one of the many thinkers who warn us that analysis kills creativity and spontaneity while synthesis brings life. This insight may suggest one of the frightening aspects of topiary. Besides the "killing" nature of analysis, cutting or snipping suggests mutilation and pain. Freud, who consistently figured trees as phallic symbols, sees tree cutting as representing castration. If we think back to some of the literary examples discussed earlier, we see the particular horror of Heinrich Hoffman's *Mr. Tailor Man* illustration. The thumb-sucking offender (obviously still in a phase desiring oral gratification) waves his outstretched, bleeding stumps before the revolted viewer. Not only does the loss of the thumbs remove the source of his sucking pleasure, but it also radically changes the level of usefulness of the hands, since the opposable thumb is one of the hallmarks of humanity. This fear of mutilation and loss also appears in Liz's nightmare in "The Topiary Garden," in which the man with the huge pair of shears advances toward her, rooted to the spot as a topiary woman. He has lopped off the arms of the other topiary women in the garden, leaving them deformed and vulnerable.

Because psychologists identify childhood as the critical time of ego development, Rousseau's image of the child as a young and tender plant seems richly suggestive. The child's mind is vulnerable, growing, malleable, and dependent, so it is likely that he or she would identify far more deeply than do adults with the manipulation and mutilation perpetuated on trees by adults. The association of cutting with analysis and rationality may help explain why topiary is more disturbing to children than to adults. At a point of mental growth when their reasoning and analytical powers are developing, generally under the nurture (or constraint) of formal education, children may sense and fear the death of imagination, the cutting off of a mental power that has hitherto been primary. William Wordsworth, famous for his own aphoristic denunciation of analysis, "We murder to dissect," in "The Tables Turned," vividly records his sense of childhood's imaginative loss as rational power grows in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality."

Jung spent considerable time considering trees as archetypal symbols, frequently equating trees to both male and female humans as well as the human lifecycle: "Taken on the average, the commonest associations to its [the tree's] meaning are growth, life, unfolding of form in a physical and spiritual sense, development, growth from below upwards and from above downwards, the maternal aspect (protection, shade, shelter, nourishing fruits, source of life, solidity, permanence, firm-rootedness, but also being 'rooted to the spot'), old age, personality, and finally death and rebirth" (272). Obviously, then, attempts to structure—by determining through the shaping power that is topiary—a psychological symbol this rich and powerful would be intensely troubling to anyone.

When we consider trees and shrubs within an ecological framework, we must also ponder the role of human intervention in the form of topiary. Topiary allows humans to indulge the delusion of remaking a natural, living thing as an artifact under our own power, whereas we recognize unconsciously that the shaped plant is fundamentally autonomous. Nature is ultimately untamable—and topiary thus offers a constant reminder that our sense of controlling nature is illusory. Further, topiary brings to mind our basic hypocrisy regarding nature and suggests our insecurity and helplessness in a natural world we cannot control. This sinister, or at least discouraging, aspect appears time and time again in the literary representations of topiary. As in Gorey's cartoon panel in Figure 1, "They were shown into a

garden where the topiary was being neglected," random sprigs break out and eventually return even the most regimented microcosms of the natural world to wildness or wilderness. Because plants are constantly growing and often do so rapidly, shaped shrubs or trees are always on the boundary between domestication and savagery, a frontier some might equate with childhood itself.

Literary texts clearly show that it is even more frightening when the human urge to shape or subjugate is subverted by a dark supernatural force. Consider the topiary in Goudge's *The Little White Horse*: "Yet all attempts to cut those yew trees into any shapes but those of black knights and black cocks is doomed to failure; always they go back to their original shapes" (128). The reverse is true in Boston's *Children of Green Knowe*: the malignant figure of Green Noah is no longer trimmed yet still suggests human shape, with arms that wave, clutch, and attack. Both texts make it clear that human pride, arrogance, and vengefulness have cursed the trees.

Looking through an ecological lens, we can also view topiary as the plant equivalent of animal vivisection—a gratuitous and frivolous destruction arbitrarily visited on another life form. There have been numerous scientific experiments attempting to discover if plants feel pain. The published work of Dianna Bowles, Paul Simons, and Karen Fitzgerald primarily demonstrate cell movement and the role of calcium channels in plant sensitivity. Children themselves often play with "sensitive plant" or *mimosa pudica*, a botanical curiosity that seems to recoil from human stroking as if shrinking from painful or unwanted touch. Recall the child Joseph's pronouncement in Boston's *Castle of Yew*, "After all, bushes are alive" (18). In a darker mode, one might think of the cautionary myth of Erisichthon, who cuts down a sacred oak that bleeds and groans on being destroyed—and also of Erisichthon's ultimate punishment of eating himself and dying, obviously a story that would repay both psychological and metaphorical readings.

Much of this discussion has suggested that humans, particularly children, identify with the pain inflicted on plants just as if they themselves were plants. Whether or not scientific investigation proves that plants actually experience pain is not as important as the fact that we would experience pain if something similar were done to us (hence the psychological aversion to knives and scissors, and the acts of cutting and incising.) This in turn makes us wonder: what might plants do if animated, for example in the shape of topiary animals? Would

they display pain and perhaps attempt revenge on those who had cut them? We see this sort of animistic vengeful spirit particularly in the Green Noah figure clutching and trapping the terrified Tolly; the empathetic Baudelaire orphans, who have ample reason to understand the sinister side of the adult's impulse to control and dominate, give the serpent topiary a wide berth in *The Reptile Room*. A tremor of fear seizes Maria in *The Little White Horse* as she passes the topiary garden and senses the figures' cold gaze upon her. In all these cases the authors present their child protagonists as wary of the vengeful nature of the mutilated life form.

A broad range of recent ecological texts (I would particularly commend David Kidner's *Nature and Psyche* and an edited collection by Theodore Roszak, *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*) underline the extent to which we are increasingly alienated from nature. In my narrower focus on topiary, the shaping of shrubs becomes a microcosmic act of ecological hubris—an attempt to subjugate and control nature. The artificially shaped plant represents living proof of our guilty partial success. Another ecological perspective is offered by Michael Perlman in *The Power of Trees: The Reforesting of the Soul*. Chapter four, titled “The Importance of Tree Spirits,” comments on violating tree spirits in a way that has much in common with the myth of Erisichthon. It may well be that children, not yet quite socialized out of what remains an instinctive tendency for people to be closer to nature than are adults in Western industrialized societies, are more sensitive than are their elders to the potential spirituality of trees. A child encountering literary representations of tree spirits or animated trees, such as the Ents in J. R. R. Tolkien's Ring cycle, would sympathize with them as characters and see their destruction as a form of murder. Along this line, it would be interesting to compare and contrast adult and juvenile readings of the adored and abhorred (sometimes simultaneously) children's text, Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*.

Several of these thematic points regarding psychology and ecology overlap one another, and still more of them lie in the territory of metaphor. I'd also like to consider some of the other metaphoric ways of viewing topiary. By definition the art of topiary shapes a plant into another form so that the outcome includes elements of disguise or falsification. This sort of deception can be inherently unsettling and intimidating to children, who are similarly troubled by masks, clowns, and other artifices that conceal the natural. Several of the literary representations discussed above are along these or related lines, such

as Sam the gardener's phrases quoted earlier, "I've been thinking of all the years . . . that I've spent turning what's natural into what's unnatural" and "putting Mother Nature into corsets and stays" (187).

Ultimately topiary is a symbol of transformation, but perhaps the younger and more literal-minded child reader or viewer extrapolates to wonder if, given that powerful adults can seemingly transform a shrub into an elephant or a snake, then perhaps a human could in turn be transformed into a plant. Greek mythology and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* abound with such stories—nymphs into laurel trees or reeds; young men into floral forms bearing their names, Narcissus or Amaranth. Or perhaps a child might fear transformation to something on an even lower scale of existence than plant or flower forms, entities not only nonsentient but nonliving. One might consider William Steig's *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*, in which Sylvester (who starts out as an anthropomorphic donkey boy) spends seasons as a mute, lonely rock until discovered, transformed, and restored to his family. The vast theme of transformation clearly has a sinister and terrifying side to it.

Taxonomically and metaphorically, life forms fit into two great kingdoms: plant and animal. Transmogrifying a plant into an animal profanes what has been traditionally construed as a sacred division—in much the same way that many people find sex change operations threatening because they break the boundary between male and female. In a similar vein, plants are traditionally understood to be lower on the Great Chain of Being than are animals. Surreptitiously elevating them to the level of animals violates the *Scala naturae*, the natural order of things. The topiary process can thus be perceived again as unnatural or even sacrilegious, thereby generating a sense of unease.

It may be that the ultimate tree metaphor and a fitting conclusion for this study is suggested by a quotation from David Kidner's *Nature and Psyche*. Kidner envisions a tree "with its roots in the ground and its branches in the sky" as "a symbol of the integration of heaven and earth, or conscious and unconscious, or of intellect and feeling" and is "reminded of the wholeness of the world" (255). Here we encounter the meaning of the tree as originally conceptualized in the Garden of Eden and later as the tree on which Christ died: the cross. Meddling with this tree, even in a relatively lighthearted fashion, is bound to resonate ominously and forebodingly, particularly if one forces the tree to take a clearly inappropriate form. This sort of willful, prideful human shaping does indeed become "the devil's own art."

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>Other films that depict fanciful or frightening topiary include Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) and two versions of Stephen King's *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980, and a television miniseries in 1997). However, because these films were made and marketed for an adult audience, I am not including commentary on them here.

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