

MICHAEL GIFFIN

# LITERARY ACADEMICS ARE FULL OF POOH



**A**N INFLUENTIAL THEORY once assumed that the old Establishment perpetuated its hegemony, by influencing the way the ancient classics were interpreted, by controlling the semi-otics of its high culture, while teaching English literature—a relatively recent enterprise—was considered more egalitarian: a middle- or working-class reaction against the old Establishment. If aspects of the theory sound convincing, remember how English departments established themselves throughout the twentieth century—with their attempts at perpetuating *their* hegemony by controlling *their* semiotics—in ways that were as bad as anything they once attributed to the old Establishment.

As literary academics are influenced by their beliefs, potential students need to know what they're in for and hapless graduates need to process what they've been through. Here are two slim volumes from a retired insider, Emeritus Professor Frederick Crews, who parodies the discipline's methodologies and alludes to the politics driving them; *The Pooh Perplex*, first published in 1963, parodies earlier trends in literary criticism; *Postmodern Pooh*, first published in 2001, parodies later trends in literary theory.

Lampooning critics and theorists can be an easy thing to do. What's impressive about Crews is his depth of knowledge, which makes his parodies more than potshots at partisans he doesn't agree with. But who does he agree with? Although it's tempting to locate his voice

among his parodies, he disguises it, like great literature, which distances itself from its author. That's a major achievement.

Here's a selection of parodies from each book.

**C**REWS BEGINS *The Pooh Perplex* (1963) with a cheeky description of the perplex: we know the stories comprising the *Pooh* opus are among the greatest ever written, but they're also among the most controversial, and critics can't agree on what they mean. On reading his freshman casebook, we're left wondering whether the critical approaches parodied are really about literature, or whether

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they're about something else: what happens when literary academics don the mantle of disciplines they might not be expert in; disciplines which might not be relevant to literature; some of which might not be relevant at all.

In "A Bourgeois Writer's Proletarian Fables", Martin Tempralis, a leftist radical, argues that at the time of writing (1939) England was the world's most bourgeois country, with a bourgeois aristocracy, a bourgeois bourgeoisie, and a bourgeois proletariat. To prevent England from turning further to the right, Tempralis brings to light Milne's unconscious socio-political intentions. *Pooh* touches on every problem of industrial society. It's full of imperialism, colonialism, and profiteering. The main characters are property owners who don't work; they are supplied, as if by miracle, with endless supplies of honey, condensed milk, balloons, popguns, and extract of malt; they crave meaningless aristocratic distinctions; they resort to any measure to cling to their property.

In the stuffed animals, we see the struggle of rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed. Rabbit is the capitalist manager bent on imposing his will while struggling to keep everyone else from organising against him. Owl is the pedantic, scholarly plutocrat who steals the tail of Eeyore—the most bounced-upon and downcast member of society—and converts it into his door-

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*The Pooh Perplex*,  
by Frederick Crews;  
University of Chicago Press, 2003, 164 pages, US\$16.

*Postmodern Pooh*,  
by Frederick Crews;  
Northwestern University Press, 2006, 192 pages,  
US\$19.95.

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bell. If, in its portrait of capitalism, *Pooh* is full of free market bestiality, we glimpse not only the sordidness of wage-slavery but the possibility of a better life; a forthcoming revolution of oppressed peoples, marching side-by-side down the collective road to prosperity and equality for all.

In “The Theory and Practice of Bardic Verse: Notations on the Hums of Pooh”, P.R. Honeycomb, a loner outside the academy, shows how Pooh’s ponderings on the whatness and howness of things are poetry; elusive, double, profoundly not there when we think it is. He sees in *Pooh* traces of Shakespeare, the Nordic sense of nature, and a London where children struggle through the fog towards Eliot’s God (or perhaps the 1920s child-equivalent of Mickey Mouse or Superman). These hums epitomise two rival poetics of our tradition; the meticulous, thoughtful, concise style of Horace and Pope and their faith in revision and self-analysis; the quick, sub-rational, heart-and-liver thudding faith of Shelley and Whitman.

As Pooh reconciles these tensions in a modern way, our awareness of his modernism allows us to forgive his occasional sins against art, vicious confusions, and sophistications of heuristic regression. Pooh needs to cry up, cry down, cry in, and cry out the over-full poignancies of man’s (or bear’s) fate, the numbing torments of the victim whose sufferings are such that no regular metaphysic, no grammar of regular form, can body them forth. In these hums we hear the deracinated howl of the soul’s quick, which comforts us, for it convinces us that Pooh is one of us, and ultimately worthy, in spite of all if not because of all.

In “Poisoned Paradise: The Underside of *Pooh*”, Myron Masterson, an angry young man entering middle age, admits to having access to *Pooh*’s real meaning. Using a range of eclectic influences, including Freud and Jung, he demonstrates that *Pooh* is full of incest fantasies. The real subject is the repression of Christopher Robin’s oedipal complex, complicated by the loss of his mother, which is alternately symbolised, accepted, protested against, denied, and homo-erotically compensated for through “nursery” stories. As the boy is entering the latency period, he projects his forbidden fantasies onto his toy animals—all lacking in genitalia—who themselves, by his fiat, have entered a latency period of their own.

In this ideal world, which Christopher Robin has hallucinated, the fundamental questions small children want to ask their parents are never asked. While it appears as a fun-filled paradise garden, where the danger of punishment for incest is nil, like all such gardens something is likely to go awry sooner or later. In this case, the entrance of Kanga—her pouch—womb containing Baby Roo—transforms *Pooh* with one brutal stroke; depth psychology turns a bucolic idyll into Gothic ter-

ror. Her appearance as a loving *anima*—Woman threatens the common happiness of the hallucinating latent boy and his hallucinating latent animals. How will they resolve this threat?

In “Winnie and the Cultural Stream”, Murphy A. Sweat, a celebrity professor at Yale, discusses the cultural references in *Pooh*: the Roaring Twenties, the Jazz Age, Postwar Disillusion, Hemingway, Faulkner, Joyce, Proust and Mann. Since around 1600, the big thing has been the rise of the middle class, which reached its height during the Industrial Revolution. The middle class is in decline, though, and *Pooh* is an ironic commentary on the decline. Readers who feel nothing really important happens in *Pooh* overlook the way it develops the central antitheses of its century—Capitalism versus Communism, Prose versus Poetry, Men versus Women—in a way that mirrors the Hegelian dialectic.

*Pooh* has all the elements of a modern novel: the vanishing hero, alienation, angst, the absurd, symbolism, the interior monologue, and the stream of consciousness. For angst, *Pooh* is up there with Kierkegaard and Sartre. For the absurd, one page of *Pooh* provides more than Ionesco and Beckett; all those questions about Backsons and Wozzlets means no one knows what’s really up. As for the sexual element, the bouncy Tigger is as potent as one of those bulls or horses Lawrence went wild over. Of course, he doesn’t see much action—this is ostensibly a children’s book—but if we read between the lines we’ll know what’s really going on.

In “A Complete Analysis of *Winnie-the-Pooh*”, Duns C. Penwiper, who’s slowly and methodically climbed the academic ladder at the University of Chicago, lists the elements of what he believes to be the best method of interpreting *Pooh*: the structural analysis practised by Aristotle as refined by his modern disciples. Why is this method best? Because it’s the only one that encompasses the whole of *Pooh*; because it’s the most comprehensive, systematic, analytical and differentiated; because it isn’t limited, narrow, rigid or dogmatic like other methods; because entire encyclopaedias of definitions, categories, entities, rhetorical terms, methodological principles and metaphysical frameworks can’t begin to exhaust it. Its superiority should be obvious: Why prefer Newton’s principles over Einstein’s?

Clearly, *Pooh* is art—more specifically, *poesi*—as it has the three properties which define art: unity, because its parts cohere; imitation, because it differentiates between art and nature; beauty, because its perceptible form has proper proportion. Most importantly, each volume in the opus has Aristotle’s *sine qua non* of an excellent plot—a beginning, a middle and an end—abounding in peripety (sudden reversals) and discovery. Finally, as *Pooh* is filled with Jamesian situations—which draw their complexity from the subtleties of appeal, criticism, muted disrespect and barbed repartee

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among the characters—we can say its plot is true and ranks along with the *Iliad* and *Hamlet*.

In “The Style of *Pooh*: Sources Analogues, and Influences”, Benjamin Thumb, whose criticism is respected by a small but discriminating group of academic readers, contemplates *Pooh*’s style: its sources, works resembling it, works influenced by it. As *Pooh* was published in the 1920s, at the height of the modernist reaction against Victorian style—when poets such as Eliot and Pound were reclaiming Metaphysical traits—we see obvious echoes of Donne and pervasive borrowings from Shakespeare. For example, “I can see a bird from here,” said Pooh. “Or is it a fish?” is clearly borrowed from Hamlet’s “Very like a whale” conversation with Polonius. Also, Milne’s syntax and dramatic quality are identical with Henry James’s.

Regarding analogues and influences, consider Milne’s knack of coining nonsense-words in accordance with his characters’ difficulties in spelling, pronunciation and experience of the world. When Pooh mistakes an ambush for a gorse-bush, the North Pole is imagined as a stick, and “Happy Birthday” comes out “HIPY PAPY BTHUTHDTH THUTHDA BTHUTHDY”, we know Milne was influenced by but also influenced Joyce: *Ulysses* came before *Pooh*; *Finnegans Wake* came after. If you aren’t convinced, consider how Piglet’s cries of “Help, help, a Horrible Hoffalump! Hoff, hoff, a Hellible Horralump! Holl, holl, a Hoffable Hellerump!” are beyond doubt the original of Joyce’s notorious: “And ho! Hey? What all men? Hot? His tittering daughters of. Whawk?”

In “Another Book to Cross Off Your List”, Simon Lacerous, a send-up of F.R. Leavis, announces himself as destiny’s messenger; a moral and aesthetic guide, leading the culture-hungry masses to the finest purest literature and keeping the rest in outer darkness. He’s read what the critics say about *Pooh*, but feels those who praise it are really attacking him, even though they don’t mention his name or allude to his work. This leaves him with no alternative but to declare his judgment. Literature must reflect on, conform to, and serve Life; it demands moral seriousness; it must instil hatred of the Establishment. By these measures, *Pooh* is a vast betrayal of Life. This isn’t to say Milne doesn’t inculcate values; he simply reinforces the wrong ones.

There’s no element in *Pooh* that touches upon Life. There’s no attempt to imitate D.H. Lawrence. There are no deserving characters. The degenerate Pooh turns out to be always right while the two characters who approach human decency—Tigger, with his healthy habit of bouncing upon the others by surprise; Eeyore, who suffers everyone’s insults and neglect—are consistently rejected and mocked. Milne prefers the more “normal” Pooh and Piglet, who are surrounded by friends and never feel the moral necessity to lash out at

injustice the way Tigger and Eeyore (and Lacerous) do.

IN THE PREFACE to *Postmodern Pooh* (2001), Crews humbly admits a celebrity professor confided to him that *The Pooh Perplex* was three decades ahead of its time, as an example of Teaching the Conflicts, the method that dominated the humanities in the 1990s. In Teaching the Conflicts, the focus isn’t on literature; it’s on giving a curricular function to the clashes of interpretation that cause professors to defame one another as sexists, fascists and idiots. The celebrity professor felt Crews should update his book to teach the conflicts of a more sophisticated period; but rather than a freshman casebook, he felt Crews should use the most methodologically-acute material from the MLA Convention of 2000, which the celebrity professor happened to be organising himself. Crews believes the bright critics in *Postmodern Pooh* show—in sophisticated and ingenious ways—that by the 1990s, just as we’ve suffused *Pooh* with our humanism, our humanism has become full of *Pooh*.

In “Why? Wherefore? Inasmuch as Which?”, Felicia Marronez, Sea & Ski Professor of English at the University of California, author of (*P*)*ooh La La! Kiddie Lit gets the Jacques of Its Life*, demonstrates how the ethically-serious Derrideanism of the Yale School illuminates the subtleties of *Pooh*, and how *Pooh* embodies the principles of Deconstruction. First, she argues our concepts of author, text and reader—like truth and meaning—are fallacious and unstable. Second, she argues we can only misread the text, although some misreadings are more fruitful than others. If we can’t proclaim *Pooh*’s meaning we can establish what it’s trying to say.

When the conditional and egoistical bear says “I could spend a happy morning / Being Pooh”, this Being signifies Heidegger’s *Dasein*; the personification (or ursification) of Manbear stripped of his striving for Nature without cultural excess or archive. Pooh’s Being-*Dasein* soon confronts Rabbit, signifying logocentric discourse, which sweeps Pooh from trance to transaction, but his new logocentrism is no greater than that of the kapok menagerie surrounding him. The whole enchanted forest is ruled by a child-god, (Christ) opher Robin, soon to be warped by that deadly Pied Piper, Western culture. To resist this threat of imminent closure, the text keeps deconstructing itself. The branch—on which we wielders of critical discourse sit—is continually being sawn away.

In “A Bellyful of Pooh”, Victor S. Fassell, Exxon Valdez Chair in the Humanities at Rice University, argues that works such as *Pooh* don’t drift towards banal meaninglessness; they shape the public’s illusions about important issues; they feed directly into policy at the highest levels. Take, for example, the abdication of

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Edward VIII; England's privy councillors could hardly have failed to notice that at the end of *Pooh* Edward Bear is granted a knighthood as a means of bidding him good riddance. In physique, though, Pooh calls to mind not Edward Windsor but his Tory detractor, Winston (Winnie) Churchill, who was also given to snacking and napping at unorthodox hours.

While *Pooh* is a work of our time and culture, psychoanalytic theory tells us it's a sublimation of its literary ancestors such as Rabelais. For example, the more strenuously an author attempts to efface or censor the body, the more certain we can be that subliminal signs of the unspeakable appear in his text. While there are no genitals or digestive tracts in *Pooh*, Pooh still eats at a pace that would wring grudging sighs of admiration from Rabelais's anally-sexually-fixated Gargantua; when Pooh gets stuck in Rabbit's hole, a whole week passes before he (and the reader) are freed from his rectal-erotic *memento mori*. When will the mess emerge?

In "The Fissured Subtext: Historical Problematics, the Absolute Cause, Transcoded Contradictions, and Late-Capitalist Metanarrative (in *Pooh*)", Carla Gulag, Joe Camel Professor of Child Development at Duke University, argues that the previous two critics fail to overcome their pre-historical biases, which have encouraged literary criticism to play with its weenie in the sandbox for so many decades; they are both pious frauds who pretend to be open-minded and neutral but are actually political through and through. They ignore the truly essential task of criticism: cognitive mapping, reconciling emergent and residual forms, weighing synchronic against diachronic factors, detecting and disabling master narratives, retotalising the Real, and deciding what is hegemonic over what.

To see what happens when this mandate is ignored, Gulag considers Fassell's lame attempts at interpretation. The Political Unconscious knows the ideologeme of waste expulsion refers to exclusion from ruling circles. Milne's squeamishness betrays his inability to accept class differences between the possessive home owner Rabbit and the itinerant beggar Pooh. If Pooh poops on Rabbit's floor, he'll establish a squatter's right—a laudable privilege-annihilating development—but this ownership theme emerges in unconscious self-parody. Rabbit, by hanging his washing on Pooh's "south end", alludes (by denial) to the threat of soiling, reasserts his property rights, and reminds us that lands below the equator are those most susceptible to neo-colonial exploitation.

In "Just Lack a Woman", Siseria Catheter, Director of Women's Studies at the University of Massachusetts, admits her gynocritical discourse isn't just a "school of criticism". It partakes of a wider project: rescuing the Earth itself from the gender that's brought it to the brink of catastrophe. From the rape manual of soulless science, Newton's *Principia*, through the testosterone-fuelled equation  $E=mc^2$ , phallogognition has saddled us with a predatory and suicidal antagonism to nature. Earlier feminists weren't much help in rescuing *Pooh* from condemnation as the blatantly sexist performance it is. They would have simply noticed a feminine presence in the motherly Kanga, whom Milne depicts as a quintessential female airhead.

What would a liberated Kanga say? Would she rupture Milne's testicular textuality with a few well-aimed kicks? She might notice the male characters are uneasy about their identity. When Eeyore's tail is removed, he sees himself castrated and thus female. Pooh's reaction, while gazing at Eeyore's rear end, is to reflexively insert one paw into his mouth and nervously check his crotch with the other paw. When the full potential of this polymorphous perversity is realised, who can say how radically our world will be transformed. Positively, Pooh and Piglet hold hands in an obvious proxy for same-sex marriage. Negatively, Rabbit vents his pent-up libido on a boychild: Baby Roo.

In "Resident Aliens", Das Nuffa Dat, Classic Coke Professor of Subaltern Studies at Emory University, uses a postcolonial hermeneutic to discover evidence of great historic crime in *Pooh*, which the theories of previous critics don't accommodate. Although Milne claimed to be pacifist between the wars, he's still associated with the crimes and cruelties of empire. This is evident early on. The verses written for his pampered son—and other apprentice sahibs—are filled with images of imperial rule and the subjugation of indigenous races; verses like "There's nobody else in the world / and the world was made for me" clearly reveal Western solipsism at its most grandiose and ominous.

When we move from the verses to the stories, we find the same loyalty to imperialist values. This subliminal message is the work of Milne's Colonial Unconscious; however, because the oppressor always tries—only half successfully—to stifle sympathy with the oppressed, a rebellious Colonised Unconscious takes up residence with the first one. By bringing to light *Pooh*'s counter-hegemonic impulses, postcolonial criticism shows where the self-divided "master" psyche

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is most vulnerable to paralysis from within. If the ravages of imperialism are ever to end—if the colonising Heffalump one day lies down with the formerly colonised Lamb—history will record that it began here with Dat speaking for the voiceless.

In “Gene/Meme Covariation in Ashdown Forest: *Pooh* and the Consilience of Knowledge”, Renee Francis, a clerk at the National Bureau of Standards, advocates a return to empiricism. After discussing the ways in which Milne consciously represents classical physics in *Pooh*, Francis explores the relationship between science and literature, through evolution and a biopoetics. Why evolution? Because it’s been established that art first occurred when our eukaryotic ancestors gave up asexual reproduction for the opportunities and risks of sex. Why biopoetics? Because knowledge is biological, and literature is knowledge, therefore literature is biological. Art is males competing to perpetuate their genes; a homeostatic, low-risk solution to the flight-or-fight dilemma confronting suitors. The Darwinian implications of *Pooh* are deliberate, and two anomalies are easily explained; first, that the animals are without the ability or inclination to mate isn’t relevant because they are types who correspond with the stability experience of their species; second, that the animals are domesticated rather than wild means their evolutionary fitness depends on being attractive to their caretakers, not on reproducing and caring for offspring. Clearly they’ve chosen reproductive altruism. Apart from gene theory, *Pooh* is full of memes—the mental equivalent of genes, which leap from one brain to another, substituting cultural for sexual reproduction—the most obvious being *Pooh* himself. Look around you and you’ll see him everywhere!

In “The Courage to Squeal”, Dolores Malatesta, a survivor of unrecalled abuse diagnosed from unremembered memories, now a mother and author of healing fiction for female adolescents, explains why *Pooh* is immoral and sinister. Of course, she can’t put the author and his son—much less the fictional characters—on the analyst couch but *Pooh* contains substantial evidence which forms a consistent pattern when interpreted psycho-dynamically: Christopher Robin was a survivor of sexual abuse and the fictional Piglet is his Shadow. Piglet wakes from a dream about a Heffalump but can’t recall what the dream was about because the human response to sexual atrocity is to banish it from consciousness.

The repressed dream was obviously an incestuous nightmare in which Piglet was being chased by a Heffalump, a hairy monster with an extended trunk, which plainly shows what kind of threat it poses. As

Piglet disbelieves and denies this memory, we know it’s repressed. We also know he manifests dozens of symptoms from various checklists of after-effects used to diagnose incest survivors. Milne obviously committed incest with Christopher Robin, who later wrote an autobiography revealing similar after-effects as Piglet; he often dreamt about a dragon invading his bedroom. Also, because he admits that his father’s heart “remained buttoned up all throughout his life” we can assume other buttons got undone instead.

In “The Importance of Being Portly”, Orpheus Bruno, a send-up of Harold Bloom, admits to being an alien among this Party of Pique, these desperate self-important theorists and their smelly little orthodoxies, scrambling to reach the top of the academic anthill. The real world—with which he’s in touch—is vastly different. This Party of Pique may succeed in banishing the irksome Western masters—Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Milne—or worse, will keep them within nominal view while distorting them beyond recognition, but not with his encouragement. He withdraws discreetly from the scene, leaving the theorists to judge for themselves how little satisfaction can be gleaned from endlessly “liberating” one another.

Any critic steeped in the Western Canon, their ear lovingly bent to the text, will hear *Pooh*’s precursors as Milne seeks to overcome his influential predecessors. To give two examples: Who can fail to notice links between *Pooh* and *King Lear* (where *Pooh* is *Lear*) or *Pooh* and *King Henry IV, Part 2* (where *Pooh* is *Falstaff*)? Who can fail to notice that Milne’s dialogues, which portentously arrive nowhere, are parodies of those later-Jamesian conversations which maddeningly orbit around a minuscule speck of psychological matter? Finally, isn’t it obvious that, given their voices are similar, Woolf surreptitiously wrote *Pooh*, colluding with Milne to enhance his reputation while preserving hers from infantilisation?

**C**OULD I SEE myself among the parodied? Yes and no. None of us has a completely autonomous critical sensibility; each of us is influenced, to a greater or lesser degree, by the hermeneutical fashions of our age: if only to object to them. As Crews has blessed us with an overview of the critical and theoretical trends that dominated the twentieth century, we have an opportunity to locate ourselves among those trends, notice which ones once made sense at the time, and remember which ones we’ve since discarded. Having processed our critical *Pooh*, we can move on feeling lighter than before, until we need to *Pooh* again.