Winnie the Pooh (1926)

Milne’s book in context:
the (ironically) nostalgic Edenic garden of childhood
From Carroll to Milne: from Victorian to Edwardian England

- During the second half of the 19th Century small families were coming into fashion among middle-class families:
  - medical emphasis on the debilitating effects of bearing too many children on a woman’s health
  - increasing knowledge of birth control
  - increasingly widespread feeling that one’s children could have better opportunities if there were fewer of them to feed, clothe etc.
The demographic change: the example of Children’s authors

› Edward Lear (b. 1812): the youngest of 20 children

› C. L. Dodgson (b. 1832): the eldest son of 11 children

› Beatrix Potter (b. 1866): one of two siblings

› A. A. Milne (b. 1882): one of three sons, and each of them in turn father of one child only
The fashion for smaller families and the cult of the child

- Parents had more time and money to devote to their children’s needs
- Closer attention was lavished to the world of children
- More interest in ‘childish’ things: child books, clothes, toys etc.
- Rise of the industry of children’s commodities
The myth of the ‘beautiful child’

1886: Frances Hodgson Burnett publishes the novel Little Lord Fauntleroy, which establishes the fashion for laces, collars and long curls
Milne and the beautiful child...

The Milne Family

Milne’s son in *When we were very young*
Winnie the Pooh and the lovable child

“Oh, Bear!” said Christopher Robin, “How do I love you!”
“So do I”, said Pooh

“You’re the Best Bear in the World”, said Christopher Robin sootingly.
“Am I?” said Pooh hopefully.
Alan Alexander Milne (1882-1956)

- A very happy childhood among other boys (his father was in charge of a public school)
- Educated at Trinity College, Cambridge (third-class degree in mathematics)
- 1906: assistant of Punch
Alan Alexander Milne (1882-1956)

- 1915: though a pacifist, he enlists for war service (then invalided home from the Somme with trench fever)
- 1920: birth of Christopher Robin, his only child
- Milne ‘enraptured’ by his son
- Moves to a country retreat in Sussex (a model for Pooh’s forest)
Alan Alexander Milne’s work

- *When we were very young* (1924, poems)
- *Winnie the Pooh* (1926)
- *Now We Are Six* (1927, poems)
- *The House at Pooh Corner* (1928)
The Pooh books were immensely popular (40,000 copies sold in England after six weeks)

However, Milne’s later career as a dramatist was not successful

His son’s resentment: “It seemed to me, almost, that my father had got to where he was by climbing upon my infant shoulders, that he had filched from me my good name and had left me with nothing but the empty fame of being his son”
Winnie the Pooh: childhood as nostalgia

- After the first World War, there is a decline in children’s fantasies
- Disillusion about middle-class certainties
- With this respect, Milne’s Pooh stories look back nostalgically to an Edenic conception of childhood...
- ...but are also shot through with mockery of the very idyll they are offering
Winnie the Pooh: a ‘realistic’ Arcadia?

- *In Winnie the Pooh, we find again the symbolism of the garden*
- *Burnett’s Secret Garden: a place of protection but also of ‘magic’: as Mary tends the garden and weeds away the undergrowth, her cousin re-gains his health*
- *In Milne’s book, the garden is the cosy, middle-class space of idyllic seclusion from the world*
Edwardian Parodies of the Myth of the Garden

Beatrix Potter (also her stories are set in a ‘perfect garden’ but:) “But don’t go to Mr McGregor’s garden; your Father had an accident there; he was put in a pie by Mrs McGregor.”

T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land (1922) as the most famous overturn of the beautiful garden; The Four Quartets
Winnie the Pooh: a ‘realistic’ Arcadia?

The ‘original’ toys of Milne’s son Christopher Robin
Winnie the Pooh: a ‘realistic’ Arcadia?

- Where Carroll invented a wild and chaotic Wonderland, Milne is much more realistic:
  - his characters are middle-class household commodities (toys from Harrods!)
  - the garden is modelled on Milne’s Sussex garden
  - also children are depicted as they are
The Pooh stories show a clever juxtaposition of two worlds:

- Victorian non-sense and fantasy
- the Edwardian myth of the ‘idyllic rural England’

The result is a kind of tamed (=domesticated) nonsense brought into the world of everyday
Milne’s idea of childhood

Milne rejects the Wordsworthian view of childhood. “Preface to the Parents”:

✓ very young children possess an ‘artless beauty’ that mistakes parents into thinking that “Heaven [...] does really [...] lie about the child”

✓ but children’s beauty is accompanied by “a natural lack of moral quality, which expresses itself, as Nature always insists on expressing herself, in an egotism entirely ruthless”
Children as self-centered

- The ‘realism’ of the Pooh stories is visible also in the representation of children’s attitude and behaviour.
- Children are not just idealized, realism calls for the representation of children’s faults as well.
Childlike Selfishness in the Pooh stories

- Every character personifies one type of selfishness:
  - Pooh: puts his appetite for honey before everything
  - Piglet: only concerned to save his own skin
  - Eeyore: self-pity taken to extremes
  - Rabbit: business-minded
  - Owl: self-respect for his (nonexistent) cleverness
Adults and children in W-t-P

- The narrator is intrusive but affectionate, nostalgic contemplation of childhood:

- The end of Pooh Corner: “Somewhere, a little boy and his bear will always be playing!”

- The end of James Barrie’s Peter Pan (1911): “As you look at Wendy, you may see her hair becoming white [...]. Jane is now a common grown-up, with a daughter called Margaret; and every spring cleaning time, except when he forgets, Peter comes for Margaret and takes her to the Neverland, where she tells him stories about himself, to which he listens eagerly. When Margaret grows up she will have a daughter, who is to be Peter's mother in turn; and thus it will go on, so long as children are gay and innocent and heartless.”
Adults and children in W-t-P

- **Childlike characters:** Pooh, Piglet, Roo, (Tigger)
- **Adult-like:** Christopher Robin, Kanga, Owl, Rabbit, Eeyore

- However, the status is not fixed for all the characters:
  - Christopher Robin is often adult-like (a ‘deus ex machina’) but the narrator makes clear he is a child
  - Pooh: a child with respect to CR but a parent with respect to Piglet