Occidental College
OxyScholar

ECLS Student Scholarship | English and Comparative Literary Studies (ECLS)

4-1-2009

The Story of Ferdinand: The Implication of a Peaceful Bull

Gabriela Villanueva
Occidental College

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholar.oxy.edu/ecls_student

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Villanueva, Gabriela, "The Story of Ferdinand: The Implication of a Peaceful Bull" (2009). *ECLS Student Scholarship.*
http://scholar.oxy.edu/ecls_student/6

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the English and Comparative Literary Studies (ECLS) at OxyScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in ECLS Student Scholarship by an authorized administrator of OxyScholar. For more information, please contact cdlr@oxy.edu.

"I believe that children's books must be judged as part of literature in general… A good children's book must not only be pleasing to children. It must be a good book in its own right."
John Rowe Townsend, Written for Children: An Outline of Englsih-Language Children's Literature

The Story of Ferdinand: The Implication of a Peaceful Bull

As the field of Children's Literature continues to expand, there remain many conflicting views about how or if to analyze it given that Children's Literature is not only meaningful to children, but also meaningful to adults who are its producers, but not its intended recipients. Peter Hunt, in his introduction to *Children's Literature— Blackwell Guides to Literature* explains, "Children's literature has… distinctive virtues and difficulties, genre, and modes… [analysis has] mov[ed] over the last one hundred years from prescription, to description, to criticism" (Hunt, Intro x). Further, he describes how "[a]s it has been associated with education and academic studies it has become preoccupied with how texts mean generally, rather than with the interaction of story teller and hearer"(ibid). In other words, when approaching children's literature one will be confronted by the "involvement of disciplines as apparently disparate critical theory… mean[ing] that no single approach to the subject dominates" (Hunt, Intro xi) because "[j]ust as we read children's books in several ways simultaneously, so the writer, *consciously or unconsciously* (my emphasis), has to consider the generic, socio-cultural, and didactic implications of writing children's books" (Zipes 49). It seems that Children's Literature has finally become an object of analysis.

Hunt also asks us to consider that we (the non-child) are what he terms the "secondary reader" of children's literature, the child being its "primary reader." As secondary readers of children's literature, we are also critical readers. To approach children's literature, regardless of "how we choose to construct it", Hunt suggests that we

approach the subject in the "spirit of adventure" with which the primary reader (child) might experience the "revelation, expansion, and exploration" of the text—(we mustn't forget that it is a children's book after all) and in this spirit set off in search of a text's possible meaning.

Following Hunt, I have undertaken the "adventure" (at the risk of your judgments) to engage my secondary reader status and read analytically one of the most enduring and endearing classic children's picture book of the last seventy-two years—Munro Leaf's, *The Story of Ferdinand*.

The Story of Ferdinand is the creation of American author Munro Leaf and illustrator Robert Lawson. Published in the fall of 1936, it is an 800-word picture book about a bull named Ferdinand who lives in the countryside of Spain. Almost instantly, Ferdinand became a favorite of both children and adults reaching in fact a sort of celebrity status. The first edition released consisted of 1500 copies and by 1938 was out-selling the popular novel *Gone With The Wind* published in that same year. The story was also adapted as a Walt Disney short 8-minute film, which won the 1938 Academy Award for best short animated film (the Disney treatment of the picture book, though very interesting in its own right, is not part of this analysis). This classic children's picture book has been translated and published in sixty different countries, boasting to date over ninety-two editions and has never having been out of publication since its debut. Its latest translation was into Chinese in 2008.

It is important to keep in mind that *The Story of Ferdinand* is not only a children's book, but more specifically, a picture book. The children's picture book is the marriage of text (story) with images (illustrations). The book depends on illustration to help narrate a story and hence establishes interdependence. That interdependence is necessary because

there are only 800 words in the case of Ferdinand and while the words begin to narrate the story, the images, or illustrations, complete the narration.

Picture books are a significant sub-genre of Children's Literature and present an additional challenge for the objectivity of its criticism. In the 1930s, picture books saw the height of their popularity, offering to children animal heroes who expressed many of the concerns and contradictions of the adult world (as we will see with Ferdinand). Sheila Egoff argues that in picture, the directness and frankness of the images themselves leave them no place to hide their meaning, whereas with words there is a possible vagueness that can always be associated to them. Created from the simple line style, Lawson's illustrations offer a candor and clarity that "can sometimes have alarming or—depending on the viewpoint—amusing consequences" (Egoff 247). The images are fully exposed placing the picture in a much more "vulnerable" position because as Egoff point out "Adults seem willing to judge a 'written' book as a whole [not judging a book by its cover] where they would not do so for a picture book" (ibid). Pictures will reveal that which the text can make ambiguous or all together not make mention of at all textually. The era of the 1930's-1960's gave rise to the classic definition we have of the picture book today. It is

> a perfect balance between text and pictures, a work that evoked a total response….The illustrations could reinforce the story… never overshadowing the printed word.. [and] [t]he illustrator's literal fidelity to the text gave an extra dimension to the work in the sense that children could 'read' the pictures even when they could not read the words (Ardizzone 249).

In the duality played out between text and images, as the secondary readers, not only can we read the words, but also "read" the images through our non-child eyes and capture what is called "the third story" which is informed and constructed by the way the picture books operate within and between the narrative and illustrations. What we perceive from this third story is very revealing of what Graham Greene describes as "an effort to illustrate a private world in terms of the great public world we share."

This third story "underneath" the surface of the narrative plays itself out in the images and is shaped through the critical adult perspective because the melding of information conveyed through the images is what creates the plot. In the case of Ferdinand we have the contribution of two different people to this third story. On one side we have the narrative as Munro Leaf intended it. On the other we have Robert Lawson's visual interpretation that, not so inconspicuously, provides images that complete both the narrative at the "surface" and "underneath."

To illustrate how these premises apply to Ferdinand, I will proceed with a close examination of pictures selected throughout the book. Situating the story in its historical context and reading the work through a lens of war, specifically, the Spanish Civil War, we will find our "third story" emerge.

When first published, the book was labeled as subversive, stirring an international controversy. With its message of peace, the book was attacked as anti-fascist propaganda because of its implied satire on violence and war given the eruption of the Spanish Civil War on July 17th, 1936 (in close proximity of the book's publication in September of that same year). As a result of the increasing tensions in Europe during this time, the book was burned in Nazi Germany and banned in Franco's Spain. Ferdinand became known as the "Peaceful Bull" by critics who were quick to accuse its creator of constructing the

story with the intent of criticizing Fascist revolt. Though the author always denied that he had such intentions and declared only that he wrote the story for his friend Robert Lawson to illustrate, within the context of the Spanish Civil War, the images in the story suggest just such a meaning.

The Spanish Civil War stretched out over a three-year period. On July 17th, 1936 Nationalists Party leader, General Francisco Franco led a military coup to overthrow the elected, though severely fragmented Spanish Republican Party government, a radically based party also known as the Loyalists Party. At the outbreak of the conflict the sitting government in Madrid was unsure if it could trust the armed forces and ultimately armed the trade unionists (and other non-military forces) in defense of the Republic. Urging resistance against the coup, Communist leader Dolores Ibarruri coined the famous Loyalists slogan !No Pasaran! (They shall not pass!) making it the rallying cry of the resistance. The Nationalists advanced on their frontal ground assault on Madrid and in mid-November when they had reached the outskirts of the city, they were met by an unexpectedly stiff Loyalists resistance. Franco then ordered the aerial bombardment of the city's residential areas with the intent of terrifying the civilian population to surrender. The strikes by German bombers piloted by Germans, also referred to as "fascist vultures", went on for a week but proved ineffective—Madrid did not surrender

(NO PASARAN!).

These events, heavily covered by foreign journalists (among them Ernest Hemingway), brought international attention to the first and most significant heroic moment of the conflict and generated a collective sympathy for the Loyalists side. Many in the United States sympathized with the Loyalist side,

whose victory was regarded as necessary for the defeat of the Fascists who were being assisted by Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy.

Almost three years later, on March 27th, 1939 the Nationalists with their rebel army, surrounded a severely debilitated and, shattered Madrid (known now as the second siege of Madrid) and the city, and hence all of Spain, fell to the Nationalists. On April 1st, 1939 General Franco declared himself "Caudillo" (Leader) and "Savior" of Spain and there began what would become a thirty-year dictatorship by Francisco Franco.

Turning now to the book I will juxtapose images with actual photographs of the war itself.

Upon opening the book, we see who our intended audience will be—children. The picture (Fig.1) is of a small town, rural setting with a mountain range in the distance on one side, rooftops of homes and a church, clearly a Catholic church given the ornate bell tower and the cross placed on top the steeple, the church hovering over the rest of the town. There are ten young boys dressed in hats, coats and short-pants. Some are running up a cobbled street to join the others standing in front of a huge poster located on the side wall of a home advertising El Toro Feroz FERDINANDO (The Ferocious Bull FERDINAND). It is an image of a massive, muscular bull with long sharp horns angrily huffing. The expressions on the children's face denote curiosity, uncertainty and sheer fear, as we see from the only young boy looking directly at us.

The use of propaganda posters was a powerful tool employed by both sides in the conflict to move and influence the masses and in those masses none are more impressionable than the children. Juxtaposed with the image in the book, is a famous photograph of the civil war (Fig. 1a). It shows two very young boys in short pants and coats between four and six years of age, their backs turned to us, looking up towards a

propaganda poster of Franco and the boys, one with a basket in his hand, have their right arms raised in a fascist salute before the poster. It is a powerful picture precisely because of its depiction of children suggesting that they too are an intended audience.

Right at the start we are given obvious symbols that place the story in its cultural context: a Catholic rural town setting where the population is humble, if not poverty-stricken, as seen from the patches on the young boys clothing, and the most obvious, a fighting bull named Ferdinand, two very iconic symbols of Spain; the name Ferdinand alluding to the Catholic monarchs of Spain and bullfighting, a practice for which Spain is known the world over—we are in Spain.

Turning next, the narrative begins; "Once upon a time in Spain…"—At this point we are now being told we are in Spain but it is a somewhat "fairytale-like" Spain indicated both by the opening line of the story and also by the scene. Above town, sit castle-like towers resting atop a hill that has a deep dark crevice in the center, a mountain range off in the distance, humble homes at the base of the hill and sprawling fields occupied by four grown bulls and three little bulls (Fig. 2). In addition there is a large vertical cloud formation (an image that will be constant throughout the book) rising out from behind the castle. These images suggest, with the "castle" on top, peasant homes at the bottom, and the fairy-tale reference in the opening, that this is the Spain of the past; a past when the monarchy ruled the land from its castles and peasants lived a tranquil life. But now all that has changed and in its place is the violence-centered doctrine of destruction and oppression (castle towers of fascism and not of monarchy overseeing the land). With the huge, dark, deep crevice in the hill, perhaps having created by a bomb, and the large smoke cloud above, it is an image of constant bombardments and the fairy-tale is now over.

The bulk of the actual combat occurred in the rural areas of Spain. These rural areas, already ravaged by drought, were no longer cultivated. Farmers and peasants (the vast population of Spain) couldn't work the land and because of this hunger and poverty prevailed in these communities. These are Ferdinand's fields (Fig. 3). They are empty, barren of life and the little bull Ferdinand walks across them alone. These fields became the literal graves for the hundreds of thousands who were killed. (Fig. 3a)

We now see a full-grown Ferdinand (Fig. 4), very placidly chewing on a twig standing next to a tree trunk. According to the markings on the trunk we know he is now two years-old. As the narrative points out he "grew and grew" and is now at the peak of his strength: massive in size, muscular, intimidating, capable of inflicting pain and damage as expected he do so—after all, he is a bull. What the narrative fails to mention, although visually obvious, is a big black vulture perched atop the tree trunk looking down at Ferdinand who is completely unaware of his presence. Ferdinand is unaware, but we the readers, most specifically the secondary reader (non-child) are not.

Vulture images in Ferdinand are highly significant. They appear six times making them what is termed a "running story", meaning that they present throughout the images but no narrative reference is made to them. Another "running story" in the book are the pictures of clouds throughout that don't provide much to the "surface" story, but "underneath" we discover that they are the vertical smoke cloud formations that come up from the ground after a bomb has hit). Aside from the first image where the vulture makes himself known to us, the other five instances are located more inconspicuously throughout the book. The running story there is that they are there to remind us of something, lurking from above, observing, just waiting… waiting to strike, waiting to come in after the carnage… just waiting.

Why vultures? Franco and fascism unite soon after the outbreak of the civil war and from the onset of the war Franco was backed by the two other Fascist governments in Europe; Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany. As noted earlier, The Condor Legion conducted the majority of the aerial bombardments and participated in all major engagements. A propaganda poster from the Loyalists side depicts two vultures. The one on the left is in Nazi pilot gear with the swastika on his chest, alluding to the German pilots. The vulture on the right is in a General's cap with the Nationalist/phalange emblem on his chest representative of Franco's forces. They are shown together with the slogan NO PASARAN! (They shall not pass) written across the bottom both in Spanish and German (Fig. 5). Written across the top is MADRID 1936 and coming across the middle of the image are artillery weapons over city-like buildings. With the Loyalists cry of NO PASARAN!, the image is a symbol of the failed siege on Madrid by Franco and the fierce determination of the Loyalists to defend the city.

The animal alone, without the fascist connection, is an image that connotes death, evilness, threat, fear, danger— in summary, all the things that must be defeated. But put the animal in Nazi pilot gear and a fascist rebel uniform, and this becomes the symbol of the ultimate villain that must be vanquished.

Moving along with the narrative, there is a group of four bulls standing in front of a poster advertising the bullfights at the stadium in Madrid (Fig. 6). The poster is on a wall and behind that wall, in view, there is the upper half of a house. On the roof of this house, perched there, observing, are again two vultures. Besides the reappearance of the vultures (second appearance), the poster itself is of great relevance. Looking closely at the last line at the bottom of it, there is a date. The numbers cannot be clearly made out but the month can—the month on the poster is July. For anyone looking at this image,

with all of these associations to Spain and situating this moment in Madrid, in July of 1936 (book is published in September 1936), there is now a direct association between the book and the siege of Madrid at the outbreak of civil war on July 17th, 1936. Critically examining this one image within the context of the Spanish Civil War we can see it all start to play itself out. The animal figures, bulls and vultures, represent the adult anxieties linked to these events. The bulls, iconic symbols not only of Spain but of Spaniards, are now standing before the threat and devastations of death, war and fascism represented by the vultures looming up above ready to come down and strike in the form of German fighters.

Then, through a series of incidents out of Ferdinand's control, Ferdinand gets selected by a group of men, is placed in a cart and is taken from his fields in the countryside to Madrid to partake in the bullfights (Fig. 7). On his way to Madrid, Ferdinand passes by a bridge where he is also greeted by another vulture perched on a sign pointing to "Madrid"(third appearance). Unbeknownst to Ferdinand, the bridge he goes by on his way to Madrid is Puente Nuevo (New Bridge). This is in fact an actual bridge in Spain (Fig. 7a). Located in the city of Ronda in the Andalucia region of Spain, it is considered an architectural masterpiece of the 18th century and is also strongly associated with the conflict.

In this bridge there is a chamber beneath the central arc that was used as a prison by both sides during the conflict. It also served as a torture chamber for those who were captured. The bridge towers 390ft above the canyon floor and as such was also the death to the many who were thrown from the windows and plummeted towards the rocks below. The killings of Loyalists by Nationalists in Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bells Toll* (a novel about the Spanish Civil War) are based on accounts of the actual

murders that took place on this same bridge. And so we have a very conspicuous image of a bridge with a very inconspicuous message of death if not for the vulture perched on the sign continuing to announce his imminent descent.

Ferdinand has now reached his destination—Madrid (Fig. 8). There is a typical narrow cobble-stoned street, tall home structures on each side of the street and people looking out from their windows. They are looking in shock, maybe fear, out down below to where a huge crowd has excitedly assembled holding banners and waving flags. We also have a couple of vultures again (fourth appearance), perched on the rooftop looking down at the crowd that has gathered. It is a rowdy crowd, excited over something. Looking closely at the image, we can see that those participating in the demonstration are in ponchos and hats, indicative of the all too familiar proletarians who were the participants that made up these crowds during the resistance, specifically in Madrid.

Madrid, the stronghold of the resistance, was the stage for countless demonstrations. Massive crowds taking to the streets are a common occurrence, not only in Madrid but also throughout the country in all the major cities such as Barcelona, Valencia, and Sevilla. It is the rise of the people. People come out in hordes to protest, to show support to their unionist affiliations, to fight, to mourn (Fig 8a). They hold anti-fascist militia committee meetings out in the streets; people come out to join the lines of Loyalists troops, armed workers and women's militia units as they parade down the streets and they hold funeral processions for the victims of the bombings usually bringing out the greatest number of people out to the streets. There are also the crowds who incite street fighting and mob violence, showing that whoever controls the fighting controls the city (Fig. 8b). And they are also the masses of Nationalists soldiers who marched through the street once the city is besieged. But massive demonstrations are not taking place only

in Spain. There were also demonstrations abroad, like in New York, where large numbers of people also came out on to the street with banners and signs demonstrating in support of the Republic/Loyalists (Fig. 8c).

We go from the crowds on the street to the crowds inside the bullfighting arena and we see Ferdinand himself now at the center of the ring (Fig. 9). He is standing out in the middle of the bullring. The place is filled to capacity. Looking very closely at the image we find the vultures once more, four of them this time (fifth appearance), again perched way atop everyone on the ledge of the roof—waiting. There is a huge crowd but it is a faceless crowd. The drawing style lets us know that there are people there but there is no delineation of features whatsoever, making them emblematic of the millions of people whom their names might had never been know but who nonetheless were affected by and/or part of the conflict.

During the conflict, bullfighting arenas were used to hold parades and demonstrations to rally the people for the cause and the arenas would become filled to capacity (Fig. 9a). Juxtaposing the image in the book with the photograph, we can see the same type of structural arches going all around the arena and just as interesting, the crowds appear faceless but we know that there are people there. The faceless element in both the book and the photograph create a coherent message that everyone is in this together. There are no distinctions. The faces we are able to see in the photograph of those marching across the ring are both women and men united in their cause. But the image in the book becomes more interesting once we realize that there is also another person there in the ring with Ferdinand.

Looking at the same image (Fig. 9) we see a man. He is towards the outer right edge of the ring and he is standing behind a filming camera, as if reporting on the events

that are unfolding but, like the vultures, there is no reference to him in the narrative itself and if the reader doesn't look closely enough, he or she might not perceive him at all. Why is he there?

The Spanish Civil War became the first war to be reported on an international level, being broadcast directly from the fields of conflict. There was a strong presence of international journalists out in the field on both sides of the conflict and for the first time, the public's perception of war is being influenced by media coverage and its images/pictures. The filming of the conflict then serves to bear witness for the world out side of Spain and provide an account for the millions whose faces went unknown but who nonetheless existed, fought and suffered through one of the most ruthless civil wars in recent history.

Ferdinand, a witness himself , though unaware and hence not actively participatory in the events himself, is placed back in the cart and taken back out to his fields (Fig. 10). And though he remains unaware, the vultures (sixth appearance) continue to remind us, indicating to us, as they had been the entire time, the true meanings of these images. In this last image we can see that they too have gathered their forces, as there are now a total of nine vultures flying over Ferdinand indicative of the always-constant looming dangers ready to strike at any moment. With the analysis of this last image, the "adventure" of critically looking at the images is concluded.

We have now seen how *The Story of Ferdinand*, superficially an innocent text, does in fact prove threatening and subversive to fascist Spain and Nazi Germany. An adequate reading done of this book today is a reading that can recover its lost critical meaning. By situating the story in its correct historical context and in juxtaposing the illustrations in the book with the actual images of the war, we discovered the anti-

fascist/pacifist undertones in the story validated through our secondary reader status as we were able to unveil the overreaching political anxieties and understand how the analysis of the images have shown why this book became the object of censorship and book burning, proving the text significant.

The Story of Ferdinand persists and endures over the years because in its images is a space in which the reader, be it an adult or child, can go back to again and again, finding something new, yet familiar, each time.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Work Cited

Ardizzone, Edward. "Creation of a Picture Book" Only Connect: Readings on Children's

Literature 2nd Ed. ed. Sheila Egoff, G.T. Stubbs and L.F. Ashley. Oxford UP: New York, 1980: 289-298.

Egoff, Sheila A. Thursday's Child., Trends and Patterns in Contemporary Children's Literature. Chicago; American Library Association, 1981

Carr, Raymond. The Spanish Civil War A History in Pictures. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986.

Hunt, Pete. Children's Literature: Blackwell Guides to Literature. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001.

Leaf, Munro. The Story of Ferdinand. New York: Viking Press, 1936.

Zipes, Jack. Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter. New York: Routledge, 2002.