

Drawing the Line: *The Giving Tree's* "Adult" Lessons

This paper reads Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* alongside his writing for *Playboy*, tracing a conversation that gives us insight into both types of texts. Although it is widely received as a children's book, it is unclear Silverstein wrote it with a child audience in mind. *The Giving Tree's* ambiguous audience makes it useful for exploring the way categorization of a book as "children's literature" affects its reception. Popular and critical reactions to *The Giving Tree* reflect a paradoxical nostalgia for the future that often accompanies seeing a work as "for children": fans see an innocence regained through an example of selfless giving, while those who decry it as sexist or ecologically immoral also rely on an idea of the child as innocent, impressionable, and a repository of hope. Silverstein's work anticipates current moves to blur a line between child and adult by playing with that line, creating a frisson, a playing field for multi-aged audiences. Meanwhile, the circularity of the book's critical reactions—they create *The Giving Tree* as a children's book and then criticize it for not being appropriate for children—falls into the pattern of compulsive repetition Silverstein depicts repeatedly in his work. Drawing on Jackie Stallcup's work on children's satire and Marah Gubar's taxonomy of children's literature criticism, I show that drawing a line between Silverstein's writing for children and his writing for adults is a barrier to fully understanding either one. My discussion of Silverstein's line drawings, their publication history, and their popular and critical reception exposes manufactured lines between audiences, lines that describe competing theories of childhood (and adulthood), as well as competing definitions of children's literature. Juxtaposing Silverstein's "adult" cartoons with his "children's" book calls into question critical discrimination between the two and allows us to think critically about how we define children's literature and what these definitions do for us culturally.