

University of Utrecht

# Ideology, Myth and Politics in Children's Literature

A close-reading of 'Die Krismiskinders' by C.J. Langenhoven (1926, 1978)

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## Introduction

Three years ago, I was doing volunteer work in Israel, working at a kindergarten for migrant children. In the provisionally set house packed with children and some oversized cockroaches, every child wanted to be cuddled and lifted up. Upon entrance they would spring on you and shout: “Lift me, lift me!”. After having lifted and cuddled about ten children, I sat down on a chair. A northern-African girl who demanded my most attention, immediately climbed on my lap and asked me to read her a book . The only book available there was entitled “Zehn kleine Negerlein”. It was a picture story book that opened with ten black children who disappeared one by one with every page we turned. The climax of my indignation was when a white police officer took away one of the children, for no particular reason. I did not throw the book away, even though I strongly felt like doing so.

This was the moment when I realized, how engrained ideology can be in something seemingly innocent like children’s literature. Children’s books are not isolated from the structures of knowledge and the ideas in society. Therefore they may not escape the bias that might be written between the lines. My Bachelor thesis will explore the intersection between ideology and power structures in children’s literature, using the South African children’s book *Die Krismiskinders* (Langenhoven).<sup>1</sup> Through this book,

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<sup>1</sup> A general outline and overview of the story can be found in the appendix.

I will explore how racist ideology is structured and shaped. I will approach the book as a text in a historical context with doorways to the ideas of that time.

### *Relevance*

Thinking about it now, I am glad that I did not throw the book about the ten little black children away. This is no way to deal with problems. It is better to analyze the way such a book operates, and see the moment where it fails to hold on to its ideology. Thus the relevance of this thesis is twofold; it aims to provide a better understanding of the workings of ideology and it tries to come to terms with the colonial and Apartheid past. Thus my purpose is to open the possibility for a different way of creating memory.

In the 1978 (when *Die Krismiskinders* was republished) strong resistance to Apartheid: “...the 1970S represented a time when people renewed their fight against the system” (Deegan) . The oppressive militarised state was trying to hold on to a completely racial segregation by enforcing their ideology. The reaction of the state to opposition was violent and political prisoners were tortured on a regular basis. An example of the political climate can be seen in the events of 1976;

What had started as a march through Soweto by 15,000 students protesting against the compulsory use of the Afrikaans language in schools ended in a ‘brutal suppression’ when the police opened fire, killing several students, including a 13-year-old, Hector Peterson. (Deegan)

These violent happenings had only increased opposition, “the government had been in pursuit of order and control since the Soweto uprisings of 1976-77” (Deegan). The propaganda mentioned no opposition, only a communist conspiracy that endangered the national security.

After the fall of apartheid when Nelson Mandela came to power with the ANC, South-Africa has been trying to come to terms with its past and memory: “Thus it is that the stories of the TRC seem poised to result in one major spin-off, among others: the restoration of narrative” (Ndebele). This meant that repressed stories of Apartheid victims came to the surface, and also that the perpetrators were made to confess their crimes. Concomitantly, literature written and published during Apartheid and colonialism was and still is being evaluated, bringing to the open the biased ideology. Thus memory is re-evaluated and re-made. Here the complicated question of “the ethics of representation” arises (Buikema). How can we represent repressed peoples and narratives without repeating the faults that we have

condemned?<sup>2</sup> Before answering this question, we must first evaluate and criticize the previous way of representation. I will attempt this in relation to *Die Krismiskinders*, by deconstructing the representation of the characters.

### *Theoretical Positioning*

In this thesis I will be mostly be moving through postcolonial theory. However first of all I will outline shortly what constitutes the field of literary analysis of Children's literature according to Peter Hunt's *Understanding Children's Literature*.<sup>3</sup> After this I will go into the way 'the child' is constructed according to what is thought to be its essential characteristics. Here I will also be dealing with the concept of whiteness, defining it not just as a racial category but also in terms of myth according to Roland Barthes.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore concepts of the Self and the Other will take in a central position in my analysis, using Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's article<sup>5</sup> on reading literature in its political context. The Other is defined as the 'not-yet-human-Other', who needs to be civilized in the imperialist mission. This gives the colonial Other a position outside of civilization and strengthens the inside position of the western Self. I will further on analyze colonial positions according to images of mirroring in *Die Krismiskinders*; here I will make references to J.M. Coetzee's nobel prize speech *He and His Man*. To show that these ideas on racial positions can be seen in the actual historical time, I will read the book in its colonial context. I will connect passages of the book to historical landmarks showing how the book reflects its time and reconstitutes the general political ideology.

Lastly I will go into the representation of the Bushmen as barbarians. Here I will be using John Maxwell Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*,<sup>6</sup> as a postcolonial critique on the way the enemy is created for a greater good. The dichotomy between the barbarian and the civilized subject, and the borders of civilization are central to this part of my analysis.

These subjects can be related back to ideology and myth, which form the overarching constructs. I will define ideology according to Brillenburg Wurth, Kiene and Ann Rigney referred to in *Het leven van*

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<sup>2</sup> The issues of representation with dealing with the history of Sarah Baartman are elaborately discussed in Buikema's *De verbeelding als strijdtoneel: Sarah Baartman en de ethiek van representatie*.

<sup>3</sup> Hunt, Peter. *Understanding Children's Literature*. London: Routledge, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Barthes, Roland. *Mythologieën*. Utrecht: Vertaling Uitgeverij Ijzer, 1957,2002.

<sup>5</sup> Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry* (1985): 243-261.

<sup>6</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Baskerville: Penguin Books, 1982.

*teksten, Een inleiding tot de literatuurwetenschap*; here it is formulated that ideology is the process of values and norms penetrating society and at the same time constituting themselves. Myth then is the content of norms posing as natural in this process, when in fact they are constructions (Barthes). The literary text will be approached in this thesis as “a site on which ideological struggles are acted out” (Barry). This is where Post-colonialism comes together with Post-structuralism; through deconstructing the characters in *Die Krismiskinders* according to postcolonial ideas. This approach entails a move away from one consistent interpretation – rather than attempting to discover or reconstruct an original meaning of the text, I will show how (post)colonial subjects are constructed in the text in relation to diverse and sometimes paradoxical frameworks of meaning. It is these inconsistencies that show the ruptures of ideology and the way myth is constructed. I will be specifically referring to the political ideology of South-African colonialism and Apartheid.

As Post-colonial literature often attempts to rewrite earlier literature in a new critical way (Brillenburg Wurth and Rigney), intertextuality is central to my method of analysis. I will be cross-comparing and imagining a dialogue (Bakhtin) mainly between two of Coetzee’s works and *Die Krismiskinders*. I will mainly be using Coetzee’s nobel Prize speech *He and his man* (2003) and his novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*(1982). Accordingly, I employ Julia Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality, where the relation between different texts creates new meaning (Brillenburg Wurth and Rigney). Coetzee’s novels are adequate for the use of imagining textual dialogue as they give postcolonial criticism on a situation that resurfaces in *Die Krismiskinders*. It is the interpretation that comes forth out of the relation between the compared texts that is interesting. An intertextual reading entails an openness to the way in which both the original and the new text are changed. I will concentrate on the way the first text, *Die Krismiskinders* is changed and can be interpreted according to these intertextual dialogues.

## Thoughts on Children’s literature

The field of children’s literature is relatively new, as for a long time it has not been considered as proper literature. In recent years, children’s books are becoming more and more central to critical analysis. Hunt claims that “the books have, nonetheless, been marginalized. Childhood is, after all, a state we grow away from...” (Hunt, *Understanding Children’s Literature* 1). Hunt claims that this marginalization has had the advantage of keeping children’s literature free of any discipline claiming it and subjecting it to its rules. This marginalization however means that the researcher of children’s literature faces some challenges.

However, because the study of children's literature has been skewed towards reader and affect, rather than towards the book as artifact, we are in the position of having a great deal of speculative and theoretical criticism, but relatively little 'solid' bibliographical backup (Hunt, *Understanding Childrens Literature* 7).

A researcher of children's literature seems to be approaching a subject surrounded by "speculative and theoretical criticism" with hardly any solid backup. Hunt says that such lack of researching method for children's literature is due to the fact that children's books are not approached as an artefact. A researching method should entail first of all positioning the production of children's literature in society:

This means that just as children's literature do not exist in a vacuum—they have real, argumentative readers and visible, practical, consequential *uses*—so the theory of children's literature constantly blends into the practice of bringing books and readers together (Hunt, *Understanding Childrens Literature* 2).

Thus children's literature is subject to the particular situation that it is developed and read in. This means that we are able to read a children's book within a certain political context — politicizing the text. Spivak notes that it "should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English" (Spivak). Similarly it should be impossible to read any children's book without taking into account its socio-political context. Applying this notion specifically to our case, it would mean that it should not be possible to read *Die Krismiskinders* outside of its political context of colonialism and Apartheid.

As reflected in Hunt's citation, the relationship between the reader and the book is also interesting. We cannot deny that there are books that are read by a public of readers. But this 'public' is not uncomplicated and even less so is the representation of that public as characters in children's books.

In examining various attempts to define 'children's literature' we find a constant assumption of the existence of the (reading) child (that is: the assumption that there is such a thing as a unified, consistent, 'objective' 'child reader') together with the capacity for knowing it that each critic claims for himself or herself. (Lesnik-Oberstein).

The child reader is therefore constructed by authors and critics; authors assuming children identify with the characters and critics assuming 'the child' as an objective unified entity. This means that the

concept of ‘the child’ is constructed for children to identify with. Consequently, the constructed child is like a mirror image of what are thought to be the essential characteristics of a child in a certain time and place. I will now go into the issues of the constructed child and the interpretation of mirror images specifically in *Die Krismiskinders*.

### **The constructed child and mirror images**

The central focus in the story of *Die Krismiskinders* lies on the characters of the children. They can however be complicated in many ways. In this part of my thesis I will focus on how the characters are constructed according to their (implicit) skin colour. Furthermore, I will go in to key concepts of Self and Other, and analyze the way in which the two are connected. The children may be at the centre of the story; however this does not mean that they are automatically the Self.

In *Die Krismiskinders*, already the entrance of the children into the story is interesting. They are delivered as presents in baskets, without any sexual relations ever having taken place between the old couple. This motif evokes biblical stories. The couple receive their children miraculously like Abraham and Sarah who were too old to conceive a child<sup>7</sup>; and they receive their babies in baskets like Moses who was found by the Pharaoh’s daughter, Batjah<sup>8</sup>. Oddly enough the couple mistake the first baby for a doll:

“Dan moet ons twee nou op ons oudag weer popspeel!” lag die pappie. Hy kom nader. Die twee buk saam oor die mandjie en kyk in, bang om aan die dingetjie te vat dat hy miskien ’n vlekke of ’n skrappie kry.

Hulle staan nog so en kyk, toe maak die waspop twee blou ogies oop, en gaap met ’n rooi mondjie, en steek twee vet armpies na hulle toe uit, en glimlag.

Die grootmensspeelgoed was nie ’n pop nie maar ’n babadogtertjie. En van nou af was die oom en die tante ’n pappie en ’n mammie (Langenhoven 9).

In this citation we see how the old couple regards the baby as something alien to them. The thought that the baby must be a doll fits to the way she enters the story; as a commodity. Even when they realize that it is a baby girl, she is still described as a plaything for adults “Die grootmensspeelgoed was nie ’n pop nie maar ’n babadogtertjie”. Roughly translated, this sentence means that “The adult plaything was not a doll but a baby girl”. The baby girl in fact seems to be a “commodified person”

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<sup>7</sup> This can be found in Gen. 21:1-7.

<sup>8</sup> This can be found respectively in: Gen. 21:1; Exodus 2:1-9; Chronicles 4:18.

(Spivak). The other two boys are delivered the same way, in baskets, appearing at the door as surprise Christmas presents. The absence of sexual reproduction is interesting in post-colonial context. Spivak speaks about 'child bearing' and 'soul making' in relation to imperialism, as the following citation will illustrate:

This stake is represented on two registers: childbearing and soul making. The first is the domestic-society-through-sexual-reproduction cathected as "companionate love"; the second is the imperialist project cathected as civil-society-through-social-mission (Spivak).

We read here about the social mission to teach the non-Western "not-yet-human-Other" (Spivak) referring to the so called white man's burden. This is formulated in this citation as the purpose to create a "civil-society-through-social-mission" (above). 'Soul-making' can be defined as the imperialist project "beyond "mere" sexual reproduction" (Spivak) to educate the colonies. This is something that suits the complete lack of intimacies between the old couple in the book. The children then are the offspring of 'soul-making', having the purpose to educate the environment.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, we could question whether these child characters are really children. They develop wonderful talents in high forms of western art: music, poetry and painting. They never show any emotions, never object to anything and seem to be stoically unmoved by any circumstance, even when they are violently taken away from their home. They do not have a personal character, they are only what they are good at and are enjoyed by, we could even say, that they are consumed by their environment. They are used for the pleasure of everyone around them and in the end are absorbed into the earth. There is a strong sense of Otherness in their perfectness. They seem to be more like metaphorical pillars of western civilization than actual children. Therefore they are positioned inside as well as outside: they represent western civilization, but they are also othered in their incapacity to actually be human. The child is made "...wonderful at the expense of making it not like us—in essence, not quite human" (Nodelman). Thus the children are also a 'not-yet-human-Other', as they still need to grow up.

### *Whiteness*

If the outside position of the children is constituted by their perfection and their being outside of humanity, what gives them a position on the inside? I have already interpreted them as pillars of

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<sup>9</sup> I will elaborate further on this subject when discussing whiteness.



western civilization, but there is more to their being. The children in *Die Krismiskinders* are examples of what 'white' should be, they are in fact exemplars of 'the white child'. They are ideal white children.

The children are never labelled as white in the book, but there is no need for that. The white constitutes the rule that does not need to be categorized: "Whites are not of a particular race. They are simply, the human race." (Swiger) This of course should be read ironically, because whites are not 'the human race', but this is how they are often presented, whiteness studies criticize this notion. Whiteness is constructed in a way that is more subtle because it overarches the general whole situation: "It is presented as a historical accident, rather than a construction" (Swiger). Whiteness in *Die Krismiskinders* indeed presented as a natural phenomenon, which needs no explanation, like a 'historical' accident. This so-called natural state of being, that needs no explanation, is what Roland Barthes defines as one of the characteristics of myth (Barthes). It is the task of the researcher to see through this guise of naturalness and see the way this myth is in fact a construction.

The concepts of whiteness are embodied foremost by the children in *Die Krismiskinders*. They are presented as innocent creatures, talented in the Arts (with a capital A), moral in their behavior, respectful to their elders and dominating when showing civilization to the animals around. The last characteristic may need some explanation, the following citation shows how the girl rules over nature and brings peace among the animals through music:

Sy sit in die voorhuis en speel, en Woewoef sit by haar, harige kop skeef, nou hierdie kant toe, dan daardie kant toe nes 'n voëltjie wat na sy maat se gesangetjie luister. En toe Talie weer sien, hier is Miaau ook by, Miaau wat anders nooit naby Woewoef kom nie of dis gebrom en 'n gespoes en 'n rusie...Die musiek het ál die narigheid en nukkerigheid uit hulle harte getoor en hulle vriende gemaak (Langenhoven 28).

The girl solves the ongoing quarrel between the cat and the dog. This connects to the concept of 'soul-making' that I mentioned earlier; the white girl civilizes the animals and gives them a better existence. When Talie begins to play in the woods, an even larger population of animals appears and sits listening in harmony:

Dit was in die namiddag, en Talie het langes die rivier op gaan loop tot by die bo-ent van die soekoegat, en daar het sy op 'n stomp gaat sit, in die koelte van die populierbos, op die rand van die gat water, en begin te speel...Dit was 'n vergadering van duisende en duisende diere, van die aarde en die hemel en die water, almal vriende met mekaar soos hulle in die paradys was

voordat Adam en Eva deur hulle ongehoorsaamheid die vloek op die aarde gebring het (Langenhoven 28, 30).

As the citation above shows that Talie is able to bring the peace of paradise back onto the earth through her music. Christianity plays here the part of prescribing a utopian situation while educating the reader of the curse that occurred after disobedience in the Garden of Eden. We can wonder if perhaps whiteness and Christianity are also strongly connected. Surely in political context, this is the religion that the European settlers brought to South Africa.

### *Self and Other*

In what form are the Self and the Other represented in this children's book? These concepts can be analyzed according to "images of mirroring" (Spivak). In the book, Sontie presents these images in two ways, one is his reflected image either in the mirror or in the water, and the other is the dark shadow behind him. In spite of the fact that Sontie knows that these two are different, he calls both images his shadows. He makes the distinction in their color, one is clear and the other is dark. He has a kind of philosophical scene near the pool, which evokes the myth of Narcissus. Sontie considers how it is possible that he has two shadows that follow him everywhere; a clear shadow and a dark one. He begins firstly to think about his dark shadow:

"Ek, Sontie, het twee skaduwees," so het sy gedagte geloop. " 'n donker skaduwee en 'n helder skaduwee. Dis allebei maar twee ander ekke, twee ander Sonties ; hulle lyk allebei na my. En tog lyk die een nie na die ander nie.

" Kyk nou die swart skaduwee, wat altyd saamgaan waar ek gaan....Jy kan niks aan hom sien nie as net sy omtrek; hy het nooit 'n kleur ook nie; hy bly maar eners swart. Maar wat soos ek lyk, is hy (Langenhoven 43).

This passage shows the connectedness between Sontie and his shadow: he is followed by this other Sontie. The shadow can only be seen by its contours, because it is utterly black. Is this black shadow the colonial subject? If we interpret the dark shadow as such, the Other of the white, then this scene represents the general thoughts of the time on colonial relations. Concomitantly, it is presented as if racial segregation based on notions of black inferiority is something to philosophize about; but in the end the shadow, the African subject, still remains in its blackness. The shadow is subjected to what Franz Fanon calls "the fact of blackness", being unable to escape and always being seen as black (Fanon). It is presented as the natural state and order of the world, while in fact racial myth is made and formed

through a fictional story (Barthes). The book presents the contemporary reality of racial segregation during colonialism and Apartheid through the philosophical thoughts of a child.

There is a strong connection between Sontie and his Other shadow, through the sentence where he says: “what looks like me, he is”. This can be interpreted as the selfed Other (Spivak). In the form of the shadow, the properties of the Self are projected upon the Other. It is interesting however that, the Other in the form of the shadow seems to have the possibility of existence: “he is”. This gives the shadow the possibility of being alive, perhaps even having a life of its own. However, the book does not relate that Sontie’s shadow has a will and opportunity to lead its own life, like Peter Pan’s shadow that does whatever it likes. In our book, the shadow is attached to every movement Sontie makes. If we read this politically in a racialized context, the supposed dependency of the black African on the white Afrikaner evokes itself.

Coetzee describes in *He and his Man* what would happen if ‘his man’ were to lead his own life and even be more successful than its owner the main he-figure: Robinson Crusoe. His man would impressive letter reports to the he-figure, even become better at writing than the He. But there is no actual meeting between the two. They are like two crossing ships;

If he must settle on a likeness for the pair of them, his man and he, he would write that they are like two ships sailing in contrary directions, one west, the other east. Or better, that they are deckhands toiling in the rigging, the one on a ship sailing west, the other on a ship sailing east. (Coetzee, Nobel Lecture - Literature 2003)

Thus the two are connected by the same action, while heading in different directions. We could interpret Sontie’s shadow as ‘his man’, busy in the same action as Sontie while remaining his opposite through his darkness. We could signify this as the impossibility for the Other, the colonial subject in the form of the shadow to escape Otherness, when it is defined as such by the Self. But still there is a rupture in this dependency, because the shadow seems to be on its own, just as ‘his man’ leads his own life.

A similar yet opposite analysis can be made about the clear shadow that Sontie sees in the water of the pool. Here the reference to Narcissus becomes even more clear as Sontie stares at his reflection in the water and philosophizes:

“...ek het ’n helder skaduwee ook, wat ook net soos ek lyk, en roer soos ek roer, en alles saamdoen wat ek doen...Ek het eers gedink, toe ek klein was, hy woon hier onder die water in die soekoegat, want nes ek oorbuk en afkyk, dan steek hy, gelyk met my, sy kop onder die wal uit en hy kyk op na my soss ek afkyk na hom... (Langenhoven 44)

Roughly translated, Sontie narrates how he has also a clear shadow, that looks like him, moves like him and does everything together with him; when he was smaller he used to think that there was another boy living in the water. This represents the “othered Self” (Spivak), as Sontie sees himself and first thinks that his reflection is another boy, an Other Sontie. Spivak places the moment of self recognition of the mirror image in postcolonial context: “In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Narcissus’ madness is disclosed when he recognizes his Other as his self: “Iste ego sum.”” (Spivak). Sontie however does not go mad upon discovery that his reflection is not another boy, but makes this comprehensible to himself by seeing it as a kind of clear shadow.

Sontie says that ‘when he was small’ he used to think that his clear shadow lived in the water. This is an interesting thought, because in fact Sontie is still small, but he speaks about himself as though referring to a past time in his childhood. If he is not a child now, when was he a child? His childhood seems to be marginalized by his philosophically adult thinking, even though it also has a naiveté about it. Mixed with wisdom, this naivety can be interpreted as the wisdom of a noble savage who is wiser than the modern adult in his closeness to nature (Jenkins).

So how can we interpret the fact that Sontie has a clear shadow and a dark one? The myth that society should be racially segregated, separating black and white people, is constructed here. But there is a rupture in this myth, as both the dark as well as the clear shadow are part of Sontie. In this context, we can refer to Coetzee’s Nobel Prize speech:

...the tour that showed there was a farther side to the island, craggy and dark and inhospitable, which he ever afterwards avoided, though if in the future colonists shall arrive upon the island they will perhaps explore it and settle it; that too being a figure, of the dark side of the soul and the light (Coetzee, Nobel Lecture - Literature 2003).

The shadow of light and the dark one do not only represent figures of the contemporary colonialist positions, but also “a figure of the dark side of the soul and the light” (see above). These two meanings can come together when we think that both colonialist positions; that of colonizer and that of colonized,

the light and the dark figures, the white and the black— are found within each person. In the next part I will go deeper into the specific colonial context of South-Africa, while relating it to *Die Krismiskinders*.

## Politically Reading

In the beginning of the twentieth century, South Africa was ruled by Great Britain as a colony. Racial categories were maintained and people were separated geographically by segregation. Segregation was in fact a formal political policy, which had been enforced in the Union which union by the Labour Party in its manifesto in 1914 (Deegan 13). Black and white people had already been separated geographically before this, through the “Great Trek” in the early nineteenth century. The white Boers moved away from the Cape Region north-eastwards and established the Free State and Transvaal. Due to this great migration: “the frontier between white farmers and Africans was extended from 320 to more than 1600 kilometres...it was on the frontier that the trekboers came to identify themselves as white and superior to a black enemy” (Deegan 9,11). Afrikaner Nationalism was developed in this time.

Furthermore, by occupying the “high veld” the economic position of white Boers was enhanced due to the discovery of gold some decades later. Black labour was mainly used for the mining industry in slavery conditions. In the working field, black and white people could not completely be separated. To ensure that there would be no mixing, the Immorality Act was established in 1927 which forbade extra-marital sexual relations between black and white people (Deegan 14).

Linking the story of *Die Krismiskinders* to the political situation of the time, we see clear references in the beginning. The story starts with a description of the environment of current time but reflects back to the old time when things were quite different.

Soos die wêreld vandag daar lyk, daar in die Kango, loop daar by die grotte ’n rivier verby, tussen groen lande en bome en tuine deur, met hoë koppe weerskante, en verder tot onder dwarsdeur die dorp Oudtshoorn. Dis pragtige boereplase wat daar lê, ál langs die rivies af, netjies bewerk en vrugbaar, want die grond is geil en die weer is warm en daar is goeie water. Ja, vandag is dit ’n digbewoonde streek. Maar ons storietjie is nie vandag se tyd nie, maar van die óú, óú tye toe alles nog woes en onbewerk was, een ruwe bosgasie aanmekaar. Daar was nog byna geen witmense in die land nie (Langenhoven 1).

This citation describes that “today” (in 1926) the Kango is well inhabited by people who cultivate their environment into something harmoniously beautiful. But the story itself takes place in a time when the area was still “wild and uncultivated” and “there were hardly any white people on that land.” The last

phrase implies that in the time of the story, white people had not yet made the land into something safe and beautiful. The issue of land property and its acquisition is politically relevant considering that 13 years earlier the Natives Land Act was accepted, intending to prevent Africans from buying land in areas designated for white people (Deegan 3). Furthermore there were massive evictions of black people to clear the way for the extension of white farming activities (Deegan 17). The policy of segregation employed by the British was put to practice through the division of land:

Segregation had been defined as the territorial and residential separation of peoples based on the idea that black and white communities ‘have different wants and requirements in the fields of social, cultural and political policy (Deegan 3,4).

The policy of segregation was not only based on the idea that “black and white communities “have different wants and requirements...”, but also on the notion that they are essentially different and that white people were superior to black people.

According to Shula Marks, this divide and rule approach was part of British colonial policy and reflected racial perceptions. Certainly, notions of racial superiority formed part of the general pattern of colonial rule into twentieth century (Deegan 5).

The notion of racial superiority is formulated as an accepted categorization in the beginning of *Die Krismiskinders*. The old couple in the story are set against the Bushmen who are very different. The following citation corroborates this:

Bure was daar glad nie. Die enigste mense in die omtrek was ’n stam wilde Boesmans wat hulle lêplek of kraal had onder die krans waar die ingang na die grotte toe is. En nie alleen had die oom en die tante nie vriende van hulle eie mense nie; hulle had nie een kindjie nie (Langenhoven 2).

The translation would be read as: “There were no neighbours at all.” This statement however contradicts the next sentence saying that “The only people in the surrounding land were a tribe of wild Bushmen”. So in fact there were people in the surroundings. This contradiction is solved by stating that “uncle and aunt had no friends of their own people”. Thus the story defines the Bushmen as different kind of people. The terminology of “wild” categorises the Bushmen as primitive; which elucidates why they cannot be considered as neighbours or as the same kind of people as the old couple. The Bushmen are distanced from the centre of the story, as if they are not really present in the neighbourhood. They

remain un-present throughout the story, until they make a completely unexpected invasive and violate entrance.

### **The Bushmen and the Borders of Civilization**

Who were these Bushmen in reality? They were the San tribe who occupied most of the Southern African region, living in a hunting-gathering style (Deegan 4). Of course such life was the only option open to them since the Natives Land Act. Duncan Brown claims that the notion of the Bushmen living in hunter-gatherer style is a myth aimed to deny Bushmen peoples land and political rights, so as to effectively destroy them (Jenkins). These two claims might seem contradicting, but myth is not the negation of a real situation nor is it a confirmation, it rather presents a situation as normative through “depolitized speech” (Barthes). Depolitized speech can be defined as a text that poses to be devoid of political content, when in fact this content is just hidden behind or in a way impoverished by the form (Barthes). Even though myth does not represent a real situation it does have real implications on it. The myth of the dangerous black majority threatening to swamp the white community was an important factor in the development of Afrikaner Nationalism. This fear of being swamped is incorporated in the book by the Bushmen:

Dit was 'n geraas en geskree en 'n gevloek soos van duiwels. Eers van die een kant af, nader en nader; toe van alle kante. Die pappie staan op en hy gaan by een vir een venster uitkyk. Rondom die huis wemel dit van die Boesmans (Langenhoven 53,54).

A general translation would be that “there was a noise, shouting and swearing like that of devils”. The invasive swamping danger is shown in the next sentence “First from one side, closer and closer; then from all sides”. When the father and mother look through the window they see that “around the house the Bushmen where swarming”. The Bushmen go to the house for only one purpose; to steal the children. This action seems completely unmotivated; except for being wild from having celebrated their successful hunt with beer, raw meat, smoking and dancing:

Die boesmans het die dag van die jag af teruggekom met 'n groot koedoe wat in een van hulle putte geval het, en twee volstruismannetjies wat hulle met die pyl en boog gekiet het. En die vroue het vir hulle bier gemaak, en hulle het 'n groot fees gehou en rou vleis geëet en bier gedrink en dagga gerook en gedans en te kere gegaan tot hulle almal dol was.

“Kom ons gaan die duusvolk se kinders afneem,” , skree een skielik (Langenhoven 54).

The decision is made in a drunken wild mood, but without any real reason. The reader hears of no motive of hatred or a previous history with the white family. It seems to be caused by the effects of alcohol, smoking and raw meat that they invade the house. In this action, the Bushmen in this story are presented as barbarians, wanting to steal children for no apparent reason but sheer wildness. They form a dichotomy to the civilized subjects, whom the highly talented children represent in the story. The civilized position of the children is actually strengthened by the figuration of the barbaric Bushmen. This observation is corroborated by the following quotation: “Consequently, the term *barbarian* entails a collective construction of the Other in a way that helps to define the civilized subject itself — specifying its negative limits” (Boletsi). Accordingly, the children are defined as civilized subjects by the uncivilized barbaric representation of the Bushmen. The dichotomy between the children and the Bushmen specifies where civilized culture ends and where barbarism begins; the borders of civilization.

Interesting connections can be made between the presence of the barbaric bushmen in *Die Krismiskinders* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* (Coetzee). Even though the barbarians never actually invade any homes in Coetzee’s novel, unlike the Bushmen in *Die Krismiskinders*, a similarity arises in the expecting anticipation of the insiders. In *Die Krismiskinders* we find mysterious signs of danger, which are like ruptures in the harmony of the story. In Coetzee’s novel the signs are shown for what they are; the structure of power to dominate by creating fear. The way in which the enemy is created is open to the reader. Still, a fictional enemy who exists only in minds is equally present as the one that does make an actual appearance. It is the fear of what might come that gives the invasion of the barbarians a ‘fact of life’ status in both books.

Coincidental happenings are blamed on those imaginary barbarians in Coetzee’s book: “Barbarians. They cut away part of the embankment over there and flooded the fields. No one saw them. They came in the night. The next morning it was like a second lake.” (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 108). Similarly, in our book, when the girl Talie is in the woods for a short while, her father immediately presumes that there is a danger that needs to be fought:

“Vroutjie, waar is Talie?” skree hy by die voordeur in.

“Pappie, ek het haar daar langes die rivier op sien loop na die populierbos se kant toe,” kom die antwoord agter uit die huis uit.

Sonder ’n woord verder vlieg die pappie binnetoe en hy gryp sy geweer en hy hardloop weer voor uit (Langenhoven 31).



Why is there danger when everything around the family seems so safe and harmonious? The reader is as oblivious of the danger the child that goes into the woods to play. The necessity of the gun for the father to protect his home from invasion becomes apparent when the Bushmen come:

Daar was 'n Boesman wat sy knie al op een van die vensterbanke had om die raam stukkend te stamp en in te breek. Pappie haal sy geweer oor. Klak-klak gaan die haan. Nog 'n oogknip en hy sou afgetrek het. Die middeldeur gaan oop! Hier staan ou Vader Krismis (Langenhoven 54).

The interference of Santa Claus in this part of the story is very interesting. Earlier in the story, the family is given hints from Santa Claus of what is going to happen. On the seventh Christmas, the one before the last, Santa Claus gives all the children presents to make for their parents to remember them by, referring to their future departure. When the barbarians invade the house to steal the children, Santa suddenly appears – not to protect the children, but to say that the children should be taken away to save their parents:

“Foeitog, Neef en Niggie,” sê ou Vader Krismis; “ek is baie jammer. Daar was al baie vaders en moeders wat nie hulle kinders wou afgee nie en dit tog darem maar moes doen. Wees gehoorsaam ; daar is niks anders te doen nie. Groet jullie kinders. My kindertjies, groet jullie pappie en mammie” (Langenhoven 56).

I cannot help wondering how it is possible that Santa seems to know what is going to happen and doesn't do anything to prevent it. Strangely enough, he even helps the Bushmen to take the children away. He uses his authority as a saintly figure to force the old couple do what he thinks is best. Common logic fails completely here, as parents do not in general give their children away to save themselves. Are we dealing with an evil Santa here? Before giving a clear answer to this slightly paradoxical question we can compare Santa's position with the authoritarian figure, Colonel Joll, in Coetzee's novel. Similar to Santa, colonel Joll is a representation of higher power who appears suddenly and whose orders everybody must follow. Both Santa and colonel Joll work for a greater good that nobody seems to clearly understand. In the above citation we see an example of Santa's authority. In Coetzee's novel, an example can be found when the main figure (the Magistrate) tries to dissuade the Colonel from going on an expedition, which is read in the following passage:

He hears me out, even (I have the feeling) leads me on a little. I am sure this conversation is noted down afterwards, with the comment that I am 'unsound'. When he has heard enough he

dismisses my objections: 'I have a commission to fulfill, Magistrate. Only I can judge when my work is completed' (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 12).

So what is this greater good that Santa and Colonel John work for? I would say that though their ways are quite different, they both are and work as gatekeepers of western civilization. Santa takes on the guise of Christianity, Colonel Joll assumes the appearance of a high military function. If we see Santa as a gatekeeper of Christianity, perhaps we can explain his action of forcing the parents to give the children away. The children can be read then as a Christ-like sacrifice, for the good of civilization. The parents give the children up out of faith in the Christian figure Santa Claus. This theme can also be related to the Old Testament, where Abraham is told to sacrifice his son Itzhak to prove his faith.<sup>10</sup>

The location of both stories is at the edge of civilization. In *Die Krismiskinders*, the house takes the position of a secluded haven of civilization, surrounded by uncultivated nature; further on the barbaric Bushmen inhabit the area, and even further there is a dark cave. In Coetzee's novel, we have the town that is like a secluded haven of civilization, with gates and walls surrounded by rough nature and various barbaric tribes. This is made explicit in the above mentioned scene when the Magistrate tries to stop the Colonel from going: " 'I ask' , I continue, 'only because if you get lost it becomes our task here to find you and bring you back to civilization' " (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 12).

What lies then beyond the borders of civilization? In Coetzee's novel the clear answer is, annihilation: "Above our heads on the ramparts the soldiers, the forty men who stand between us and annihilation gaze out over lake and desert" (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 154). It is this fear of annihilation of culture which is central to Coetzee's novel and actually happens in *Die Krismiskinders*. In the children's story however, the children impress the barbaric Bushmen with their talents before they are annihilated. Each child persuades the Bushmen to keep them alive by performing one of the arts; poetry, painting and music. After this the Bushmen are so tired from all the excitement that they sleep like the dead: " Die Boesmans slaap soos dooies" (Langenhoven 65). This scene comes to show that the children make the barbarians see that the western culture is outright better than theirs. This motif is dealt with in Coetzee's novel as well; "I think: 'But when the barbarians taste bread, new bread and mulberry jam, bread and gooseberry jam, they will be won over to our ways" (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 169)". If we take thematic reference further on, we see a similar theme in Cafavy's poem, on which Coetzee bases his title. Here the town is preparing for the barbarians to come, actually

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<sup>10</sup> This can be found in Genesis 22:2.

anticipating to win them over by showing them their cultured ways through rhetoric and jewelry, because “things like that dazzle the barbarians” (Cavafy)<sup>11</sup>. It is self-contradicting that the barbarians can even appreciate these civilized products of western culture. If they are so barbaric, how can they? Perhaps underneath it all, the barbarian is not so different from the western subject.

### *Into the cave*

After the children have dazzled the Bushmen, one of the ghostly figures that has spurred them to use their talents, makes a statement that supports my earlier thought that the children are in fact sacrificed:

“Kinders”, sê Harmonie, “ julle gawe om dinge te skep wat so wonderskoon is, is ‘n wondergawe. Hy is nie vir vyf bedoel nie. Vyf is te min ; vyfduisend is te min. Luister weer, en sê vir my, watter dag is dit vandag?

“Ons verjaarsdag.”

“Ja?”

“En dis Krismis. Ons is Krismiskinders.”

“En wie se verjaarsdag nog is dit vandag?”

“Die verjaarsdag van Jesus.”

“Ka, kinders. En weet julle wat het Hy ons kom leer? Dat ons lewe nie ons eie alleen is nie. Dat ons nie net ons eie geluk moet soek nie; dat ons hier op aarde leef om ander mense se lewe soet te maak” (Langenhoven 66, 67).

In this passage, the children are synchronized with the figure of Jesus Christ. Their birthdays fall on Christmas day and they follow a similar quest like Christ to make other people’s lives sweet by their wonder-talents. Like Jesus, the children are also taken away from mankind. The children are taken into the dark cave by a large bat with baboons-paws, into the kingdom of the shadows, where the King of darkness rules. He tells them why he brought them there:

“Mensekinders, ek het jullie hierheen laat bring om my te dien. Die Koning van die Lig het nog altyd al die kunstenaars daar bo op die aarde gehou. Drie van hulle sal hy nie mis nie. Maar of hy my dit ook gun of nie, dis tyd dat my paleis verheerlik word.” (Langenhoven 73)

In this passage we see that the King of darkness wants to be embalmed by the children’s talents. But the children are unable and unwilling to comply with his wish. As the boy talented in poetry says, “ En as ek

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<sup>11</sup> See appendix for full poem.

dit kon doen ook, o Koning, dan nog sou ek weier om aan my eie siel ontrou te wees” (p.73) which can be roughly translated: the boy will not betray his own soul. The boy resists the king of darkness like a Christian martyr. The girl reveals to us what the location of the cave might mean. In her refusal of the king's wishes, she says: “ My kuns is die kuns van die lewe en nie die kuns van die dood nie”(p.74), which can be translated that her art is that of life and not of the death. Are we in the kingdom of death?

The king of darkness is of course displeased with the situation. Thus he sends the children into the deepest and darkest corner of the cave, which cumulates in their annihilation:

“My knegte,” sê hy, “doodmaak kan ons hulle nie; hulle is onsterflik. Maar neem hulle na die agterste, diepste afgrond waar die ongehoorsames bewaar word, die diepte van die uiterste duisternis. En laat hulle daar bly tot hulle skaduwees is soos julle” (Langenhoven 74).

We can read this ending in a number of ways. On the one hand, the children are elevated to immortality. They sleep in the cave, not aging a day. On the other hand, by remaining entrapped in the dark cave they are annihilated as human beings becoming mere shadows:

En daar, in die diepte en in die donker, in die hart van die aarde, daar slaap Talie en Aristo en Sontie. Daar het hulle geslaap deur die jare en jare wat hier bo op die vrye wêreld omgegaan het. Maar hulle het nie ouer geword nie ; Talie is nog 'n dogtertjie van veertien ; die tweeling is nog seuntjies van tien. En nog vandag slaap die drie kinders daar (Langenhoven 74).

The children sleep in the deep and dark cave, in the heart of the earth; they still sleep there today — the story narrates. This place is similar to Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness'; actually located in Africa it also emulates the heart of human darkness (Brillenburg Wurth and Rigney). We could further reason that, represented in the dark cave with shadows in the children's story, the human darkness embodies the fear of the indigenous people, supposedly taking western culture into a black hole where there is nothing but darkness and shadows of death.<sup>12</sup>

As the children still sleep there today, they are left outside of time in an oblivious sleep. This motif comes forth in Coetzee's novel as well: “these dreamless spells are like death to me, or enchantment outside time. (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 33). Like any sleep, one can awake from it. Reflecting messianic hopes, the children wait for our call;

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<sup>12</sup> This theme is related in Psalm 23:5 as 'the valley of the shadow of death'. Furthermore 'shadow of death' is a frequent term in the bible.

Miskien in ons tyd, miskien nà ons tyd, kom daar nog iemand wat sy weg daarheen vind en met 'n skynende lig die kinders wek en groet: “ Gelukkige Krismis, Talie, Aristo, Sontie; kom ons het verlang na julle!”

Want slapende wag hulle vir ons om hulle te roep (Langenhoven 75).

In this citation the reader is directly spoken to: “Maybe in our time, maybe after our time, someone will find his way to the children and will wake them with a shining light and greet them saying: “Merry Christmas, Talie, Aristo, Sontie; come we have longed to you!” Because while sleeping they wait for us to call them”. It is as if the children in the story were ‘our’ children that we have lost and long to find again, but never do. They wait for us to call them, have we forgotten them all this time? There is a fearful and dark feeling the reader might get, as if remembering that essential parts of ‘our’ culture are lost and it lies in our hands but beyond our reach to retrieve them.

## Conclusion

In my Bachelor thesis, I have explored the range of meanings when close-reading *Die Krismiskinders*. My arguments have focused on the meaning created when placing the book in a certain context. First of all I have outlined the general field of researching children’s literature. After this I interpreted the book in the context of postcolonial criticism, deconstructing ‘the child’, and the representation of the Other and the Self. Furthermore I have related the book to its specific political context, ‘politicizing the text’. Finally I have read the representation of the barbarian in opposition to the civilized subject, specifying the borders of civilization and the threat of annihilation that lies beyond these borders in the minds of the civilized subject.

After having analyzed the different representations of the characters and the political background in *Die Krismiskinders*, we are left with the question: What now? The opening to change of racial representation might seem like an uncertain future, but I think that by understanding and criticizing the way in which ideas are constructed in a text, we might have already done an essential part towards a change. In the beginning of my thesis I have touched upon the ‘ethics of representation’ questioning how we can create new collective memory that reconciles with the colonial past and Apartheid past. While moving through the different textual frameworks I have attempted to create new meanings, which may contribute to such re-making of memory.

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## Appendix:

### Plot of the novel

We start with an old and lonely couple living all alone on a farm in the wilderness. The only inhabitants of the area are a tribe of wild Bushmen. One Christmas evening Santa comes along, as a tired traveler who refuses to eat at their table, because he has so many houses to visit. Santa feels sorry for the old couple because they have no children and promises to come back next year with some kind of surprise. The next year the old couple finds a basket with a baby girl. The next two years at Christmas they get a dog and a cat. The dog saves the girl from near drowning. The following year the girl gets a violin. The girl meets a spirit in the wood, who teaches her how to play the violin. The following year, the couple receives two baby boys in baskets. As the boys grow they each meet a spirit in the woods. One spirit teaches how to write and the other teaches how to paint. The next Christmas all three of the children get a tool to help them with their talent. The Christmas after all three get a present that they need to complete: a notebook to write a musical composition in, a book to write a poem in and three empty canvases to paint on. The presents are all provided with the same description; 'a memory of'. The last Christmas the Bushmen come to invade the house. They want to take the children. Santa appears telling the old couple to give their children away, because there is no other choice and many fathers and mothers have done this. The children greet their parents and are taken away. The tribe takes the children to the edge of the cave. They want to kill them, but then the spirits appear to the children and tell them to show their talents. The Bushmen are dazzled by the children's talents and finally fall vast asleep from all the excitement. Then a horrible big bat appears who takes the children into the cave

where the Shadows and the King of Darkness live. The king wants to profit from the children's talents. But the children cannot fulfill the king's wishes, because their talents lie in the land of the King of Light. The King of Darkness sends the children to the farthest darkest place in the heart of the earth, where they remain sleeping until someone will find them again. They wait sleeping for our call.

*Narrative overview*

Chapters	Events	Magical appearances	Disruptions of Harmony
Before first Christmas	Arrival Santa		
The first Christmas	Baby girl Christmas present		
The second and third Christmas	Cat and dog Christmas present	Spirit of music	-The spirit is a bit mean -The girl nearly drowns
The fourth Christmas	Violin Christmas present		
The fifth Christmas	Two baby boys Christmas present	Spirit of literature Spirit of painting	-These spirits are a bit mean as well
The sixth Christmas	Tools for painting and book Christmas presents		
The seventh Christmas	Christmas presents of empty notebooks and canvases to make into a memory.		-Premonition of children having to leave
The last Christmas	-Invasion Bushmen -Arrival Santa	-The three spirits -Monstrous Bat -King of Darkness -The shadows	-Violation of the home -Santa tells the parents to give their children away -Kidnapping -The children are locked in the cave.



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Contradictions/  
parallels :

Santa gives<>Santa  
takes  
Cat<>dog  
Bushmen<>Whites  
Primitive<>Artistic

Saving dog—  
remembrances= both  
premonitions danger

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### Waiting for the Barbarians

By Constantine Cavafy (1864-1933), translated by Edmund Keeley

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

The barbarians are due here today.

Why isn't anything happening in the senate?

Why do the senators sit there without legislating?

Because the barbarians are coming today.

What laws can the senators make now?

Once the barbarians are here, they'll do the legislating.

Why did our emperor get up so early,  
and why is he sitting at the city's main gate  
on his throne, in state, wearing the crown?

Because the barbarians are coming today  
and the emperor is waiting to receive their leader.

He has even prepared a scroll to give him,  
replete with titles, with imposing names.

Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today  
wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas?

Why have they put on bracelets with so many amethysts,  
and rings sparkling with magnificent emeralds?

Why are they carrying elegant canes  
beautifully worked in silver and gold?

Because the barbarians are coming today  
and things like that dazzle the barbarians.

Why don't our distinguished orators come forward as usual  
to make their speeches, say what they have to say?

Because the barbarians are coming today  
and they're bored by rhetoric and public speaking.

Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion?

(How serious people's faces have become.)

Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,  
everyone going home so lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.

And some who have just returned from the border say  
there are no barbarians any longer.

And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?

They were, those people, a kind of solution.