15. Thomas the Tank Engine

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Thomas is originally a British train, first appearing in *Thomas the Tank Engine* in 1945, the second book of the Rev. W. Awdry's Railway Series, illustrated by Reginald Payne. In the US, and since the series was adapted for TV in 1984, Thomas has become a truly multi-media superstar and is very much a part of the lived experience of American childhood. His usually smiling visage graces lunchboxes, clothing, bedsheets, toys, DVD’s, books (new and reproductions of Awdry’s). He’s an
important part of children’s culture not simply because of his popularity, but because of the
conception of childhood that his popularity represents.

James Kincaid documents the rise of “The Child Botanical,” a Victorian conception of childhood as
innocent, vulnerable, trainable, and lacking will, depicted in imagery that associates children with
plants or in bucolic settings, linking children with “the natural.” Thomas is the most popular example
of a new common image of children: trains anthropomorphized as children (including the Disney
series Chuggington, The Little Engine that Could, the Little Golden Book Tootles, Virginia Lee
Burton’s Choo Choo) and other machinery (Handy Manny’s tools, Bob the Builder’s construction
Botanical” has been joined by a new visual metaphor: “The Child Mechanical.” The proliferation of
Child Mechanical imagery demonstrates a perception of childhood as teeming with power, and
therefore in need of restraint not for his own development but for adult’s safety.

Neil Harris claims trains in children’s literature in the first half of the 20th century
connote power, freedom, and mobility. What is connoted in images of those engines
morphed into children, especially when those images multiply exponentially in the
second half of the 20th century? How is “power” or “freedom” reconciled with the
presence of a child in the same image—in fact, as part of the same object? In images
of The Child Mechanical, cultural fascinations with the transportation revolution
become cultural anxieties around children and childhood. During the Industrial
Revolution, such images made machinery seem softer, more human and accessible
(see op de Beeck). Today, they embody a view of children as more powerful and
dangerous.

Images of The Child Mechanical demonstrate an adult awareness of the child’s will, ability, and
potential power, which were all absent from images of The Child Botanical. Thomas and friends tower
over human superiors, and boast of and frequently prove their strength by hauling heavy freight or
moving at great speeds. More often than not, though, they lose control and rocket down hills or off
track, illuminating the fact that large, heavy train engines are dangerous and need to be properly
controlled. The moment of losing control is always chalked up as the child-engine’s fault, condemning
him or her for being unwise yet powerful, full of potential energy and strength but prone to losing
control and producing great damage—a popular view of childhood reflected in the popularity of
Thomas himself.

Works Cited

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