Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/05/2026 09:44:34

New Horizons in English Studies 7/2022

LITERATURE

Oliver J Hancock

University of Liverpool, United Kingdom
Hancock.OliverJ@outlook.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3530-6160

Postmodernist Fictions of Girlhood: "Child-Drag" in *The Stain* and *Blood and Guts in High School*

Abstract. Whilst scholarship about postmodernist American literature has tended to focus on the entanglements of power, language, identity, and history, few have noted the important role played by children and child culture. Reading Rikki Ducornet's *The Stain* and Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* through the lens of literary child studies can usefully demonstrate the ways in which postmodernist literature relies on depictions of childhood to interrogate language and culture acquisition, analogised in terms of parental, pedagogical and institutional control. Ducornet and Acker's novels, in particular, use a young girl's voice – to borrow a phrase from Acker, a kind of 'child-drag' – to explore themes of control and female sexuality, and to demonstrate the broader difficulty of achieving some 'authentic' identity, when 'identity' is so often viewed as violence submitted from without. In conjunction with poststructuralist and feminist theories of identity-making, this essay will explore how both Ducornet and Acker use the form of the bildungsroman to explore how a self-effacing girlhood beset by naïve bad faith can try to transform itself – through a characteristically postmodernist disassembly of language – into a new and more authentic language of the self.

Keywords: Literary Child Studies, Postmodernist Literature, Girlhood Studies, Feminist Studies, American Literature, 20th Century Literature

Kathy Acker's writing, as Doug Rice reminds us, is oftentimes fuelled by a 'subversive desire to deconstruct childhood myths designed by patriarchy' (Rice 2011, 427). This works in a double sense: her work interrogates both the 'myths', or the latent ideology, learned and reified during childhood, and the 'myths' of the child – that is, the cultural construction of childhood and child culture. On the latter point, it is a truism now in child studies that the stage of life that we call 'childhood', and the attendant qualities

DOI: 10.17951/nh.2022.7.32-44

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/05/2026 09:44:34

of the 'child', can be best understood not as biological fact but 'a socially constructed concept which varies by time, geography, culture, and economic and social status', akin to critical understandings of race, gender, and class (Cox 1996, 5). The potential for culturally-relativist readings of childhood, demonstrated perhaps most clearly by Ariès' *Centuries of Childhood* (1960), has proven fertile ground for literary study, and we can trace a glut of important studies of the 'literary child' following both *Centuries of Childhood* and Peter Coveney's own landmark *Poor Monkey: The Child in Literature* (1957). Such studies, which interrogate the depiction of childhood in various texts and contexts, show that literary children can 'reflect and reveal [contemporary] concerns, cultural tendencies, and areas of interest' around childhood, but also 'carry substantial weight' in service of 'instruction, allegory, pathos, escapism, satire, identification, demonization, or idealization', as Adrienne Gavin has noted (2012, 3). The use of the child as an innocent foil for deleterious 'adult' values, or a childish perspective to defamiliarize that of an adult reader, has become a cornerstone of studies of Romanticism and Victorianism in particular, and academic interest in children's literature has experienced a sharp upturn since the 1980s. Yet there remains much work to be done on the literary child of the twentieth century, particularly outside of the realm of children's literature; my own area of research interest lies in the confluence of literary child studies and literary postmodernism studies, a field with very little sustained interest outside of casual mention in single-author studies and a handful of articles or chapters.[1]

As seen in the work of Kathy Acker and Rikki Ducornet, works of literary postmodernism often make use of the naïve child's voice – in Acker's words, a kind of 'child-drag' (Acker [1973] 1992, 67) – to re-apprehend and register alarm at the workings of a corrupted adult world. Similarly to the work of authors like Dickens and the Brontës, such contrast between the worlds of child and adult oftentimes come to the fore in the visceral collision of each (and scenes of child abuse and adult cruelty are again common), but authors like Acker and Ducornet place more emphasis upon childhood as a site of adult coercion through pedagogy and language acquisition, consonant with the focus of many iterations of postmodernism upon the latent power relations reified through language, knowledge, and representation. The fact that these depictions centre upon young girls is particularly significant. Key critical contributions by Shulamith Firestone (1971), Jane Helleiner (1999), and Rachel Rosen (2018), have emphasized the potential for overlap in the methodologies of child studies and feminist theory, and since the '90s, the field of 'girl studies' or 'girlhood studies' has begun to dislocate itself from 'child studies' more broadly (see Kearney 2009). In turn, feminist readings of childhood studies have found interesting points of overlap between the myths of 'woman' and 'child', in their emphasis upon vulnerability, domesticity and the hegemony of the nuclear family, and the way in which the male gaze sexualizes femininity in terms of juvenile traits like hairlessness (see, for instance, Thorne and Yalom, 1992;

[1] See for instance Pifer 2000, 212–30; Purdy 1988; Kolbuszewska 1998; Salvatore 2000; and Thurschwell 2012.

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/05/2026 09:44:34

Nash 2006). Inasmuch as young 'girls' and young 'boys' hold different connotations from one another, it is useful to distinguish the gendered connotations of the unsexed literary child, particularly since Acker and Ducornet's work has so often been read in proximity to feminism (see Sciolino 1990). Most important here to note is the association of young girls with a polite 'cuteness', which, despite the aesthetic potentials that Sianne Ngai (2005) has highlighted, bears connotations of 'smallness, compactness, softness', 'helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency' (816), and thus tends to be entwined with a sense of powerlessness (see also Merish 1996). Though this 'cuteness' is ostensibly asexual, it can blur into that which James Kincaid (1994, 1998) has called an 'erotic innocence', with reference to the ways in which images of young girls are eroticized (in advertisements, animation, and child-stars like Shirley Temple), and the way in which this eroticization is deflected by appeals to the grim realities of paedophilia and child abuse. Such porous borders between sentimentalization and sexualization can tell us much about a culture's treatment of young girls, but much about its understanding of womanhood as well, since the (illusory) asexual nature of 'little girls' preordains a view of the female subject that is tailor-made for the erotic male gaze, whilst necessarily 'innocent' or 'unknowing' of its own sexual potential.

A quick word on my use of 'postmodernism' here – Acker's association with postmodernism is a well-documented one, and Ducornet has oftentimes been understood in proximity to the term, but its precise usage and connotation remains too nebulous to pass without comment (especially given its current co-optation by the right as a broad synonym for cultural relativism or political correctness). Both authors have, indeed, had their connection to the term questioned; Sinda Gregory (1998), for instance, notes that there is 'an almost old-fashioned insistence on the difference between good and bad' in Ducornet's work which seems to grate against the relativistic urge associated with postmodernism (142), whilst critics like Emilia Borowska (2019) and Georgina Colby (2016) have argued that Acker could more usefully be placed within an avant-garde tradition. In this view, Acker is less a 'postmodernist' than 'one of the most prominent writers of the postmodern avant-garde' (Borowska 2019, 3), a distinction which does account for Huyssen and Bürger's distinctions between canonized modernism and the early twentieth century avant-garde, and does aptly intimate the continuance between the work of artists associated with Surrealism and Dada and the work of Acker and Ducornet. Even so, I do not see 'postmodernism' and 'avant-garde' as necessarily mutually exclusive; most theorists of early postmodernism (Huyssen included) have emphasized the clear debts that most early postmodernism shows to the early twentieth-century avant-garde, for instance, which encompasses the work of some of the foremost canonized postmodernists.[2] Moreover, I do not believe that postmodernist texts need be opposed to an 'insistence on good and bad', despite their resistance to closure; to adapt a phrase from David Cowart (2011), we are left in little

[2] See, for instance, Fiedler (1965, 509) and Huyssen (1986, 167–8) on the continuances between Dada and literary Surrealism and early postmodernism.

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/05/2026 09:44:34

doubt as to the views of Vonnegut, Heller, Pynchon, Reed, Morrison or Barth on 'racism, oppressive economic practices, genocidal violence, skulduggery in high places, and police-state repression' (84). Part of the problem lies in the use of 'postmodernism' as a monolithic marker of some clear philosophical or ideological framework, whereas it is clear that there the term encompasses several different iterations of 'postmodernism' (or even different 'postmodernisms') that developed concurrently in the mid- to late twentieth century, and that each of them encompassed a variety of unique voices and approaches. For Acker and Ducornet's part, I believe that their work can be usefully understood within the shift in the '70s and '80s toward a kind of 'deconstructionist postmodernism' (as Hans Bertens [1994] and Andreas Huyssen [1986] have identified) that was strongly influenced by the 'American domestication of French poststructuralism' in the academy (Huyssen 1986, 180); such works show a new 'focus on cultural theory' and a new attendance to 'the workings of power and the constitution of the subject', particularly as it is reified through discourse and representation (Bertens 1994, 7; Huyssen 1986, 166–7). This turn will become a key context in this essay, and the work of Michel Foucault in particular will provide a useful lens through which to read the literary children of Acker and Ducornet.

In Rikki Ducornet's 1984 novel *The Stain*, the depiction of a waif growing up in 1880s provincial France is used to explore these entanglements of knowledge and power. The protagonist Charlotte, born with a birthmark (the titular 'stain') shaped like a dancing hare, is rendered passive by her 'evil aunt' Edma (Ducornet [1984] 1995, 29), a hyperbolic parody of Puritan ascetism.[3] Edma both censures the energetic Charlotte for wanting to play outside and buy toys – such things are 'extravagance and vanity' (39) – and tries to wash away Charlotte's birthmark 'with a pig-bristle brush' that leaves her 'raw' and 'bleeding' (55). Her emphasis on 'spotlessness' is given gendered significance by the revelation that Charlotte was born out of wedlock, and her deceased mother has apparently passed on the 'sin of lust' through the 'stain' upon her child (50). To feel sexual desire is to be 'spoiled' or 'stained', and Edma instead teaches her niece to be as 'pure' as her chicken's eggs, which are smooth, clean, and unfertilised (49–50). Ducornet makes clear that these conceptions of sexual 'purity' are nonsensical (Edma's 'pure' eggs, for example, are the product of cannibalistic chickens) and that the Puritan logic that legitimates her belief is rooted in misogyny; a local Exorcist enlisted to remedy Charlotte's sins is actually a lascivious man who 'cures' wayward nuns by sleeping with them. Even so, these abstemious influences ultimately draw Charlotte into a routine of self-flagellation, expressed predominantly in the perverse ritual of eating glass and then 'vomit[ing] blood, ropes of it, Exultant' (55). Focalized through her youthful mind, this violent masochism is rendered unset-

[3] All subsequent quotations come from this edition. As well as French novels like Zola's *Nana*, Ducornet's story draws upon Hawthorne's 'The Birth-Mark' (1846), and even *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), inasmuch as Charlotte is similarly 'marked' as impure. The latter story in particular will become important to a reading of Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* later in the essay.

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/05/2026 09:44:34

tlingly carefree; Charlotte is pictured as a glass-eating companion to the 'Princess who weeps diamonds', a typically postmodernist collision of childish innocence and adult experience (55).[4] Her enthusiastic pursuit of self-harm also shows an uncomfortable internalization of the vitriol directed at her since birth, literally forcing this vision of passivity 'down her unwilling throat' (55). Ducornet's emphasis upon her childish naiveté, meanwhile, shows her mind to be a particularly vulnerable one to being imprinted upon with the beliefs of others, and the carefree and playful Charlotte at the start of the story is quickly transformed into a young zealot obsessed with becoming a child-saint and martyr.

As will become a theme in both Acker and Ducornet's work, the physical violence enacted on the child is used as both analogy and continuance from discursive violence – in this case, Aunt Edma's insistence upon Charlotte's 'stain' of sin – and institutional control makes itself felt by acting upon bodies. In one sense, this shows a feminist logic: since 'women's biology has nearly always been interpreted by men', as Nancy Fraser points out (2013, 49), the transmutation of Charlotte's birthmark from a playful dancing hare into a demonic 'Evil Eye' (84) makes clear that the 'reading' of Charlotte's birthmark is the privilege of patriarchy. Yet the novel continually complicates the relationship between masculinity and femininity, hinting that each has the 'promise of both genders' (153), as we hear from the male Exorcist's entrance to the female convent in drag. Certainly, Ducornet's insistence that 'power does not belong to the phallus' (Sinda, 1998, 134) is strengthened by the role of Aunt Edma, who scolds both her niece Charlotte and her timorous husband Emile, and by Charlotte's entry into an all-female convent in the second half of the novel, which becomes the main source of violence acted upon her. Here, Charlotte's self-harm not only continues but is actively encouraged, reconfigured as a necessary path toward salvation, a form of painful 'Purification' that prepares one for 'the Fiery Kiln of Beatitude' (60). Consonant with Foucault's ([1975] 2020) analysis of institutional discipline, which touches bodies only to 'reach something other than the body itself' (11), the physical violence acted upon Charlotte is attended by the discursive; as well as the beatings doled out Sister Malicia and The Mother Superior, the nun's urge toward masturbation is literally 'demonized' as a symptom of possession (83), whilst Charlotte is led to believe that her birthmark is actually a foreshadowing of an inevitable martyrdom.[5] Whilst the grotesque physical violence and rape conducted in the convent thereby analogises the connection of power and knowledge – as in the lascivious Exorcist's sexual 'cures' for the young nuns, which are in the convent are justified as a necessary reaction to 'the month of feminine hysteria' (83) – they also show that these systems of power/

[4] See, for instance, Bianca's rendition of 'The Good Ship Lollipop' as an S & M routine in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973); the P.O.W's performance of 'Cinderella' in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969); or the children who run the town of Yellow Back in Reed's *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969).

[5] Elsewhere, Ducornet places important upon masturbation as a means to imaginative self-discovery in the short story 'Fairy Finger', published in *The Butcher's Tales* (1994).

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/05/2026 09:44:34

knowledge ultimately work upon bodies. For instance, Charlotte's menstrual blood is explained away as a representation of Christ's 'stigma' and 'a sign from Mother Mary' (170); the revelation that she 'can [now] have babies' sends her into a 'scream[ing]' fit of shame (170–1), given that its suggestion of sexual maturity grates against the emphasis placed by the convent upon the danger of being 'spoiled' by sexual desire.

It is notable that traumatic or confusing first experiences of menstruation are a repeated image in other postmodernist novels written by women: the protagonist of Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks* remembers thinking that '[she] had dislodged some vital organ […] and was haemorrhaging to death' during her first period (1999, 40), whilst in Kathy Acker's *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* the young narrator's mother tells her that menstrual blood is just 'carrot juice com[ing] out of her' (1992, 64).[6] The latter touches a common thread in Acker's work, in which young girls struggle to come to terms with their bodies and bodily desires, even whilst their bodies are exploited by others. Like *The Stain*, Acker's work is replete with images of discursive/bodily abuse shown through the mechanics of repressive institutions (whether it be families, convents, or boarding schools) and rooted in the language of paedophilia and rape – fathers are said to want both to 'condition' and to 'fuck [their daughters]' (Acker [1973] 1992, 23–24, 48).[7] This process of 'conditioning' is an image of which Acker is particularly fond, hewn from Burroughs' early postmodernist Nova Trilogy but turned instead to the process by which home and school discipline young girls into a normative 'regime of gender' and a view of sex as purely heterosexual and procreational, as Margaret Henderson has argued (2021, 111–2). Like Ducornet, Acker's use of a naïve child's voice shows her to be a particularly vulnerable mind to this 'conditioning', and brings an ironic (and disturbing) attention to her lack of understanding of the events narrated. The ten-year-old protagonist of *Blood and Guts in High School* for instance, compares her father's rape to her own playing 'eeny-meeny-miney-moe' with her stuffed lamb, and reflects that their lack of intercourse meant that 'Daddy no longer loved me' (Acker [1978] 2017, 26, 31).[8] Similar scenes abound in her work: in *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* a young girl's descent into madness and self-harm is accompanied by 'slobber[ing] down the right side far white mouth goo goo goo' (Acker [1973]

[6] The denial of menstruation as one of many taboos surrounding the female body (particularly as it enters puberty) touches a common thread in theories of girlhood; as early as *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir ([1949] 2009, 340–1) emphasises the 'shame' surrounding the onset of female compared to male puberty, in which the growing penis is a sign of strength (Beauvoir [1949] 2009, 340–1). More recently, critics like Victoria Louise Newton (2016), Joshua Gunn and Mary Douglas Vavrus (2012) have adapted Foucauldian theories of biopower to show the way in which the discourse of women's bodies (for instance, the medicalization of menstruation) can inhibit female bodily autonomy and expression.

[7] Though a biographical focus is beyond the scope of this essay, it should be noted that many of these depictions of childhood parallel Acker's own youth: like her own father, most fathers in her work abandon pregnant mothers, and her own fraught relationship with her mother is recapitulated in the various domineering mother figures that populate her work.

[8] All subsequent quotations refer to this edition.

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/05/2026 09:44:34

1992, 87); similarly, in *Great Expectations*, a scene of domestic violence is punctuated by the couples' regression into baby talk and nursery rhymes (Acker [1982] 2018). In one sense, these visceral collisions of the adult and the childish draw attention to the grim pressures felt by young girls subject to a patriarchal 'conditioning', and indeed the pressures felt upon women in general, inasmuch as older characters in Acker's fiction are similarly infantilized by a masculine urge to 'protect', control, and exploit. Yet Acker here also emphasizes the child's mind as a key moment in which these 'lousy habits […] installed by parents and institutions' (Acker [1973] 1992, 86) are learned and can perhaps be unlearned – by using the language of girlhood, Acker is constantly drawing attention to the potential for one to both apprehend this process and try to 'redo [one]self' apart from it (87).

Perhaps even more so than *The Stain*, *Blood and Guts in High School* emphasizes language as essential to this process. In one of the central episodes in the novel, the young protagonist Janey's entrance into prostitution is accompanied by the need to write 'book reports' on Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and to translate the 'pukey' love poetry of Sextus Propertius that she learned in school (101). The reference to Janey's schooling here again evokes a much longer and ongoing process of 'conditioning', and much of the picaresque novel does see Janey trade one abusive partner for another, as 'parents teachers boyfriends' (165) are joined by pimps, gangs, and the Reverend Dimwit, and amongst a cartoonish array of others. As the name of her pimp 'Slave Trader' intimates, these relationships evoke a kind of 'slavery' for Acker's protagonists, a repeatedly used term betokening the state in which a 'man drive[s] his fingers into [her] brains and reform [her] brains as he wants' (Acker [1973] 1992, 19). Acker's 'plagiaristic' use of intertexts suggests that this process is even tied up with literary language, and so Janey's nonsensical 'translation' of Propertius' Elegies partly represents an irreverent repudiation of a 'phallocentric literary canon', as Borowska (2016, 6) notes:

> Slave Trader first with his lousy me imprisoned eyes
> Diseased by no before wants
> Then my strong he threw down the drain individuality
> And head forced into the dust LOVE's feet
> Until me he had taught to be evil,
> Him evil, and without to live plan. (101)

Though the section reads like a Burroughsian cut-up, Janey here is actually conducting a rudimentary, word-for-word translation of the Latin without any regard for correct syntax or word order. Acker's use of the childish voice undercuts the seriousness of Propertius' love poetry, showing its own construction of Cynthia – as a passive object of affection, whose refusal to submit to the narrator's courtship constitutes a form of 'abuse' – to be a nonsense. However, Acker also shows this act of linguistic violence to be a necessary stage on the way to finding Janey's own artistic voice; as the section con-

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/05/2026 09:44:34

tinues and Janey is more comfortably able to mould the Latin to fit her own voice, her expletive-laden 'love poems' start to function less as ironic repudiations of the original poems' logic and more as genuine efforts to find her own poetic 'language'. This culminates in a series of poems that 'Janey wrote […] by herself', in which the linguistic flow of the original poems collapses completely into a fragmented stream of consciousness, incorporating crude drawings and variant typography (105–116).

Recalling *The Stain*, Janey's poems evoke Foucault in her depiction of identity-making as less an act of personal discovery than a violence submitted from without – she 'do[esn't] know what or *who's* happening' (my emphasis) to her at any one time (106). This attempt to take stock of her diffuse and irreducible 'identity' also centres upon the bodily; Janey admits that her 'body likes sex' but worries that she 'must taste sweet', and that her desires will make her 'an offender' like Hawthorne's Hester Prynne (107–9). Again, this is felt particularly in the mind of an impressionable young girl beset by the institutional and discursive manoeuvres to which children are particularly subject; thus Janey's and Charlotte's flight from the institutional bounds of home, school and convent life also signal a step toward a more mature authenticity. Suitably, Charlotte's entry into puberty and escape from the convent catalyses a hasty re-evaluation of the 'churchy crap' (171) to which she had been submitted as a young girl, and Janey has a similarly epiphanic moment talking to an embodied 'Death' in an Alexandrian gaol (134–5). Acker and Ducornet both place emphasis upon their young girls' conscious rejection of their elders' values as an embrace of apparently 'degenerate' or 'deviant' cultures – Charlotte falls in with the 'gnomish drunk' Poupine (31), whilst Janey's flight from home takes her through New York's seedy underbelly. The growth toward maturity seen in these novels thereby consists of what Teresa de Lauretis (1968, 165) has termed an 'undomesticat[ion]' of the female body, by 'reinscribing it in excess'. Essentially, a self-effacing, 'cute' girlhood is transformed into a sensuous and independent womanhood, by being led away from domestic and policed spaces representative of rigid societal norms (like home and school) toward heterotopian spaces 'outside' of society (bars, brothels, pirate ships).[9] Given this narrative trajectory, both *The Stain* and *Blood and Guts* take on much of the character of a bildungsroman, or even a künstlerroman, inasmuch as their protagonists' self-realization is eventually found through artistic creation; Charlotte's flight from convent life in *The Stain* leads her to take up painting, banned in childhood as an extra-Christian extravagance, and Janey's new poetic voice culminates in her master-work, 'The World', in the novel's last few pages.

This is not to say that these works show their young characters achieving a self-assured maturity or narrative authority in the way that a traditional bildungsroman might imply. At the close of *The Stain* the Exorcist is slain and Charlotte joins a gang of outlaws, but the novel still pictures Charlotte only at the cusp of maturity, with her 'fate

[9] For more on the heterotopia as a space of transgression see Foucault (1970); De Cauter and Dehaene (2008); and Voela (2001).

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/05/2026 09:44:34

[…] undetermined', as Allen Guttman notes (195). Meanwhile, 'The World' only appears when Janey has already died in Luxor, after having been rejected by a community of rebels and abandoned by a fictionalized Jean Genet, and it therefore becomes hard to read the ending of *Blood and Guts* as somehow triumphalist. Acker in particular seems to find the very logic of the bildungsroman to be faulty, since the notion of a coherent, bounded identity seems culturally contingent to begin with; her proliferation of unreliable narrators (which in works like *Great Expectations* seems to exchange names and genders at will) tests the artificial unity of a single 'I', a letter Janey herself says she finds it hard to 'believe' in (108). It is for this reason that 'The World' predicts 'many other Janeys' being born and 'cover[ing] the earth' (165), exchanging Janey's pursuit of an 'authentic' identity for an emphasis upon multiplicity and flux. This again has feminist resonances – it anticipates Luce Irigary's (1995) critique of the implicitly male 'philosophical subject' to which women must appear as a valorized 'other' that 'is not one, nor […] singular' (12), for instance, as well as theories of gender that emphasize its performativity (rather than representing it as a stable category of identity).[10] Yet Acker and Ducornet also provide a wider challenge to the 'reduction of a subject to a fixed identity' as they grow up, whether this be along the 'fixed parameters of masculine and feminine', as Giovanna Covi notes (1998, 206–7), or in evoking the broader 'kinds of subjects that are constituted in and by ideology: class subjects, race subjects, sexed subjects', or indeed, child subjects, as Martina Sciolino argues (1990, 438–9). The novels' postmodernist resistance to closure thereby precludes the kind of resolution implied by the traditional bildungsroman, showing the 'possibility of [Eden's] reconstitution' (Guttmann 1998, 184) only in glimpses of artistic creativity and social resistance that 'retain some remnant of potentiality' (Muth 2011, 100).

Considering the focus on art and writing in both novels as a means to this end, Acker and Ducornet do thereby seem to reach for a kind of *écriture feminine.* In particular, Acker's intertextual style seems to realise Cixous' (1976) claim that a feminist subjectivity must probe 'the mystifying charms of fiction […] where woman has never her turn to speak', and therein create a space for that can 'serve as a springboard for subversive thought' (879). It is through the process of 'translating' works of literature by men that Janey is able to find her own poetic voice; likewise, Charlotte's rejection of her religious fervour helps nurture a vaguely animistic belief in the power of flora and fauna – particularly her own 'Dancing Hare' – and her belief in her saintly powers is turned toward a more general inheritance of feminine 'witchery' (189), previously a term used to denigrate sexually active nuns. Even if Janey's masterwork 'The World' is posthumous, it is finally able to 'create this world in [her] own image', and provide a space to 'dream of sex […] of thieves, murderers, firebrands […] of huge thighs opening' (163–4) – again, to find not only a less repressed iteration of her social life but a place almost completely 'outside society' altogether. In terms of the former, both *Blood and Guts in High School* and *The Stain* acknowledge the extent to which young

[10] See also Butler 1990.

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/05/2026 09:44:34

girls feel 'lobotomized and robotized from birth' (Acker [1973] 1992, 58), variously 'conditioned' to adhere to conceptions of femininity centred around an emphasis on politeness, self-effacement, and a dispossessed eroticism that leaves them vulnerable to the advances of men. As with many works of literary postmodernism, the child is figured as a particularly helpless mind to these acts of didactic inscription, and both the family and school are pictured as particularly clear sites of indoctrination. Recalling the work of Foucault, both Acker and Ducornet variously connect the discursive strategies of these institutions to structures of power, and connect the discursive and the bodily in acts of discipline and punishment; importantly, this works not only to analogise discursive violence in more visceral terms, but also forms an important acknowledgement of the extent to which discourse ultimately works on bodies, and that the very real embodied experience of young girls can be affected by the things that they learn about womanhood, and about themselves. The texts thereby prefigure many feminist conceptions of girlhood, as well as more recent debates about the rights of queer and trans children to maintain agency over their own bodies (see Key 2014).

Acker and Ducornet's use of a young girl's voice does not simply testify to the vulnerability of the child, however. Janey and Charlotte's silly, mischievous, and irreverent young voices undercut the expectation of girlhood as defined by a passive 'cuteness', and the unruly young girls are ultimately shown to escape (or at least, signal the possibility of escaping) the processes of 'conditioning' imposed on them by adults. As Janey's deconstructive rewriting of Propertius makes clear, Acker's attempt to recentre young girls as active participants in the story figures them as knowing sexual agents; Janey is wont to sleep with her father and then mock him that she will 'sue […] for child abuse' (31), and enthusiastically doodles pictures of genitalia and sex acts throughout the novel. Whilst these run an uncomfortable liminality between recovering the erotic agency of these girls and indulging depictions of paedophilia, Janey's mockery of her father remains key to Acker's literary project. As Linda Hutcheon (1994) reminds us, the ironic gaze is a powerful one, which suggests an amount of epistemological authority in the 'mocker' in contrast to the 'mocked'. Recalibrating this ironic gaze back upon the male logic of comedy seems one of the clearest ways in which these novels try to find a new 'female' language of humour, which simultaneously also asserts the ability for young girls to be mischievous, irreverent, and bawdy.[11] As with much early postmodernism, this constantly refracting irony mocks the affixation of 'serious' knowledge, but also suggests the implicitly ethical imperative in doing so – the resistance to these canons of 'truth' needn't be simply a form of humour, but can highlight the limits to how they are shaped, and the identities they shape along with them.

[11] The same goes for their participation in the ironic dynamics of metatextuality, which often seems male-centred; as Jeanette Winterson (2002) emphasises, 'when women include themselves as a character in their own work, the work is read as autobiography. When men do it – say Milan Kundreva or Paul Auster – it is read as metafiction' (vii).

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/05/2026 09:44:34

References

Acker, Kathy. [1973] 1992. *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*. In *Portrait of an Eye: Three Novels*. New York: Pantheon.

Acker, Kathy. [1978] 2017. *Blood and Guts in High School*. St Ives: Penguin.

Acker, Kathy. [1982] 2018. *Great Expectations*. St Ives: Penguin.

Althe r, Lisa. [1976] 1999. *Kinflicks*. London: Virago.

Ashenden, Samantha. 2004. *Governing Child Sexual Abuse: Negotiating the Boundaries of Public and Private, Law and Science*. United Kingdom: Routledge.

Bertens, Hans. 1994. *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History.* London and New York: Taylor and Francis.

Borowska, Emilia. 2019. *The Politics of Kathy Acker: Revolution and the Avant-Garde*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Carter, Cynthia, & C. Kay Weaver. 2003. *Violence and the Media*. Buckingham & Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Cixous, Helene. 1976. 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. Keith and Paula Cohen. *Signs* 1 (4): 875–893.

Coffey, Amanda, and Sara Delamont. 2000. *Feminism and the Classroom Teacher: Research, Practice and Pedagogy*. London and New York: Routledge.

Colby, Georgina. 2016. *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Covi, Giovanna. 1998. 'Gender Derision, Gender Corrosion, and Sexual Differences in Rikki Ducornet's Materialist Eden'. *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. 18 (3): 205–17.

Cowart, David. 2011. *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Cox, Roger. 1996. *Shaping Childhood: Themes of uncertainty in adult-child relationships*. New York and London: Routledge.

De Cauter, Lieven, and Michiel Dehaene. 2008. 'The Space of Play: Towards a General Theory of Heterotopia'. In *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*, eds. De Cauter and Dehaene (eds.), 87–100. Oxford and New York: Routledge.

de Laurentis, Teresa. 1968. 'Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation'. *Theatre Journal*, 40 (2): 155–177.

Devoken, Marianne. 1999. 'Modernism and Gender'. In The Cambridge Companion to Modernism, ed. Michael Levenson, 174–93. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dubey, Madha. 2002. 'Contemporary African American Fiction and the Politics of Postmodernism'. *Novel* 35 (2–3): 151–168.

Dubey, Madha. 2003. *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Ducornet, Rikki [1984] 1995. *The Stain*. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press.

Fiedler, Leslie. 1965. 'The New Mutants'. Partisan Review, 32 (4): 505–525.

Firestone, Shulasmith. 1971. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: Bantam Books.

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/05/2026 09:44:34

Fitzpatrick, Kathleen. 2006. *The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.

Foucault, Michel [1975] 2020. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin.

Foucault, Michel, 1978. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books.

Fraser, Nancy. 2013. *Fortunes of Feminism*. London; NY: Verso.

Gavin, Adrienne E. 2012. 'The Child in British Literature: An Introduction'. In *The Child in British Literature: Literary Constructions of Childhood, Medieval to Contemporary*, ed. Gavin, 1–20. New York, Palgrave MacMillan.

Gunn, Joshua, and Mary Douglas Vavrus. 2012. 'Regulation through the Postfeminist Pharmacy: Promotional Discourse and Menstruation'. In *Governing the Female Body: Gender, Health, and Networks of Power* eds. Lori Reed and Paula Sakkho, 112–133. New York: State University of New York Press.

Guttmann, Alan 1998. 'Rikki Ducornet's Tetrology of Elements: An Appreciation'. *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 18 (3): 184–95.

Harper, Phillip Brian. 1994. *Framing the Margins: The Social Logic of Postmodern Culture*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Helleiner, Jane. 1999. 'Toward a Feminist Anthropology of Childhood'. *Atlantis* 24 (1): 27–37.

Hoskin, K. 1990. 'Foucault under examination: The crypto-educationist unmasked'. In *Foucault and Education* ed. Stuart Ball, 29–53. London: Routledge.

Huyssen, Andreas. 1986. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.

Irigaray, Luce. 1995. 'The Question of the Other'. *Yale French Studies*, 87: 7–19.

Jones, Susan, and Debra Myhill. 2004. 'Troublesome Boys and Compliant Girls: Gender Identities and Perceptions of Achievement and Underachievement'. In *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25 (5): 547–561.

Jong, Erica. [1980] 2003. *Fanny: Being the True History of the Adventures of Fanny Hackabout-Jones*. London & New York: Norton.

Jong, Erica. [1973] 1980. *Fear of Flying*. London: Vintage.

Kearney, Mary Celeste. 2009. 'Coalescing: The Development of Girls' Studies'. *NWSA Journal*, 21 (1): 1–28.

Key, Aidan. 2014. 'Children'. In *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*, ed. Laura Erickson-Schroth, 409–445. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kincaid, James. 1994. *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Literature*. London: Routledge.

Kincaid, James. 1998. *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Kolbuszewska, Sofia. 1998. '"It Has to Be More Than the Simple Conditioning of a Child, Once Upon a Time": The Use of the Child in Gravity's Rainbow'. *Pynchon Notes*, 42–3:111–20.

Henderson, Margaret. 2021. *Kathy Acker: Punk Writer*. London and New York: Routledge, 2021.

Hutcheon, Linda. 1994. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. London and New York: Routledge.

Pobrane z czasopisma New Horizons in English Studies **http://newhorizons.umcs.pl**
Data: 25/05/2026 09:44:34

Merish, Lori. 1996. 'Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics: Tom Thumb and Shirley Temple'. In *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemary Garland Thomson, 185–205. New York: New York University Press.

Muth, Katie R. 2011. 'Postmodern Fiction as Poststructuralist Theory: Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*'. *Narrative* 19 (1): 86–110.

Nash, Ilana 2006. *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in American Popular Culture*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Newton, Victoria Louise. 2016. *Everyday Discourses of Menstruation*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Ngai, Sianne. 2005. 'The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde'. *Critical Inquiry*, 31 (4): 811–847.

Pifer, Ellen. 2000. *Demon or Doll: Images of the Child in Contemporary Writing and Culture*. Charlottesville; London: University Press of Virginia.

Pitchford, Nicola. 2002. *Tactical Readings: Feminist Postmodernism in the Novels of Kathy Acker and Angela Carter*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press.

Purdy, Strother. 1988. 'Gravity's Rainbow and the Culture of Childhood'. *Pynchon Notes*, 22–23: 7–23.

Pynchon, Thomas. [1973] 2000. *Gravity's Rainbow*. London: Vintage.

Reed, Ishmael. [1969] 1995. *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*. London: Allison & Busby.

Rice, Doug. 2011. 'Kathy Acker'. In *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth Century Fiction* (Vol. II), ed. O' Donnell, Madden, and Nieland, 427–8. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Robinson, Kerry H. 2013. *Innocence, Knowledge and the Construction of Childhood: The Contradictory Nature of Sexuality and Censorship in Children's Contemporary Lives*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis.

Rosen, Rachel and Katherine Twamley. 2018. 'The Woman-Child Question: A Dialogue in the Borderlines'. In *Feminism and the Politics of Childhood: Friends or Foes?* ed. Rosen and Twamley, 1–20. London: UCL Press.

Sciolino, Martina. 1990. 'Kathy Acker and the Postmodern Subject of Feminism'. *College English* 52 (4): 437–445.

Gregory, Sinda, and Larry McCaffery. 1998. '"At the Heart of Things and Wild Beauty": An Interview with Rikki Ducornet'. *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 18 (3): 126–44.

Thorne, Barry and Marilyn Yalom. 1992. *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Thurschwell, Pamela. 2012. 'Dead Boys and Adolescent Girls: Unjoining the Bildungsroman in Carson McCuller's *The Member of the Wedding* and Toni Morrison's *Sula*'. *English Studies in Canada*, 38 (3–4): 105–128.

Voela, A. 2011. 'Heterotopia Revisited: Foucault and Lacan on Feminine Subjectivity'. *Subjectivity* 4: 168–182.

Vonnegut, Kurt. [1969] 2000. *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death*. London: Vintage.

Winterson, Jeanette. 2002. 'Introduction'. In *Essential Acker: The Selected Writings of Kathy Acker*, ed. Amy Scholder and Dennis Cooper, p.i-xi. New York: Grove Press.