The "Tinker" Figure in the Children's Fiction of Patricia Lynch

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Abstract: *This article explores the representation of Travellers or "tinkers" in some of Patricia Lynch's children's books from the first half of the twentieth century. One of the first children's writers to create a world directly recognizable to her young readers, in which she used to shape a concept of "Irishness," Lynch establishes the "tinker" as a bridging figure between the realism of rural Ireland and the magical "other world" of the supernatural, but belonging properly to neither. Tinkers are tools through which the child is taught, by negative example, to value the domestic realm and to be a good citizen. Relief from the domestic routine should be found in fairy tales, and not in the actual world of the tinkers. Excluded from both the real world and its acceptable alternative, Travellers are denied a legitimate status within an Irish context. Lynch suggests that the only way for a Traveller to become legitimate is to cease being a Traveller.*

Patricia Lynch (1898-1972) was a prolific and popular author of children's fiction. Growing up in Cork, she was inspired by the folktales and legends told by her mother and by Mrs. Hennessy, a famous "shanachie" who visited their house, and she subsequently saw herself as a storyteller in the wake of that tradition. She characterized most of her books as "stories, with an Irish background, stories of fairs and firesides–with the turf glowing on the hearth–of journeys and of home" (Patricia Lynch, n.p.). In her work, these realistic elements of country life "are transformed and rendered fluid and unpredictable by the addition of a supernatural or magical element... Action is linear and directed toward the achievement of a moral resolution; standard figures from Irish legend... intervene to populate the author's fantasy realm. There is no complexity of situation or motive in Lynch's stories and little attempt at character differentiation" (Leen n.p.). Lynch herself felt that the line between the real and the fantastic should not be so strictly drawn: "It is time we saw life as a whole and realized its magic. What I have tried to do in my books is to reveal the magic of ordinary life" (Patricia Lynch n.p.).

In the decades after the declaration of Irish independence, writers like Patricia Lynch and Eilís Dillon were pioneering a new national children's literature and shaping the distinctive characteristics that would instill in Irish children a sense of Irish identity. Several recent articles have made the point that Lynch was a major force in establishing a literature that Irish children could recognize and relate to, by creating a fictional world "rooted in the situations in which they lived" (Watson 345). Lynch's Ireland is rural, its infrastructure dominated by farms and cottages, bogs, markets and fairs; she has "very traditionalist ideas about Ireland, and what it means to be Irish" (Burke 99). Irish children's literature, and Lynch's work in particular, "largely reflected the dominant ideology and indeed continued throughout much of the twentieth century, despite major changes in Irish society, to perpetuate an image of Ireland remarkably similar to the over-simplified pastoral envisioned by de Valera in 1943" (Ní Bhroin 112-13). At the same time, Lynch's world is populated with supernatural figures such as leprechauns, changelings, and characters from Irish heroic legends, which, while representing a facet of Irish traditionalism, also reveal a "wild and unruly subconscious" beneath the conservative surface; their magic provides "a way out or escape, a place where pent-up emotions can be released" (Burke 98).

In several of Patricia Lynch's books, including *The Turf-Cutter's Donkey* (1934), *King of the Tinkers* (1938), and *Tinker Boy* (1955), Travelling people or "tinkers" play a prominent role. In her autobiographical account *A Storyteller's Childhood* (1947), which depicts her early years from a limited child's perspective, in much the same style as her children's fiction, Lynch relates her own encounters with the tinkers of Cork in the first decade of the twentieth century. The Travellers were, above all, a spectacle: "Canvas-covered carts with babies hanging over the front and back: tousled women, hidden in ragged shawls, carrying armfuls of shining tins: wild, barefoot boys and girls with blank, staring eyes and tangled hair running alongside: thin, watchful men in tattered clothes, leading horses" (*SC* 3). The details of her childhood encounter with one of the Travellers, "a tall, dark man" wearing "a yellow handkerchief... twisted about his head" (*SC* 24) were subsequently embellished in Lynch's children's stories. In the autobiographical account, the tinker, who remains nameless, finds young Tricia and her companion "mitching" from school, and suggests to the terrified children that they might want to join his tribe. Lynch also describes a later encounter with the same man, when she asked him for help after losing her way at the fair, no longer afraid of the now familiar figure. The tinkers fed her stew and once again asked if she would "jine us an' be one of Yalla Hankercher's tribe" *(SC* 80), before delivering her safely to her relatives. Young Tricia later defends "my tinkers" against accusations that they are "a bad lot" (*SC* 83). In Lynch's children's books, variations on these situations in the context of encounters with "Yellow Handkerchief" and his inscrutable tribe are recurring features.

Literary interest in the Travellers in the first half of the twentieth century was, of course, not confined to children's fiction. The first decade in particular produced a large number of texts featuring tramps and tinkers, to the extent that Paul Botheroyd

dubbed that period in Irish literary history "the years of the Travellers." Revivalists like W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and J.M. Synge inscribed such figures with "an anarchic and vigorous potential which was supposedly at odds with the material interests of the emerging bourgeoisie" (Delaney, "Migrancy," 179). Many of the dramas and stories about tinkers of the Revival period are based to some degree on folk tales or traditional anecdotes rather than on first-hand experience of the actual lives of the Travellers; in that sense their presence in the literature forms part of the Revivalists' endeavour to find material for a national literature in the mythology and folktales of Ireland. While tinkers were sometimes romanticized, they were more often regarded with fear and suspicion. Here were Irish people who refused to settle down–the plot of land coveted by so many of their countrymen apparently holding no attraction for them–and who appeared to be incapable of obeying the Irish law. When Ireland gained autonomous status and established the parameters of a civil society (and thus became "modern"), the Travellers increasingly were represented as the unacceptable other against which that modernity was defined. Consequently, the "tinker"–which quickly became a pejorative term–was frequently represented as animalistic, dirty, criminal, and incapable of self-control: the very terms, that is, by which the Irish as a people had been represented within the colonial framework.

While Patricia Lynch and Eilís Dillon have been credited with shaping the fictional characteristics that would come to embody Irish identity for the children of the newly independent nation, neither the tinkers nor the trappings of rural Ireland were entirely new to children's literature, even that produced outside of Ireland, when these writers began publishing their works in the 1930s. A tinker couple, for example, are the focus of a book for young children, *The Black Cats and the Tinker's Wife* (1923), by English author Margaret Baker. Its protagonists are both the stuff of fairy tales and a tool for teaching children the values of domesticity, characteristics also associated with Lynch's tinkers, but that is where the similarity ends. The book's silhouette illustrations represent the couple as a kind of Peter Pan and Cinderella: he is wearing a feathered cap, fringed tunic, tights and soft pointed shoes, while she is barefoot in a flowing ankle-length dress.[1] While her husband mends pots and kettles, the tinker's wife, who can dance "as lightly as a fairy" (Baker n.p.), tells the local children "tales of elves and dwarfs and water-sprites" (Baker n.p.). At the same time, while they were "as happy as could be" (Baker n.p.), their lives are depicted as incomplete. The wife often looks longingly at the cosy village homes, and the tinker would "think sadly of how little he could earn–so little that perhaps he would never be able to give her a home at all" (Baker n.p.). For their kindness and good deeds, and aided by a little magic, they are eventually rewarded with their dearest wish: a home of their own, albeit in a cave. The association of tinkers with otherworldliness and magic on the one hand, and poverty and homelessness on the other, is commonplace in literature: good behaviour can remedy some of the otherness, as a result of which the characters are socialized and humanized by acquiring some of the trappings of the settled world.

Patricia Lynch's rural Ireland bears a remarkable resemblance to Irish country life as depicted in *The Irish Twins* (1913) by American children's author Lucy Fitch Perkins. This was the third book in Perkins's highly popular "Twins of the World" series, which included *The Dutch Twins*, *The Japanese Twins*, *The Eskimo Twins*, and so on, and which was designed to "foster mutual respect and understanding between people of different nationalities," particularly those represented by immigrant communities in the United States (Smith 1). The story is set in the village of Ballymora in the late nineteenth century. In the opening scene of the book, we see Granny Malone in her thatched cabin on the edge of a bog, knitting and making tea by the turf fire, a bag of potatoes in the corner and hens on the doorstep, hoping that the priest will come by soon to read her the letter that has arrived from her son Michael, now an alderman in America. When the twins, Larry and Eileen McQueen, pay her a visit, she tells them a story about leprechauns. Since *The Irish Twins* is aimed at an American audience, the book goes on to show how the entire family, exasperated by the prohibitive rent imposed on their neat little farm by the English landlord's agent, emigrates to the United States. The final chapter shows the twins twenty years later, when Larry is a traffic cop, and Eileen the wife of a hard-working husband and mother of three fine Irish-American children.

In Patricia Lynch's post-independence fiction, rural Ireland is still poor, but emigration (in spite of Lynch's own childhood, which was partly spent in England) is not presented as an option or a necessity, as hard work provides the families in these stories with a decent enough existence. In *The Turf-Cutter's Donkey*, Eileen and Seamus "lived in a cabin just beyond the crossroads at the edge of a great bog,"where their father's turf-cutting provides them with "a grand little cow from Kerry, an elegant pink pig in a neat, tidy sty... and any number of hens and chickens, so they didn't do too badly" (*TD* 1). The bog is the children's playground. The child-hero of *King of the Tinkers*, Miheal Fahy, also lives in a remote cabin, with a green door, clean white muslin curtains to the windows, and flowers to brighten its aspect. His poor widowed mother busies herself with knitting, which provides enough money to buy tea and sugar and other essentials, and at night tells her son stories of leprechauns and mythical beings. The boy looks after the potato patch and the turf, and makes clothes pegs for sale at the market.

The stock setting of early twentieth-century children's fiction about Ireland, then, is a small rural cottage or farm, kept neat and clean thanks to its occupants' hard work, which also provides them with a frugal but satisfying diet of potatoes and cabbage, and with the warmth of a turf fire. Stories about leprechauns, fairies, and mythological figures keep the children entertained and also provide them with a cultural framework that encourages them to be proud of and excited about their Irishness. The tinkers who also appear as stock characters in this type of Irish children's fiction fulfil a multiple role: they are a natural and familiar presence in the rural Ireland of the early decades of the twentieth century; their way of life is presented as the opposite of the domestic family routine which these books are designed to encourage children to value; and their

elusiveness and otherness is invariably associated with the otherworldliness of fairies and leprechauns. The role of the tinker, then, is that of a go-between, a bridging figure between the realism of rural Ireland and the magic of fairy land. Tinkers are introduced into the story as tools to teach the child by negative example: a temporary escape to the world of the tinkers reveals to the child the values and benefits of a settled and domestic routine. Relief from that routine should be found in stories about the otherworld–not in the actual other world of the Travellers.

In Lucy Fitch Perkins's *The Irish Twins*, the tinkers are the cause of the twins' adventures at the core of the book. When Grannie Malone sends the children home with a story about leprechauns and a warning to beware of the Little People, they run into a band of tinkers instead. Whatever about the book's promotion of "mutual respect and understanding" between nationalities (Smith 1), the tinkers are clearly an exception to the rule. Investigators of racism in American children's literature have noted that American Indians are often put into the same category as witches, ogres, giants, and fairies (Byler 29), and in Irish literature, this is also the case with the Travellers, who are "othered" in this way, and thereby also represented as less than fully human. Travelling people in children's books typically have no names or individual identities but are collectively referred to as "the tinkers." They also act collectively and are usually depicted as travelling in large groups, led by a "king" or "chief." In Lynch's fiction, they often sing in chorus as they travel. In *King of the Tinkers*, they do so in praise of Yellow Handkerchief's thieving skills: "Right from under yer nose he'll lift all he wants / An he'll dar yez to say him nay!" (*KT* 37); in *Tinker Boy*, they sing, "We live, and we live without working. / We ask, though no beggars are we. / Refuse and ye'll surely be sorry, / For we are the wild and the free!" (*TB* 121). The tinkers, unlike the child protagonists in Lynch's novels, always speak non-standard English.

Typically in these books, the tinkers are, at least initially, observed from a safe distance. Paul Delaney has made the point in relation to late nineteenth-century representations of the Travellers that their otherness meant that "the only way to know them was to observe them unobserved," so that they were "translated into a dramatic spectacle of cultural Otherness, and their bodies were symbolically inscribed to indicate many of the fears and fantasies of their thoroughly reputable audience" (Delaney, "Representations," 55). In Lynch's *The Turf-Cutter's Donkey*, Eileen and Seamus spy on the tinkers' encampment "[t]hrough a gap in the bushes" (*TD* 3), and observe its occupants going about their business "while a tall, ragged man, with a bushy black beard and a bright yellow handkerchief twisted about his head, was making a speech. At the end of every sentence he brought down a big stick on the back and sides of a donkey which was fastened to a tree" (*TD* 4). The Irish twins in Perkins's novel also chance upon the tinkers on the bog and peek at the them from behind a wall, as if they were studying a pack of wild and dangerous animals: "The Twins were afraid of Tinkers. Everybody is in Ireland, because the Tinkers wander around over the country without having any homes anywhere. They go from house to house in all the villages mending

pots and pans, and often they steal whatever they can lay their hands on" (Perkins 47). The causality between fear and homelessness reveals the book's ideological stance, in which the noble desire of the twins' father to own his own land is implicitly contrasted with the frightening rootlessness of the tinkers.

In the course of Perkins's story, one of the tinkers, "a rough scraggly man with a beard on him like a rick of hay" (Perkins 61-62) steals the family's geese. Tinkers are depicted as inherently flawed (which is inscribed in their physical appearance): when Mrs. McQueen wonders where the tinkers got "the badness in them the way they have" (Perkins 63), her husband explains that it was the tinkers who led St. Patrick astray when he was in Ireland, and that the holy man put a curse on them so that they had to walk the roads of the world forever. The same tinker man who stole the birds later comes to the house, asks for a drink, and attempts to sell Mrs. McQueen her own geese back, but she tricks him into releasing the birds and then chases him away, threatening to call "the man working behind the house to put an end to your thieving entirely!" (Perkins 98). The tinker leaves in a hurry, taking the mug from which he had been drinking with him, "but it was cracked anyway!" (Perkins 99). The twins catch a final glimpse of him at the fair later on, and when their father hears the news he takes it as a sign to return home: "I'd rather not be meeting the gentleman on the road after dark" (Perkins 156).

In Patricia Lynch's fiction, tinkers are a dramatic spectacle, but to be observed by the Travellers in turn is a disconcerting experience precisely because their faces are unreadable. In her autobiography, Lynch mentions the "blank, staring eyes" of the older children, and the "dark faces with glittering eyes" (*SC* 81) of the assembled crowd. In *The Turf-Cutter's Donkey*, Eileen is rescued and fed by the tinkers, but made shy by "all those bright eyes watching her" (*TD* 80). When Miheal, in *King of the Tinkers*, is discovered hiding in the tinkers' cart, he tries to be brave, but "when the tinkers formed a circle round him and their bright eyes watched unwinkingly, he was terribly afraid" (*KT* 141). Tessa Nolan, the protagonist of *Tinker Boy*, makes friends with the MacDaras, a Traveller mother and son who aspire to a different way of life, but "the other tinkers... watched her with their blank, unwinking eyes and she was afraid of them" (*TB* 37). The impenetrable, inscrutable stares suggest both the essential unknowability and otherness of the tinkers, and the threat of being known and mastered by them.

In Patricia Lynch's novels of the 1930s, the tinker (the outsider) represents both a threat to the stability of the social and familial order, and a desire on the part of the child to be free from the constraints of a world ruled by adults. The "subaltern" position of children in relation to adults has been a feature of recent academic discourse about children's literature. The general contention (put forward by Jacqueline Rose and others) that children are the colonized subjects of colonizing adults is forcefully expressed by Roderick McGillis when he argues that "children continue to be the subaltern and their literature continues to serve as colonizing (socializing, taming, wrecking...) agent *par excellence*" (McGillis 224). Regardless of whether one accepts the colonial metaphor,

commentators on children's literature commonly agree that the literary category itself is a myth or a facade, in that there is "no body of literature which rests so openly on an acknowledged difference, a rupture almost, between writer and addressee" (Rose qtd in Chapleau 130), and in that "it creates a childhood that is controlled, shaped, constructed according to adults' wishes" (Rose qtd in Chapleau 132). However one approaches the notion of difference, then, it is the case that "children's fiction belongs firmly within the domain of cultural practices which exist for the purpose of socializing their target audience" (Stephens 8).

For child characters who are subject to rules and restrictions imposed on them by adults, the apparently lawless and carefree life of the tinkers is attractive–"They had a fine life," Miheal thinks in Lynch's *King of the Tinkers*: "Nothing but holidays" (*KT* 37). Once the child has acted on the desire to join the tinkers, however, it soon comes to the realization that home and family, including their hierarchical power structures, are to be preferred to the alternative. A learning process has brought the child to the point where it willingly accepts that it must be socialized and civilized according to the adult order. In Lynch's later works, particularly in *Tinker Boy*, the socializing and civilizing effort also extends to some of the tinkers, who are therefore placed into the same category as the non-tinker child characters. Colonized subjects are typically infantilized by their colonizers; in postcolonial Ireland, Travellers are infantilized in much the same way by the settled Irish population. In Irish children's literature, non-Traveller children fear the tinkers (as adults and strangers) but also patronize them (as tinkers and inferiors). Tinker children are doubly colonized, but also considered more redeemable than the adult Travellers, precisely by virtue of their child-status.

In *The Turf-Cutter's Donkey*, Eileen learns to appreciate the care and attention she receives at home when she decides, in a grumpy mood, to run away with the gipsies and never to return home again. In stark contrast to the tinkers, the gipsies are represented as overly house-proud. Their caravan has a door with a knocker and a brass handle, "just like the door to a house in the street of a town" (*TD* 69). Inside, the gipsy woman is manically cleaning furnishings and knick-knacks and silverware, and the caravan "was the cleanest, tidiest place Eileen had ever seen" (*TD* 70). Eileen is made to feed the woman's screaming baby twins, while her intimidating hostess sings: "All day long I scrub and sweep, / While the babies scream and weep. / All day long I clean and shine. / What a busy life is mine! / Shine and clean, sweep and scrub. / Rub-a-dub! Oh, rub-a-dub!" (*TD* 74). When Eileen is told that more caravans are on the way and she will soon be minding twenty even more unruly babies, she escapes, and in the woods she runs into the Tinker Chief. He takes her to the camp where a huge cauldron of stew is being tended to by an old hump-backed woman, surrounded by "scattered basins, cups without handles, empty tin cans, cracked plates, enamel plates with the enamel chipped off, lids of saucepans, battered spoons" (*TD* 78). Eileen eats stew while the chief compares the tinkers favourably to the gipsies, although Eileen is privately not persuaded, especially when one of the girls tries to steal her hat. When the chief offers to take her home,

Eileen jumps up: "She was just as eager to escape from the tinkers as she had been to get away from the gipsy caravan" (*TD* 82). A young girl, Lynch seems to say, should not face the demands and responsibilities of womanhood too soon, but neither should she grow up in a lawless and unstructured environment. Home is the golden mean to which Eileen gladly returns: "The cabin door was wide open. When Eileen saw the glowing fire on the hearth, the shining blue-and-white delph on the dresser, and the table laid for the dinner no one had eaten, she was so glad she could hardly speak" (*TD* 86). The lesson learned, she resolves never to get out of bed on the wrong side again.

In *King of the Tinkers*, Miheal's magical hens are stolen by Yellow Handkerchief, and when the chief returns in the middle of the night, the boy follows him and his band of tinkers in a dream-like state. They are joined by the strange, otherworldly creature called Red Lanty (who had given Miheal the eggs from which the magical chickens emerged), and together they make for "The Secret Valley"–which Miheal remembers from his mother's stories as the place where Finn MacCool and the Fianna live "until the great days of Ireland would come again" (*KT* 62). Red Lanty is unhappy about the tinkers' presence and urges Miheal to be quick: "we'll shut them rascals out!" (*KT* 63). The little men in charge of the valley are unsure what to do: "they didn't want the tinkers in their valley, but they were terrified of being called inhospitable" (*KT* 65). Miheal warns them: "They'll never leave the valley. They'll turn you out. They'll spoil the valley" (*KT* 66), at which point the little men close the valley to all comers, including Miheal, who blames the tinkers for the fact that he will not now see Finn and the heroes of ancient Ireland. The episode seems to imply that the tinkers are a major impediment to Ireland's return to its former greatness.

Miheal is left in the company of a poor old woman (a mythical creature who morphs out of and into a gnarled old tree), a baby (who turns out to be a changeling), and Nora, a little tinker girl. Of these three "otherworldly" beings, all capable of transformation, Nora is the only one who can be humanized and domesticated. Miheal recognizes that she is pretty and decent underneath the layer of dirt that covers her, qualities borne out by the fact that she soon decides never to return to the tribe. The generic "tinkers" in the book are represented as being without the concepts of home and family: Nora "was ashamed" to tell Red Lanty that "she had no home" (*KT* 122), and she later marvels at the idea of belonging to a proper family "when she had only been one of the tribe" (*KT* 239). Offered the choice by Lanty between the "otherworld" of the Secret Valley and the domestic reality of the Fahys cabin, she eventually chooses the latter. Miheal's mother welcomes her as her own daughter, dresses her in new clothes, and promises to teach her all the domestic skills.

Miheal himself has gone after the tinkers to retrieve his poultry and his father's stolen magical fiddle, which he does after many adventures, in the course of which he increasingly comes to resemble a tinker boy. Yellow Handkerchief asks him, "Did ye never want to join the tinkers, Miheal Fahy? ... Did ye never want to share our wild, free life?" (*KT* 144), and Miheal agrees that he did. While the role reversal leads to a permanent

salvation and liberation for Nora, for Miheal it amounts to a temporary aberration and confinement. Very soon he realizes that "already he was tired of the tinkers and wondered how long he would have to stay with them" (*KT* 153). Fortunately for him, Nora–now converted to a settled existence–has taken it upon herself to rescue him, with the help of the old woman and the changeling. She arrives when the tinkers are fighting among themselves about whom to crown as their new king. Nora is handed the King of the Tinkers' crown by the changeling, and places it on Miheal's head (implicitly suggesting that his leadership might lead to improvements in the tribe), but the changeling disapproves of her choice and explains that Miheal would "never be happy stravagin the country, takin what he wants and never payin a penny piece for it" (*KT* 234). The crown is abandoned and Yellow Handkerchief, who obviously fits the bill much better, crowns himself with it. Nora and Miheal return home with the widow Fahy. In *Tinker Boy*, Patricia Lynch also introduces the idea of an outsider as king of the tinkers, who would act as a civilizing force to the tribe, and there, too, the plan is thwarted by the essential incorrigibility of the tinkers. Mrs. MacDara reveals that her late husband (originally a settled carpenter) failed to become king due to the jealousy of Yellow Handkerchief. Her husband "would have made us all rich!" and "could have joined us in one tribe and made us respected!" The other tinkers counter that they do not need respect and that the carpenter "Wanted us to work, he did! Him and his work! Asking dacent tinkers to make baskets. Moyah!" (*TB* 96). Lynch suggests both that tinkers are in need of correction, and that their essential "tinkerish" qualities make it impossible for them to be corrected–a catch-22 that legitimizes their marginalisation and exclusion from civil society.

In the opening chapter of *Tinker Boy*, twelve-year-old Tessa Nolan observes the tinkers unseen from her bedroom window as they are passing by on their way into town. One of the horses is limping, and her first thought is, "These aren't the kind of tinkers I like! ... Tinkers are cruel!" (*TB* 5-6). On reflection, she modifies her opinion by admitting that she could like the woman and the boy she sees "if they were kinder" (*TB* 12), and by acknowledging the lure of the exotic: "She liked everything strange and this tawny-haired woman was very strange" (*TB* 15). As Tessa passes the tinker camp on her way to school, the woman appears from her caravan and asks the girl to accompany her son, Dara MacDara, on his first trip to school. He has never attended before and faces suspicion and discrimination from fellow-pupils and teacher alike. Tessa takes it upon herself to protect him.

Tessa likes her new friends, who live in a cosy but untidy caravan which sports a bookshelf in one corner. She envies them the romantic freedom of "driving into strange towns and out into the country again, of camping by the seashore and hearing the waves all night long" (*TB* 26). If only one could be a tinker without being a tinker: "She wouldn't want to stay with the other tinkers. If this caravan were hers, she'd take it where the roads were empty and not a soul would know who she was" (*TB* 26). Tessa's attitude to the tinkers is one of conflict between loathing and desire: "'I do wish Dara

and his mother weren't tinkers!' thought Tessa, ... 'Only they are and, in a way, I'm glad. I almost wish I was one. It must be grand to travel everywhere, to stop where you like, drive all through the night and never be bothered'" (*TB* 38). The MacDaras are not like other tinkers, however, who frighten Tessa and who are not good neighbours. The Wards are the worst, and "Not a tinker in the country wished for their company but it wasn't easy to escape them" (*TB* 67).

For Dara to be accepted in school, he must excel and rise above the tinker stereotype–the typical minority predicament. Soon the teacher realizes that Dara "wasn't the ordinary kind of tinker boy at all" (*TB* 43): he can already read, picks up the principle of the long division in no time, and is a master poetry reciter. Soon the whole class is full of admiration for him. Dara's mother explains to Tessa why she and her son are different. Her late husband was no tinker but a carpenter, "a good tradesman" (*TB* 28), who was tricked by the tinkers and ended up falling in love with Maura, soon to be Mrs. MacDara. His was a civilizing influence, as he taught his wife to read, and she in her turn taught her son. Dara's mother explains that he also advocated kindness to animals, a novelty in the tinker camp, and something that comes as news to Dara, who immediately begins to treat his horse more humanely. When he asks his mother why she had not told him this before she replies, "Sure, I didn't think! Even if yer father wasn't a true tinker, I am!" (*TB* 63).

Dara, who is only half a tinker to begin with, vows that he "won't always be a tinker... One day I'll be something grand, mebbe a horse dealer" (*TB* 36). Tessa supports his wish, in the face of friends' and relatives' belief that tinkers cannot change. When a crate of turkeys belonging to Tessa's aunt goes missing, the woman blames Tessa's new friends, but the girl decides that "It must be the Wards!" (*TB* 128). In order to prove that the MacDaras are "good tinkers" rather than "bad tinkers," aunt Bernadette orders that they "make the thieves give back my turkeys!" (*TB* 129): as a generic category, all tinkers are responsible for each others' actions. With the help of Dara, Tessa and her brothers retrieve the stolen turkeys from the Wards. After an accident with the Wards' caravan while they are fleeing from the law, Dara rescues both his friend Tessa and his enemy Paud Ward from the river. The act definitively separates him from his tinker origins in the eyes of the law, as Garda O'Keeffe makes a clear distinction between him and Paud: "There's one poor half-drowned young tinker and a hero–that's what Dara MacDara is–a hero!" (*TB* 172). In the Nolans' home, Tessa's heroic "tinker friend" is welcomed and given her brother's suit to wear. His mother, also invited to join the family, knows her place and prefers to stay on her "creepy" by the fire, but Dara sits between Tessa's brothers at the table. Garda O'Keeffe offers Dara a position with his uncle, who is setting up a horse dealership. Dara "won't always be a tinker" (*TB* 36), largely because he was only a half tinker to begin with. Horse-dealing, moreover, is a traditional Traveller occupation, so that his rise in the world is appropriate for his station and consists largely of becoming legitimate within a settled context. In that context, he must be subordinate to the policeman's uncle: legitimacy is irreconcilable with the "wild, free life" of the tinkers.

In Patricia Lynch's children's books, the presence of tinkers is used to enhance the Irish quality of her narratives: like the bogs, cottages and fairs, the tinkers are represented as an inalienable part of the national infrastructure. At the same time, tinkers are shown to be "different" from the Irish protagonists of the novels, but their function is not to challenge the settled cultural norm but rather to emphasize it: always focalised through the majority culture, their presence is not about "alterity" but about "cultural continuity" (Stephens 207). Their representation suffers from the same stereotypes and prejudices that researchers have detected in children's books about African Americans, American Indians, and other minorities. Tinkers are generically represented as inferior, although there are "good tinkers" and "bad tinkers." Bad tinkers are violent, work-shy, homeless thieves who spoil the countryside. Good tinkers are passive and non-violent, have romantic traditions, are eager to prove their worth, and some have the potential to become "just like us." Their highest aspiration is to stop being tinkers, and kind settled people are around to help them do the right thing. Patricia Lynch's fiction of the first half of the twentieth century teaches young readers how to behave properly in an Irish context. Being a good Irish citizen, the lesson implies, is incompatible with being a tinker. Irish Traveller organisations are today working to dispel that widespread cultural bias, by promoting "an understanding of Travellers as full and equal citizens of Ireland with their own culture and identity" (McDonagh 10).

Note

1 The illustrations in Patricia Lynch's fiction–by Jack B. Yeats in *The Turf-Cutter's Donkey*, by Katharine C. Lloyd in *King of the Tinkers*, and by Harry Kernoff in *Tinker Boy*–all represent the tinkers as women in shawls and men in battered hats, driving horse-drawn barreltop wagons.

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