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## "So I Shall Tell You a Story:" The Subversive Voice in Beatrix Potter's Picture Books

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“SO I SHALL TELL YOU A STORY:” THE SUBVERSIVE  
VOICE IN BEATRIX POTTER’S  
PICTURE BOOKS

By

Veronica Bruscini

An Honors Project Submitted in partial Fulfillment

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## **Subverting the Nursery:**

### **Beatrix Potter and the Golden Age of Children's Literature**

#### **Introduction**

Children's Literature experienced a golden age during Beatrix Potter's Victorian and Edwardian times, emerging as a distinct genre and as its own literary movement. While new ground was broken, children's authors were informed by the dominating patriarchal ideology of their day, and literature for children both blatantly and subconsciously reinforced the era's standards and perpetuated this discourse. For years, scholarship measured Potter's picture books through principles shaped by patriarchal ideology. Hers, according to this view, were fanciful tales told by a proper lady imparting a moral message. For example, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* represents the classic case of a disobedient child being punished for his naughty actions, or so early Potter scholarship assumed. The accepted understanding of Potter's life and works changed radically when her personal journal was discovered, translated, and published in 1966. Written in an alphanumeric code of Potter's own creation, the *Journal* reveals Potter's secret self. In it, readers find a writer responding to her confinement as a child and young adult in her parents' nursery as well as her conscious reaction against the dominant relations of power constraining the women in Victorian society.

Keeping a hidden journal written in a secret code was Potter's response to the social and cultural mandates of the prevailing ideology during the Victorian era. In *Beatrix Potter: Writing in Code*, M. Daphne Kutzer states that, "what we see, when the code is deciphered, is an Edwardian woman writer with deep anxieties about both gender and class, a writer with rebellious if not subversive tendencies, and above all a writer with a strong individual voice and vision" (167).

The patriarchal ideology dominating Potter's Victorian and Edwardian England dictated an emotionally repressed, physically stilted, and above all "proper" social existence, especially for children and for women of Potter's upper class. Victorian child-rearing practices were intensely child-focused, for they recognized childhood to be a distinct and separate time from adulthood, one requiring specific environmental and emotional experiences (Ariès 133). Yet, on the other hand, "distinct" in practical terms also implied "other," for the child – especially the middle- and upper-class child – routinely encountered isolation, alienation, and subjugation by, in, and for power, all for the child's "own good" (Miller 59).

Potter's parents were no exception; in fact, their controlling, restrictive influence was extreme even by the era's standards. Potter was a prisoner of the nursery until well into her thirties. In an intriguing parallel with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, secretly writing – especially in code – became Potter's primary connection to her internal and external freedom. Both Potter and Perkins recognized an inherent, subversive power for the writing female. Unlike Perkins' protagonist, who withers when patriarchy denies her access to writing, Potter aspired to, and largely achieved, a physical and emotional independence few Victorian women knew. But this was not a flawless

independence, for her writing speaks to a life-long tension between the domestic and the subversive.

Leslie Linder decoded and published *The Journal of Beatrix Potter: 1881-1897* in 1966 after several years of working on its translation. Potter never intended for anyone but herself to read her journal and therefore did not create a key to her cipher. Indeed, it appears few if any were even aware that the journal existed; historians found only one reference to it in all of Potter's other writings (*Journal* xxiii). In an era that preached emotional repression as a hallmark of maturity, Potter was denied full and independent expression by both her culture and her parents. Instead, she channeled her frustration, her clandestine interest in science, and her critical reflections of her parents, politics, and religion into her journal writing.

Until Linder cracked the code, the accepted academic authority was Margaret Lane's 1946 biography, *The Tale of Beatrix Potter*. Lane's book depicts an isolated figure, one trapped in the Victorian nursery who can only escape through an introverted fantasy world. Writing after Potter's death, Lane did so at a clear disadvantage: Potter fiercely guarded her privacy, and Lane had to reconstruct Potter's life through interviews with family and friends, in addition to being a pioneer for Potter scholarship at its infancy. In the end, Lane concludes that Potter, though fascinating, led a "modest and unsensational" life (*Tale* 7). Linder's publication of Potter's *Journal* shattered this image. He decoded Potter's own words and revealed a determined and unconventional woman who pushed the social discourse and gender boundaries in her scientific pursuits, political and social critiques, and most especially through her picture books for children. As Humphrey Carpenter writes, Potter's journal presented "a much more vigorous

character: somebody very determined and independent-minded, unable for purely practical and economic reasons to break away from the parental home until she was middle-aged, but from her early years displaying a vigorous contempt for most of the accepted Victorian values” (“Bunnies” 279). Yet even now, the *Journal* has only recently begun to illuminate a critical understanding of Potter’s picture books in relation to her confinement and liberation from the Victorian nursery. Kutzer puts it this way: “Potter is on the side of rebellion . . . but her allegiance is a complicated one. It appears that one must know when to rebel, not only how to rebel, in order to be successful, and if you mistime your rebellion you may never be able to leave the confines of home” (105).

Kutzer points to the subversive voice underlying the picture books, even as Potter articulates it through the most domestic, benign form given to moral didacticism, emotional nostalgia, and light entertainment: Children’s Literature. Potter worked to subvert while coding her rebellion in terms of the generic status quo. There is a tense duality that informs the ordered rebellion in her picture books.

One key example of Potter’s ambivalent subversions appears in 1904’s *The Tale of Two Bad Mice*. Like *Peter Rabbit*, *Two Bad Mice* was originally a picture letter sent to one of the Moore children, and also like *Peter*, Potter subversively sides with the story’s transgressors, the insubordinate rebels who dare to defy social convention. Potter addresses Victorian domesticity through life in the dollhouse. Its furniture and decorations are all for appearance’s sake, and though the dollhouse appears to be comfortable and fully provided with foodstuffs and furnishings, these items have no practical use, as Tom Thumb and Hunca Munca – the two mice – discover. It is all a pretense; the dolls’ lives are an illusion. This is a house “where one cannot sit down

without upsetting something,” wrote Potter, adding “I know the sort!” (*Letters* 93). Potter further realized her criticism by embodying it in the postures of the dolls, especially Jane, the cook doll, ironically named in that “she never did any cooking.” Potter depicts the Jane doll as standing unbending and rigid, a reflection of the equally stilted, artificial environment in the dollhouse (*Complete Tales* 71). Tom and Hunca Munca’s “invasion” of the perfectly ordered home has a two-fold effect: their very presence brings life to the stagnant house, and later their rage at the artificial world (one they at first took to be “real”) transforms the dolls’ pristine domestic setting into a chaotic jumble. After they calm down, the mice purloin certain items which will both be useful to them and which will realize a practical, substantial purpose in their mouse hole. Hunca Munca appears in the dollhouse once again at the close of the story, but this time she has an apron and broom and she tidies up in the guise of a domestic servant. Yet since the dolls do not “live” and therefore do not create messes, in the end this gesture is ironic and speaks to Potter’s duality regarding domesticity and rebellion.

Scholars following Linder, such as Carpenter, MacDonald, Mackey, and Kutzer, have moved beyond admiration of “little books for little hands” to a serious academic study of Potter’s works. They rejected Lane’s “modest and unsensational” model of Potter and instead have begun to examine the picture books in light of an author pulled between the poles of conformity and rebellion. Carpenter notes this in “Excessively Impertinent Bunnies” when he writes:

The voice we hear again and again in her stories is not that of the late Victorian spinster decorously instructing . . . in acceptable social behaviour, but of a rebel, albeit a covert one, demonstrating the rewards of

nonconformity, and exhorting her young readers to question the social system into which they found themselves born. (279)

It is precisely Potter's selection of Children's Literature – and specifically the picture book – as her chosen genre that especially intrigues scholarly interest in light of the *Journal*. Too often, Victorian literature for children reinforced the status quo, the adult domination and subjugation of the child. While many of Potter's contemporary authors wrote into – sometimes dangerously into – this objectification of the child, Potter's picture books defy and challenge social discourse through their deceptively simple texts. Again and again in her work, the subversive voice of the rebel emerges. Linder's translation opened Potter's picture books to complex social and ideological interpretation, and Kutzer argues that “many of [Potter's] books provide in miniature what all novels provide: complex interwoven plots, major and minor characters who develop over time, symbolic and metaphoric use of language and object, and moral ambiguity and complexity” (169).

The tension between “conservative” Potter and “subversive” Potter parallel, intersect, and interact in her picture books, echoing tensions in the *Journal*, and these occasionally result in rocky final products. Early picture book titles, such as *The Tailor of Gloucester*, *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin*, and especially *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, reflect Potter's lingering connections to home, her desire to break free, and her anxiety about the cost of that freedom. Her middle-career writings, including *The Tale of Two Bad Mice*, *The Tale of Mr. Jeremy Fisher*, and *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers, or the Roly-Poly Pudding*, were created at the height of Potter's financial success and initial physical independence. These “Sawrey” books, often considered her best works, encompass



domestic tensions even as they illuminate (noticeably in their artwork) Potter's obsession with her new home at Hill Top Farm. *The Tale of Pigling Bland*, *The Tale of Johnny-Town Mouse*, *Appley Dapple's Nursery Rhymes*, and other later works reveal Potter's growing passion for farming, politics, and environmental preservation, even as they signal her waning interest in writing for children. The books which follow after these never again attain the energy and artistic integrity of their earlier counterparts; Potter lost the all-consuming fire of her writing after finally attaining the freedom it had once provided.

### **Potter as Victorian Child**

Childhood was already recognized as a unique and separate phase of life when Victoria's reign began in England. However, the Victorian culture furthered this distinction, fixating on the childhood state and objectifying the child. Whether longing to return to an idealized "golden age" of youth or vicariously reconnecting with childhood innocence, the Victorian perception of children's importance to society and ever-evolving childrearing practices were the obsession of the age (Nelson 69). "A new concept of childhood had appeared," writes Ariès, "in which the child . . . became a source of amusement and relaxation for the adult" (129). The Victorian nursery, then, existed as a contradictory experiment. It created an oasis in the center of the British home, a shrine dedicated to nurturing the children and epitomizing childhood. Yet the nursery also divided parent and child, distinguishing the child as a separate entity, an "other" wholly different from the grown-up in a society and culture dominated by the adult world. At the most tender age, middle- and upper-class children were cut off from direct contact

with mother and father for their moral and developmental “good,” given instead to the care of nurse, maid, or governess. This trend informed nearly every child-rearing practice of the Victorian period, including formative mother/infant bonding. Jane Golden writes that “upper- and middle-class mothers turned to either the bottle or the wet nurse despite the admonitions of social critics and the recommendations of physicians. In doing so they rejected a biological definition of motherhood *in favor of a social definition*” (emphasis added 138).

Thus the practice of physical and emotional detachment informed the Victorian child’s perception of the world, and as a result, the child absorbed the ideological tenets of Victorian culture even before learning to speak. Victorian child-rearing emphasized the child’s total dependence on adult authority, and because of this, the child experienced both physically and emotionally what it meant to be a subordinated “other” in a hierarchical culture. A child’s immersion in the nursery’s “rules of order” was compounded by the emotional and physical detachment of such an environment, and the child learned via relationships with and in the adult world “the rules of order established by class domination” (Althusser 132).

In a similar fashion, Victorian culture granted little if any space for feminine self-identity and self-expression outside the standards of patriarchal ideology. The “Angel in the House” was alive, well and dominant; a lady’s scope for independence began and ended in her anticipated role as wife and mother. Marriage and childrearing were the pinnacle of the Victorian female’s social status, and her very identification as a woman in society hinged on this crucial life-step. Though a girl was defined by her relation to the male world, first to her father, then to her husband, Chris Bossche notes that the young

lady's marriage "was a point at which one achieved a degree of independence from one's family of origin and moved towards self-definition in relation to a new family of one's own" (83).

Unlike other Victorian families, Potter's parents made no preparations for their maturing daughter's transition from the nursery to adolescence to womanhood. Instead of broadening their social interactions with the expectation of introducing Potter to potential suitors, her parents further diminished their social circle to the barest minimum of immediate family and intimate friends. The very Victorian Rupert and Helen Potter held their daughter back from the feminine ideal of the era – building a family of her own – and took pains to keep Potter home with them and firmly under their control. This behavior reflected a divergent, even extreme variation of the Victorian view of the child existing for adult "consumption." As Kutzer writes, the elder Potters "seem to have felt that their daughter's sole duty in life was to take care of them" (7). Consequently, it is not surprising that Potter experienced an emotionally strained relationship with her parents. In her journal, Potter repeatedly references her mother as opinionated, domineering, and passive-aggressive, and while Potter wrote of interests she shared with her father and excursions they had taken through the years, Rupert in particular disrupted his daughter's sangfroid. While Potter often expressed frustration with her mother, her father's judgmental, condescending attitude and his "being as usual deplorable" could physically move her to tears even in adulthood (*Journal* 398). The constant threat of his patronizing disapproval prevented a strong bond forming between father and daughter.

Potter remained subjected to parental rule well into her thirties, and as an adult found herself still trapped in the Victorian nursery, though she now employed that

nursery as her studio, even sneaking animals inside to sketch as models. In an 1894 journal entry, Potter gave an example of her parents' controlling manipulations, writing after she accepted an invitation to visit her cousin Caroline Hutton at Harescombe. Her first independent excursion in nearly five years, Potter's time with the Huttons marked a turning point for her personally, scientifically, and creatively. However, Potter's parents as ever fought to control their daughter's activities, and they vigorously opposed her going to Harescombe. Potter wrote:

It was so much of an event in the eyes of my relations that they made it appear an undertaking to me, and I began to think I would rather not go. I had a sick headache most inopportunately, though whether the cause or the effect I could not say, but it would have decided the fate of my invitation but for Caroline, who carried me off. (312)

Especially in later entries, Potter's coded words increasingly evidence her dissatisfaction with her restricted state and frustration with parental manipulation, even as she exulted in subversive victories. Accomplishments such as secretly publishing her artwork, sneaking out of the house after dark to gather and hide fungi and other specimens for scientific research, and clandestinely writing a groundbreaking treatise on spore germination were often dampened by Potter's subject position in the family home at Bolton Gardens and by the limitations of culturally defined, restraining gender roles.

### **“So I shall tell you a story”**

Potter's journal entries waned as a new variation of her code-writing emerged. As early as 1892, Potter recorded, “Wrote picture-letters to the little Moores” (250). These

“picture-letters” evolved over the next few years, developing into some of Potter’s masterworks, beginning with the 1902 publication of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*.

Authoring picture books furnished an outlet both for creative expression and veiled social critique, while additionally providing Potter the financial resources to realize her long-denied independence from Bolton Gardens. Potter’s desire to separate from home and from continued parental “consumption” repeatedly appears in the *Journal* and recurs in the themes of many of her picture books. The picture books fuse together the separate facets of Potter’s self-definition – her wry, discerning social observations, her love of animals and the natural world, the personal and commercial fulfillment of her artwork, and especially the liberating self-expression she experienced through coded writing.

Fittingly, then, consolidating her fragmented identity brought about the financial autonomy necessary to achieving the physical freedom Potter craved. “I also increasingly derive consolation from . . . the comfort of having money,” she wrote in the *Journal*, “It is something to have a little money to spend on books and to look forward to being independent . . .” (402). Potter realized gender barriers blocked science as her main route toward independence, but employing her artistic skill and publishing her paintings and sketches proved a modest commercial success. “She could not completely escape the constraints of family and gender, but by allying herself with her equally rebellious brother managed her first successful rebellion from her parents” (Kutzer 35). Bolstered by this victory, Potter’s attention turned toward the creation of *Peter Rabbit* and the series of picture books to follow. However, her burgeoning success also spurred domestic tension. Dealings in trade and publicity of any kind horrified the Potters, and they sought to silence their daughter’s budding literary voice.

In the Broadway musical *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, Linus states, "In examining a work such as *Peter Rabbit*, it is important that the superficial characteristics of its deceptively simple plot should not be allowed to blind the reader to the more substantial fabric of its deeper motivations" (Gesner). The line is played for humor, yet its sentiment is entirely apt. Within the "deceptively simple plot" of this first and best-known of her picture books, Potter explores issues of physical and emotional detachment from the family unit, even as she struggled with the same concerns in her own life. Additionally, Potter's numerous references to appetite alongside various forms and perspectives on food and consumption deliver a sinister undercurrent of tension throughout *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. Victorian child-rearing practices likewise provided for adult "consumption" of the young, all while enforcing separation from the parent and requiring the child's obedience and emotional repression. Peter emerges as the author's alter-ego, striking out independently from his family, besting a "giant," and – at least temporarily – abandoning the imposition of social constraints.

At home, Peter is bound to Mother's rules. She warns her children of the dangers in the garden, a most relevant anxiety for the family after Father Rabbit's demise: "he was put in a pie by Mrs. McGregor" (*Complete Tales* 11). While Mother Rabbit's instruction to avoid the McGregor garden appeared in the original picture-letter to Noel Moore, this most serious motive for the rabbits' obedience did not; Potter included it as part of the revision for her first private edition. She also illustrated Mrs. McGregor looming over the pie as she offers it to her husband. Only Mr. McGregor's hands are visible; the rest of his body fades menacingly into the surrounding white space. The farmer clenches a three-tined fork and a sharp knife, ready to devour the savory dish. By

his side, a wild-eyed dog waits with its front paws on the table, its appetite lured by the aroma of rabbit pie. After the fourth printing, subsequent published editions omitted this particular plate; however its dark implications and the underlying presence of death remain as crucial aspects of the tale.

Potter employs these darker images matter-of-factly as realities of life while also suggesting that following biological instinct necessitates subverting social and cultural constructs. Though intended to avoid future Rabbit family “accidents,” Mrs. Rabbit’s admonishment suffocates Peter’s natural instincts, paralleling Potter’s illustration of Mother Rabbit fastening the topmost button of Peter’s coat (*Complete Tales* 11). Potter returns to this theme, similarly employing domesticated clothing as dangerous and restrictive for wild animals in *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*, *The Tale of Jemima Puddleduck*, and *The Tale of Tom Kitten*. Notwithstanding, Peter is drawn to the garden by his impulses, eyes bright and ears alert as he wriggles under McGregor’s gate. Peter hears two calls: the social and parental rules of domesticity, where young bunnies walk upright so as not to dirty the human-style clothing they wear, versus the biological impulses and inclinations of a wild rabbit. As both a rabbit and a child drawn by his instincts, Peter yields to the attraction of lettuces, carrots, and radishes which better fit into his natural diet and appetite than the chamomile tea and brown bread offered to him in the rabbit-hole.

In search of a more appropriate menu, Peter ventures to the McGregor garden, the same place his father once traveled on a similar errand to seek out rabbit-pleasing fare. Instead of snacking, however, Peter’s father fell prey to his garden gamble; he was captured, baked in a pie and consumed by the McGregors for dinner. Peter is fully aware

of the details of his father's death; perhaps the discarded pie illustration represented Peter's envisioning of the scene. Nonetheless, the lure of his biological instinct outweighs social restrictions and potential dangers. Potter references Father Rabbit's death only once in her characteristically matter-of-fact, unemotional style. While her broader embedded, encoded message is one of social rebellion, the deliberate understatement of Peter's family tragedy reflects Potter's sly storytelling. The specter of Father Rabbit's death and consumption haunts Peter's actions and experiences in the garden. That Mr. McGregor eats rabbits and justifiably views them as a viable food source underscores the high stakes of the chase and Peter's mortal peril.

Farmer McGregor's first reaction to his furry intruder encapsulates Potter's commentary on the social versus the biological. McGregor does not call out "Shoo!" or "Scat!" as one would to a woodland pest, but instead he yells "Stop thief!" addressing Peter's boyishness over his rabbit nature (*Complete Tales* 14). For stealing forbidden food, the property of this (to rabbit eyes) giant of a man, McGregor determinedly pursues Peter with the aim of catching and consuming him. Peter inhabits a predatory world; McGregor views him not only as a thieving pest but also as a potential meal. Readers identify Peter as the tale's hero and eagerly turn to the next page to see his triumph over the farmer. However, McGregor's view differs entirely; he regards Peter – as he would any rabbit – as a perfectly natural and practical food source. Yet Potter's story and illustrations combine to present Peter as a type of mythological hero. Here, Peter's circumstances echo the story of Prometheus, whose theft of fire from Zeus provides mankind with the means of preparing nourishing meals and heating their homes. Zeus punishes Prometheus for transgressing his boundaries and mocking his claim to absolute



power, dooming Prometheus to the daily physical consumption of his liver by a vulture. Peter's contest with McGregor, though on a far smaller scale, echoes this mythological round, and his journey is personal as well as epic, ordinary as well as mythic. Mr. McGregor, absolute master of his own (garden) realm, hunts Peter for a similar transgression. Peter entered forbidden lands to steal suitable nourishment, even as he confronts the towering figure that deprived him of his father. Mirroring Potter's situation at Bolton Gardens, Peter's journey serves as a metaphor of the child seeking to break free; he seeks to feed his natural appetite since only unsuitable "nursery" food substitutes, such as bread, milk, and berries, are offered within the designated boundaries of home in the fir-tree.

At first, Peter responds to the farmer's interpolation, running on two legs in a most un-rabbit-like manner. However, in order to escape the garden, Potter depicts Peter no longer as a "boy" rabbit in coat and shoes walking on hind legs. During his mad dash, Peter's shoes come loose and fall off, and feeling the earth beneath his paws, he sprints away on four legs as any fleeing rabbit would naturally do. Potter's illustration represents this transformation in great detail, as the anthropomorphized bunny suddenly becomes an ordinary garden rabbit in every detail. This change in attitude immediately grants speed to Peter, so much that the narrator remarks, "I think he might have got away altogether if he had not unfortunately run into a gooseberry net, and got caught by the large buttons on his jacket" (15).

Potter's ironic tone resurfaces in the narration, finding this tense and dangerous turn of events simply "unfortunate" for Peter. Understating the situation more sharply focuses the weaving together of the story's underlying danger with Potter's message of

social rebellion. For Peter to escape, he must fully reconnect with his innate, wild nature and rabbit identity. Facing mortal peril in the fast-approaching figure of the rake-wielding Farmer McGregor, Peter finds himself again trapped by the buttons of his blue jacket, exemplifying the lingering vestiges of social constraint. Still, Peter has already partially shed his socialized identity by the loss of his footwear; recognizing this, the sparrows – birds hitherto acting as silent observers to Peter’s actions – directly address him, identifying in him a fellow member of the animal world. After they “implored him to exert himself,” Peter wriggles free from the restraining coat and escapes the McGregor pie pan “just in time.” At this point, Potter’s representation of Peter changes radically; now Peter runs on all fours as an undomesticated, wild rabbit, “leaving his jacket behind him” (15-16). In this single illustrated frame, Potter explores the dangers of being “too civilized” and of the child’s desperate need to throw off confining social conventions. Once free of his coat, Peter saves himself through rediscovering his original rabbit nature.

Without allowing for a moment’s reprieve, Potter quickly reminds her readers that Peter’s situation remains a desperate one. McGregor is not the only predator in the garden; in fact, the entire garden is full of predators and their prey. Before Peter reaches the freedom of the garden gate, he observes the farmer’s white cat holding vigil over the goldfish pond. Peter is one of many edible creatures in the garden and, recollecting his cousin’s advice on feline behavior, he opts to pass by the cat silently, intent on his escape. The garden gate – once representing freedom from domesticity and adult domination – now stands as Peter’s only means of escaping literal consumption on the McGregor property. As Peter catches sight of it from his perch in the wheelbarrow, Potter realizes the encroaching scope of the garden’s boundaries in her corresponding

artwork; tall hedgerows flank the gate on either side, stretching infinitely off the page in either direction, totally surrounding the McGregors' land.

The white space framing Potter's wheelbarrow artwork radiates this oppressiveness, menacingly concealing the impenetrable walls encircling Peter and trapping him within the perilous garden. Yet once again, Peter's rabbit nature grants him unfettered, unhindered speed and allows him to outrace Farmer McGregor; he safely arrives in the forest – his natural habitat – acting and appearing as a wild, natural woodland rabbit. The clothing Peter left behind, representing the very domesticity which almost cost him his life, finds new purpose as the McGregor garden scarecrow. However, the scarecrow's function is ineffectual; Potter illustrates several birds perched on or nearby the blue jacket and tiny shoes, gazing curiously but unconcernedly at the garden's new addition. Traditionally, scarecrows are meant to frighten but cause no physical harm, yet while the McGregor scarecrow lacks even the power to scare robins, its placement serves a deeper symbolic purpose. The same clothing that creates a benign perch in the garden presents a very real danger when buttoned around young rabbits; the blue coat and new shoes represent Victorian psychological and emotional control, as well as its repressive physical limitations. During his experiences in the garden, Peter sheds all that held him back from his innate rabbit identity. In order to survive, he leaves behind the superfluity of social and cultural mandates and forced domesticity, and he emerges with a more adult rabbit awareness of the world, even if he still lacks the full maturity to articulate it.

When Peter arrives home it is to a scene of domesticity. Potter illustrates Mrs. Rabbit bending over the stove, preparing her family's meal. Interestingly, fresh garden

vegetables lie at her feet, but these will not be a part of the bunnies' supper; presumably this preferred food is reserved for Mother's consumption only, even though the vegetables sit in her children's plain sight. Victorian children experienced similar ritualized deprivations. Adults indulged in sumptuous desserts and specialty treats after dinner, yet the children received unimaginative substitutes such as bread and milk or a slice of fruit – all to teach the child his or her place. The privileges of the adult world were solely for adults, and Potter represents such an order of things at the end of Peter's journey. His sisters, Flopsy, Mopsy and Cotton-tail, will eat bread, milk, and blackberries, while Mrs. Rabbit will presumably enjoy the same garden fare Peter so recently feasted on. Pamela Robertson writes that Victorian children were trained to stand by and watch as their elders tauntingly partook of appetizing confections and treats, all the while it was established that these foods belonged strictly to the adult world (417). His obedient sisters dine on traditional nursery foods, yet rebellious Peter, sent to bed without his meal, still has an over-full belly from satiating his emerging "adult" appetite.

Mrs. Rabbit unconcernedly accepts her son's bedraggled return, her lack of reaction suggesting a pattern of behavior in Peter, especially with this being "the second little jacket and pair of shoes that Peter had lost in a fortnight" (*Complete Tales* 20). Peter's "punishment" exists only on the surface of the text. Heeding his rabbit nature freed Peter from the "nursery" and saved his life when he ventured into the larger world, providing him with both a stomach (painfully) overfull on rabbit foods and a pivotal experience on his journey toward physical independence and maturity. In this context, Mrs. Rabbit's actions can be viewed as nurturing rather than punitive. Peter is put to bed only after the narrator establishes that the rabbit feels ill, Mother dosing him with

chamomile tea to soothe his stomachache. Mrs. Rabbit's rather philosophical response to Peter's blatant disobedience further establishes the reader's praise for his rebellious actions. In fact, when Peter (reluctantly) repeats his visit to the McGregor garden with his cousin in *Benjamin Bunny*, Peter's uncle whips the bunnies for their disobedience. Mrs. Rabbit, however, once again forgives her son without further remonstrance after he returns safely and with his reclaimed (if now ill-fitting) clothing. *Benjamin Bunny's* didactic ending met criticism, especially as *Peter Rabbit's* subversive message and rebellious hero struck such a popular, celebrated chord.

Potter employs the garden setting to further her critique of Victorian and Edwardian approaches to childhood. Overwhelmingly, the culture – and especially children's authors of the era – equated “the garden” with childhood innocence. The garden symbolized a reconnection to this innocence of youth in a world of experience, especially with the Victorian concept of the child as a purifier for the corrupted adult soul. Arcadia – the ideal of spiritual refreshment in nature's green and growth – in many cases again subjected the child to adult consumption. Yet the garden Potter creates in *Peter Rabbit* is by no means an idyllic setting of innocence and tranquility. Like the motivation for Arcadia, the McGregor garden is ultimately a very adult world, one mortally perilous to the rabbits, mice, fish, and other small creatures that venture inside its gates. Transgressing the rules and borders of this highly attractive but uncompromisingly adult realm brings the risk of physical consumption to Peter, much as the child's role in Victorian culture – especially in the Arcadian plan – placed children in emotional, psychological, and even physical danger.

Sending a child to bed without supper was a common Victorian punishment; it tied into the era's favored practice of emotional and psychological control in child-rearing, a trend featuring prominently in the Potter household. Just like Peter, Potter's initial bids for physical independence manifested through clandestine, even forbidden breakouts from the nursery. In 1896, Potter recorded meeting her Uncle Harry for a stealthy excursion into Woodcote, "I escaped out of the house soon after eight, and walked up and down Bramham Gardens to the puzzlement of the housemaids. I was afraid of being stopped from going" (*Journal* 423). Potter faced a lack of understanding at home; her fears of physical and emotional restraint stemmed both from the era's pedagogy and what Miller identifies as an "inherited ideology that places the highest value on suppressing and manipulating vital spontaneity" (95).

### **Life in the Dollhouse**

Like her protagonist, Potter's own identity and domestic status remained in an ambiguous balance. Peter identified both as a little boy and as a wild rabbit, his nature subjected to socialized constructions, while Potter – an adult woman – stifled under her parents' enforced, unnatural continuation of her childhood existence. Her choice of a male protagonist as alter-ego, able to strike out against social constriction, echoes her brother Bertram's successful departure from the Potter household. At the same time, it stands as Potter's statement against the physical and financial limitations she faced in attaining the same freedom as a Victorian and Edwardian woman. Potter knew that any direct action would meet certain parental opposition and potential social censure, either outcome further hindering her bid for independence. She approached *Peter Rabbit's*

commercial publication cautiously, knowing the picture book's popularity and success in its private printings already attracted her parents' suspicions. In her *Letters*, Potter wrote to her editor Norman Warne:

If my father happens to insist on going with me to see the agreement, would you please not mind him very much, if he is very fidgetty [sic] about things. I am afraid it is not a very respectful way of talking & I don't wish to refer to it again, but I think it is better to mention beforehand he is sometimes a little difficult; I can of course do what I like about the book being 36. I suppose it is a habit of old gentlemen; but sometimes rather trying. (62)

Potter valued physical autonomy equally with freedom of expression, and she determined to have both. She faced an ongoing battle for control with her parents, this even after her initial commercial success. While working on drawings for *The Tale of Two Bad Mice*, Potter wrote to Warne, "I hardly ever go out, and my mother is so 'exacting' I had not enough spirit to say anything about it. I have felt vexed with myself since, but I did not know what to do. It does wear a person out" (85). Oftentimes, Potter appeared to acquiesce to social custom, but in reality she quietly worked toward her own ends. She understood her only avenue to freedom would come through financial independence, and that gained by her own industry. With her parents' limiting her time, money, and means of transportation, any hopes Potter had for a marriage and family of her own stood far distant, a seemingly impossible desire. Given this, Potter recognized her need to work within the system and to appear for all intents the proper Victorian spinster, writing moral tales for little hands. This "proper" occupation for a lady, that of

authoring children's picture books and illustrating anthropomorphized animal tales, concealed Potter's subversive motivations and messages; these were commercially viable artistic expressions and marketable continuations of her code-writing. Potter's quiet rebellion mirrored the writings of another female British novelist: Jane Austen. Like Potter, Austen's heroines use "silence as a means of manipulation, passivity as a tactic to gain power, submission as a means of attaining the only control available to them," write Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "the heroines *seem* to submit as they get what they both want and need" (163).

Her scheme paid off, and much to her parents' horror, Potter gained both success in trade and a popular public image. Since usual channels toward building a family of her own were denied, Potter created a family for herself; she fussed over her writings – and especially her picture books – with maternal pride and care. Additionally, her artistic and literary achievements opened a new avenue, as Potter developed into an ambitious, savvy businesswoman. She jealously guarded against unauthorized use of her characters even as she capitalized on them herself. While corresponding with Warne on each new project, Potter hand-made Peter Rabbit dolls, a board game, wall-paper and china designs, and any number of literary tie-ins. The commercial skills Potter gained by these experiences and her aptitude for business dealings later served her well as owner and proprietor of Hill Top Farm. Still, Potter contended with the specter of her parents' disapproval and controlling ways.

Knowing where to pick her battles, Potter bided her time and eventually her patience bore fruit. "That Beatrix Potter was gradually making enough money to become financially independent was threatening enough to her parents," writes Ruth MacDonald.



“That she had entered into this new pursuit expressly against their wishes was a sign that she was becoming increasingly intractable and independent in her thinking” (16). The financial gain she realized from her writing enabled Potter to make two bold (if hard won) strokes toward physical autonomy from Bolton Gardens. In the summer of 1905, Potter purchased Hill Top Farm, a property she increasingly devised excuses to stay and visit independently of her parents. Also that summer, Potter became engaged to her publisher, Norman Warne. This caused an uproar in the Potter household, not only for her making this move without her parents’ permission, but also because – their greatest horror – Warne was “in trade.” Potter refused to buckle to her parents’ demands, Judy Taylor noting that “even though Beatrix was now thirty-nine, it was not usual for a young lady to go against her parents’ wishes” (*Letters* 123). In the end, Potter compromised with her parents. She would wear Warne’s ring, but no formal announcement would be made by either family; the engagement was to be secret to all but the most immediate family members.

The year prior to her engagement, Potter wrote *The Tale of Two Bad Mice*, returning to a nursery setting for a work reflecting both biting social commentary and the growing romance between herself and Warne. While the book critiques middle- and upper-class Victorian practices as a whole, undoubtedly Potter directly targets Bolton Gardens. The physical and emotional restrictions of life in her parents’ house required Potter to move cautiously (on many levels) so as not to upset her surroundings. Potter represents this stifling atmosphere through life in the dolls’ house, employing the tale to examine class hierarchy, both within and outside the house and nursery. Additionally, she addresses her own concerns about domesticity through writing *Two Bad Mice*. “In

the widest sense, Potter's rebellion was against the strictures of Victorian domesticity, but her rebellion was an ambivalent one," writes Kutzer, "she is not necessarily against all forms of domesticity, but she is certainly against forced domesticity" (62).

From the start of *Two Bad Mice*, Potter stresses the beautiful appearance of the dollhouse and its contents. Yet for all of its "red brick with white windows, and . . . real muslin curtains," the house carries a distinct air of unreality (*Collected Tales* 71). The first illustration depicts the dollhouse in scale to its surroundings; a human-sized badminton set and jump rope dwarf the house, subtly enforcing its subjectivity to the child occupant of the nursery. The dolls' initial appearance on the outside of their dwelling shows that they likewise surpass its dimensions, and while they are housed there, they fit awkwardly and uncomfortably within the house's walls. Furthermore, the child owning such well-crafted toys would certainly belong to the middle- or upper-classes, and the ornate decoration of the house's interior no doubt mimics its larger surroundings. The disproportions of size and the establishment of the power structure on the dollhouse's exterior infiltrate the inside as well. Indoors, the dolls ill-fit their habitation; the grandfather clock stands shorter than both Lucinda and Jane. Potter quickly points out the stagnancy of life in the dollhouse; the dolls are "*called* Lucinda and Jane," their very identities and roles conferred upon them passively (emphasis added 71).

The dolls' social hierarchy once more reflects the home environment of the unseen little girl and the cultural standards she experiences. The house "belongs" to Lucinda and Jane is her servant – a cook. However, a doll cannot eat and Lucinda never requires meals, which renders Jane's very function and position superfluous. Still, any

proper Victorian home must contain plentiful provisions, and the dolls enjoy a “ready made,” bountiful table. The foodstuffs “would not come off the plates, but they were extremely beautiful” (72). The dolls’ “live” in pretense; they exist in a dwelling too small for them, observing social stations which hold no meaning, and sit at a table laden with food intended for appearances, not nourishment. This establishes Potter’s underlying critique of Victorian social practices, of valuing façade over practicality.

Enter the mice. The dolls leave their house for a morning’s jaunt in the little girl’s perambulator, and two small observers cautiously exit from their own home in the baseboard. With their arrival, Potter introduces a new culture to the mix: first, the presence of human authority in the nursery, then the world of the dollhouse, and finally, the lives of the mice, which parallel the two larger societies on the other side of the nursery wall. Even the rhythm of Potter’s language changes; rather than the passive descriptions attached to the dolls, the wording connected with the mice indicates subjective characterization, and is strikingly active and vibrant. As with Lucinda and Jane, Potter first illustrates Tom Thumb and Hunca Munca outside the dollhouse, and this time her artwork exhibits the mice’s near perfect fitness to its size. On the inside of the dollhouse, their suitable proportions eclipse the dolls’ unnatural postures. Tom and Hunca Munca, overjoyed at the abundance laid before them on the dining-room table, scurry to chairs ideally matched to their size and pick up dining utensils perfectly suited for mouse hands and feet.

Their idyllic romp abruptly turns to confusion as cutting into the most delectable, appetizing ham proves impossible. The ham, in fact, is tougher than the cutlery, which bends and injures the mice’s hands. Their potential meal, however, clings tightly as ever

to their plates, while Tom Thumb and Hunca Munca's bewilderment escalates into frustrated anger. Tom smashes the ham with tongs and a shovel, accomplishing what the tin and lead knives, forks, and spoons could not – the ham breaks into pieces, revealing inedible plaster below and destroying the illusion of paint and fine crafting. Grievously tricked and denied the hospitality of the bountiful table, the mice attack every false representative of the meal in their path, breaking the plaster foodstuffs and attempting to burn the fish which stubbornly refuses to detach from its plate. However, neither force nor fire budes the glue bonding the platter, for the kitchen fire proves as illusory as the supper table, its crackled paper flame producing not a speck of soot in the chimney (77).

As they rage against false appearances and dashed expectations, Hunca Munca's more logical sense overrides the blind destructive tirade. Like Potter, Hunca Munca is of "a frugal mind," and she recognizes the potential usefulness of certain domestications and furnishings. While these remain in the dollhouse, they will never realize practical application, but they would provide immeasurable relief and comfort to the young family in the mouse hole. Interestingly, only useful, relevant items survive the relocation; objects without a constructive function – such as an overlarge bookcase and decorative birdcage – "refused to go into the mouse-hole" (79). Tom and Hunca Munca's actions, besides embodying Potter's critique of Victorian and Edwardian excess, also represent her approval of the controlled, ordered rebellion by which she lived. Proper timing, reason, and moderation lead to provision and then escape from ideological control and death. By tempering disappointment with practicality, the mice enliven a dead habitation and procure sensible items to bolster their nest. Potter stresses that Hunca Munca acquired "*useful* pots and pans" (emphasis added 82), while any item considered an

overindulgence remained behind. Against the trend of her class, Potter appreciated simplicity and, like Hunca Munca, preferred practical, useful objects and adornment in her own home.

The mice's two contemporary societies react to the thefts by seeking to control any further attempts by Tom and Hunca Munca. The little girl, training for her future role as head of the domestic household, manages the affairs of the dollhouse by mimicking an adult response: she calls in law enforcement equivalent to the circumstances. Yet since her policeman is – like Lucinda and Jane – another doll assigned to a role, his function proves entirely ineffectual. The mice do not appear fazed or intimidated in the least, especially as the policeman doll stands “so ridiculously tall that he cannot see the mice on the floor, and so stiff and precariously balanced that he could not chase them anyway” (MacDonald 73). Indeed, two of the young mice ignore him entirely to press their whiskers against the very dollhouse window where Jane peeps out, while Hunca Munca holds her littlest aloft, apparently so it can wave gaily at the blue-coated officer (*Collected Tales* 82). However, the adult world takes a more definitive and potentially lethal position to control the rodent invaders. If the mice will venture out of their proper sphere, the governess plans to lure them to a decisive ending inside a mousetrap. The surviving mice will either meet the same fate or quickly learn to avoid the nursery – and learn their place in the social hierarchy – once one or two fail to return. The mice avoid disaster as Tom Thumb and Hunca Munca recognize and subvert the trap's function, instructing their children instead to avoid adult “restriction.”

In the end, Potter works to “reform” the mice, making their actions more socially acceptable while simultaneously expanding reader sympathy towards them and bolstering

the tale's subversive, rebellious message. Tom and Hunca Munca, the narrator asserts, "were not so very very naughty after all," and they repay the dolls both financially and with service (83-84). Yet even here, Potter's tone remains ironic. Tom "finds" the coin he and his wife give to Jane and Lucinda: he does not earn it. Hunca Munca's approach seems more substantial, making regular pre-dawn trips to tidy the dolls' home. Yet as Kutzer points out:

There will be little dust, no dirty dishes, and no trash or garbage to deal with. The mice, in fact, are making a show of being respectful and of paying for what they have taken, but in fact the show covers up their continuing rebellion against middle-class authority, a rebellion that will continue into the next (larger) generation of mice children, if we are to believe the illustrations. (76).

Potter's irony surfaces in that though destructive, the mice's rampage is the first and only demonstration of life the dollhouse experiences. Throughout *Two Bad Mice*, Potter uses her apparently polite, socially acceptable storytelling to subversively comment on social practices and to express anticipation about her own life experiences and plans. Victorian culture reflected an ideology of control and acquisition; subjugation of the woman and the child as an "other" grew out of the colonial domination of the native, naturally for the native's "own good." This hierarchy of control expanded to include both living creatures and material possessions. J. Zornado writes that in Victorian culture at large and Victorian Children's Literature in particular, "the pursuit, possession, and consumption of material things appeared as an obvious rightness in an

age dominated by capitalism, a system that ‘rewards acquiring and having at the expense of giving and sharing’” (105).

Through Tom Thumb and Hunca Munca, Potter critiqued this peculiarity of her age and class alongside the trappings of idealized domesticity. For all the delightful appearances of the dollhouse and its provisions, its occupants do not employ their possessions in any meaningful way. Lucinda and Jane maintain a social relationship with no significance; their entire existence is a show. For Potter, the dolls’ house represents the pretensions and excesses of middle-class Victorians, reflecting Potter’s own experiences of life in Bolton Gardens. The dollhouse and its occupants simply reproduce in miniature the ideology and cultural practices of its surrounding society. Potter clearly intends that the readers of *Two Bad Mice*, like the readers of *Peter Rabbit*, will extend their sympathy and approval to the rebellious characters. In this way, Potter’s child readers identify and share in her “absolute delight in bringing disruption, destruction, and energy into a house as stifling and life-denying to the dolls and mice as Bolton Gardens was to her” (Kutzer 71).

At the same time, *Two Bad Mice* represents Potter’s pending departure from Bolton Gardens. Potter revisits the nursery as she prepares to break free from it, and she completed this picture book’s writing during the months before her secret engagement to Norman Warne. In 1906, Potter wrote to Warne’s sister Millie, “Do you remember Miss Austin’s [sic] ‘Persuasion’ . . . ? It was always my favourite and I read the end part of it again last July, on the 26<sup>th</sup> the day after I got Norman’s letter. I thought my story had come right with patience & waiting like Anne Elliott’s [sic] did” (*Letters* 139). Yet all had not “come right” for Potter, despite the quietness and patience of her rebellion.

Exactly one month after proposing, Norman Warne died at his home. Potter relied on her close relationship with the Warne family for comfort, and she threw herself back into her work. Increasing the length and frequency of her visits to Sawrey and the recently purchased Hill Top Farm, Potter nonetheless continued breaking away from Bolton Gardens to a life in the Lake District she so loved. There, Potter began writing and illustrating some of her finest works. At the same time, these picture books heralded the beginning of the end of Potter's literary greatness, for her writing waned as she progressively revealed in her physical independence and immersed herself in the life of the district around her.

### **“Over the Hills and Far Away”**

The picture books written after Potter's move to Hill Top Farm – including *The Pie and the Patty-Pan*, *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers*, and *The Tale of Mr. Jeremy Fisher* – proved some of the most masterful titles of her career. The freedom of this new environment triggered Potter's creativity; these picture books contain even further refined social commentaries and critiques of domesticity. The “Sawrey” books comprise Potter's middle-career writings, and the final Sawrey title, *The Tale of Pigling Bland*, marks a major transition both in Potter's personal life and, significantly, in her writing. While Potter achieved literary success, financial independence, and a home of her own in the Lake District, one major dream remained elusive: marriage. Though a celebrated author, a savvy businesswoman, and the owner of a thriving farm, as a single woman, Potter felt incomplete.



Potter met William Heelis in 1908 after contacting his firm for legal advice regarding her Sawrey properties. Through the following years, Heelis became Potter's trusted business associate, her knowledgeable guide to the district, and her most companionable friend (Lear 249). In 1912, the pair drew closer still when Heelis proposed to Potter; she accepted, even while recognizing this meant another confrontation with her parents' scathing disapproval. Beyond their battle-cry that Heelis was "only" a country solicitor and as such beneath their station, the elder Potters objected to their daughter's marriage in that it would interfere with her "duty" to care for them and their needs. Though fiercely independent, Potter was also a most dutiful Victorian daughter; she vehemently refused to back down, even as her parents' exaggerated claims relentlessly preyed on her emotions, and these internal conflicts surface in *The Tale of Pigling Bland*. Potter, as always, provides for wide social commentary, yet here her writing touches major personal issues, and while she denied the tale was autobiographical, its themes and concerns appear to speak directly to Potter's ambivalent state of mind during this time. Her engagement to Heelis pitted her firmly between her own desire to marry and her parents' unrelenting, manipulative guilt. Additionally, Fruing Warne's insatiable demand for new books greatly diminished Potter's joy in their creation, especially as she looked ever more toward farming – not writing – as her primary outlet for her creative energy.

Like *Peter Rabbit* so many years before, *Pigling Bland's* tale is one of escape, but of an entirely different sort. Echoing Mother Rabbit buttoning Peter into the suffocating blue jacket, Potter illustrates Pigling's mother, Aunt Pettitoes, fastening a blue scarf snugly around her son's neck (*Collected Tales* 286). Pettitoes sends Pigling to the market

with specific instructions; he must leave home due to economic concerns and make his own way in the world. A pig sent to market almost certainly faces slaughter, an implied, underlying menace throughout this tale, yet Pigling's socially acceptable appearance, manners, and official pig license provide for his hire at market, not his demise. Utilizing both text and illustrations, Potter infuses this picture book with an intriguing tension, balancing the depiction of realistic farm life and barnyard animals against the anthropomorphized, socialized animals that comprise another class between the human sphere and the farm world. This establishes an ambiguous environment, as socialized animals – represented by clothing, walking on hind legs, and especially through the possession of licensing documents – are allowed a measure of safety and freedom, moving within a human society that otherwise views them as food. Nevertheless, Potter clearly notes that a license does not guarantee protection; the realities of imprisonment and slaughter threaten even the good, obedient Pigling. While Potter more fully integrates human and animal societies in *Pigling Bland* than in either *Two Bad Mice* or *Peter Rabbit*, this story remains as predatory as its predecessors. A knowledgeable and practical farmer, Potter recognized that underneath their culturally mandated appearances, waistcoat clad piglets remain a consumable resource – particularly for those who break the rules of the combined societies and ignore the implications of socialized distinctions.

Pigling's encounter with Peter Thomas Piperson underscores this reality. Though Pettitoes directed Pigling to avoid hen houses, one such structure stands as the only option for sheltering the lost, exhausted pig. Yet Potter does not allow a respite on Pigling's journey; the hens instantly greet him with "trap, trap, trap!" and, echoing his

mother's warning, "bacon and eggs, bacon and eggs!" (292-293). Despite this reminder of his very real and approaching peril, Pigling stops to rest, perhaps confident that his pig license will dispel any potential troubles with hungry farmers. Liberty in movement and freedom of decision were long-fought, crucial battles in Potter's own life, and they surface as her key themes in *Pigling Bland*. However, Potter portrays Pigling's freedom as tenuous at best. Without proper licensing (given to him by "Potter" herself), Pigling cannot legally leave the farm to travel, to market or anywhere else for that matter. Potter emphasizes the importance of this point by making an example of Pigling's brother and travel companion, Alexander. Having misplaced his papers, Alexander is unable to show proof of licensure at the policeman's demand, and the officer bodily escorts him home to be "disposed of" (290). Potter suggests that Alexander lives, but that his high spirits are trained out of him. Pigling, in possession of his license, is allowed to continue on. Yet when captured by Piperson, neither Pigling's official paperwork nor his socialized appearance give the man a moment's pause. Instead, Piperson makes bold to physically assess Pigling's potential as meat, feeling his ribs even though the almanac states the season for curing bacon has passed.

Potter stresses the presence of law in Pigling's world. To move through the human domain freely, the pigs are required to provide their official licenses to any human adult demanding proper documentation, and even then the paperwork's validity may come into question. Unlicensed animals stand subject to human authority and the humans likewise answer to the law of the land. In *Peter Rabbit*, Mr. McGregor viewed Peter as a common rabbit, a wild animal entirely separated from the human social sphere, and fittingly gave chase. McGregor faced no questions or concerns with paperwork, ethics,

legalities, or witnesses; his pursuit followed natural course and rule. Yet in *Pigling Bland*, Potter's human characters encounter socialized, speaking animals every day, and like Piperson, they recognize their ambiguous status as part-person, part-animal. While McGregor is by far the darker, more menacing figure of the two, Piperson's deliberately malevolent actions towards Pigling (and Pig-wig) make him much more dangerous and justifiably despicable.

Piperson captures Pigling (who was taking shelter in Piperson's hen house), and brings him into his home, offering him supper on a plate – not from a trough. With that gesture, he acknowledges the pig's social position. In her typically understated fashion, Potter sums up Piperson's dilemma in a single line: "the hens had seen this pig" (296). As Potter used robins to observe Peter Rabbit's reconnection to the animal world and to cheer his escape, in Piperson's integrated society, the hens can identify Pigling Bland were he reported missing, and as this is a world of *law*, Piperson is bound by it. If Piperson slaughters *this* stolen pig and his hens cluck to the authorities, he would break the county law that oversees both animals and humans and would then face legal, social, and financial ramifications. However, Pig-wig, another purloined piglet who is locked in Piperson's cupboard, faces immediate danger without similar eyewitness protection, this despite her pretty blue dress and proper manners. She knows her fate is "bacon, hams," but Pigling's horror at her unresisting, sacrificial nonchalance inspires her to action and leads both to subversion and escape.

To save themselves the pigs plan an escape, and their flight requires stealth and planning; Pigling even cautions Pig-wig to keep her peppermints wrapped lest their crisp scent attract Piperson's attention. Yet after successfully slipping away from Piperson's

house, Pigling and Pig-wig again face limitation and restraint. Pig-wig especially remains vulnerable as she travels under an assumed identity. The pigs exist in a world of subjugation and cater to its mandates to survive within the system. Their society views them both as animals and as children, either role inferior and subject to the dominant, adult power. In raising this issue, *Pigling Bland* reflects Potter's uncertainty regarding her future social and professional autonomy.

Potter occasionally included "herself" in her tales, particularly through narrative voice. She certainly drew her home and belongings into the illustrations of the Sawrey books, and in *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers*, she sketched herself standing in the distance, watching the rats run away with her wheelbarrow (193). Yet *Pigling Bland* is Potter's most blatant incorporation of "self," and this identity is complex and multilayered. Potter inserts a construction of herself into the tale; the human woman bending down to hand traveling papers to the pigs sports the tweeds Potter wore in photographs from this timeframe, as well as her distinctive, floppy hat. Helping the frazzled Aunt Pettitoes to maintain her unruly offspring, this illustrated Potter "impressively" delivers the fateful edict: "if you once cross the county boundary you cannot come back" (287). Pigling takes this statement as a warning, yet it resonates as one of Potter's many subversive challenges to her readers, and perhaps here to herself. Curiously though, in her pen and ink illustration, "Miss Potter" appears without a face, and with this blankness leaves room for further self-expression through other characters.

Something of Potter emerges in Pig-wig, though she vehemently denied Pig-wig and Pigling were portraits of herself and Heelis. Nevertheless, the love-struck lady pig daydreams over the embossed sentiments on the peppermint wrappers and, much like

Potter's situation, suddenly discovers a desire to run away from her dark fate with Pigling. In spite of her denials, this central plot-point speaks directly to Potter's real life experiences, this especially as Pigling was written during her engagement and published within days of her marriage to Heelis. Pigling, like Potter, bears the weight of "duty," and heads toward a goal set for him by others, until society's demands and restrictions drive him to subvert his mother's intentions to gain a farm, family, and life of his own. He crosses the county boundaries with Pig-wig *never to return*. This reflects Potter's own circumstances; she faced a similar choice between the obligation and responsibility she felt toward her parents as a good Victorian daughter versus her desire for a happy marriage and the freedom to live her own life separated from theirs.

During her eleven years with Warne, Potter experienced the literary "market." While publication provided the financial independence and stability she craved, at *Pigling Bland's* writing, Potter echoed her main character's desires – she simply wanted to work peacefully in her garden and enjoy the fruits of her success. However, outside demands increasingly monopolized the time and energy Potter hoped to invest in her properties and with her fiancé. Incredibly, as Potter maneuvered to legitimize her engagement and her personal freedoms to her parents, they devised ways to separate her from Heelis and the Lake District, requiring her presence at their side due to "emergency" situations. This included firing their entire household staff and even dismissing the ailing Rupert's nurse, luring Potter home to manage their now muddled affairs personally. Each time she was called back to London, Potter ended with an illness or physical ailment of her own (Lear 259). Around the same time, her publishers at Warne increased existing pressures with their insistent coaxing for Potter to produce a

new book every year. Their persistence frustrated and stifled Potter, who once wrote that her best stories developed from letters sent to children, not works produced on demand (*Letters* 132).

As Pigling and Pig-wig approach the bridge and the county border near the end of the picture book, Pigling meets the grocer at his cart and awaits his demands for “Papers? Pig licence?” (*Collected Tales* 306). Potter had already established that traveling without papers meant certain detainment and possible imprisonment or death, yet even the grocer’s suspicions over Pigling’s documents places the pigs’ freedom and lives in imminent danger. Anticipating this, Pigling acts lame and deaf, concealing his youth and vitality before the whip-wielding grocer’s social authority. Here, Potter imparts a world of ideological information; haunting this scene are echoes of the relations between humans and animals, adults and children, upper- and lower-classes, and even between the English and their imperial subjects. Imperial Britain applied similar approaches in South Africa, India, and any number of other colonial holdings worldwide. To maintain the hierarchy of power and control over the indigenous peoples in these conquered lands, the English imposed limitations on travel and gatherings, requiring their subjects to hold special “papers” that granted liberty of movement. Facing a like restriction, Pigling waits for the proper moment to subvert human authority, knowing that a hasty reaction could prove fatal. Pigling’s patience in dealing with the grocer re-establishes a recurrent theme in Potter’s work: effective rebellion requires impeccable timing. Like Pigling, Potter recognized the right time for decisive action in her own life. Ever-burdened by the oppressive, presumptuous influence of her parents, Potter took advantage of the moment when her brother Bertram stunned the family by revealing that he secretly married more

than a decade earlier. Moving quickly, she capitalized on her parents' shock and successfully pressed for a simple, hasty marriage to Heelis.

Just prior to writing *Pigling Bland*, Potter published *The Tale of Mr. Tod*, a story of “two disagreeable people” and widely considered Potter’s darkest book (253). Most critics fix *Mr. Tod* and *Pigling* in strict opposition, with *Mr. Tod* expressing Potter’s depression and her tumultuous relationship with her parents. *Pigling Bland*, in this binary, stands as Potter’s joyous escape “over the hills and far away” (308). While *Mr. Tod* does include a physical battle over the rightful occupancy of a home, *Pigling Bland* contains the swelling, ominous darkness created by continued and wearying limitations from social and domestic powers. Mr. Tod and Tommy Brock engage in a seemingly endless wrestling match and the abode around them sits in ruins for their rage, whereas Pigling and Pig-wig take proactive steps to subvert and escape, thereby earning their future domicile through their patience and ingenuity.

Like Pigling, Potter chose to cross the “county boundary,” leaving childhood ties – familiar and comfortable surroundings, but subjected to “duty” and others’ demands – for the independence and autonomy of adulthood and marriage. Pigling and Pig-wig “cannot come back,” yet ultimately they dance across that very boundary line and into a new life of their own making. In the illustration, the pigs cross the border not wild like Peter, but socialized – clothed and on their hind legs (308). Potter cleared her own hurdles in similar fashion. Conducting her rebellion within “acceptable” social parameters, she employed her talents to achieve liberty and happiness, all the while letting her own subversive voice come through. At age forty-seven, she finally took



permanent residence in Sawrey, and her marriage was a joyous one, entirely filling a long empty place in her life.

At the close of *Pigling Bland*, rabbit musicians play the tune Pigling and Pig-wig dance to as they escape hand-in-hand over the bridge and far away. Significantly, Potter identified one of the illustrated rabbits in this final, triumphant scene as Peter Rabbit himself (Lear 257). *Peter Rabbit's* success inspired Potter creatively, provided financially for her ever-increasing independence, and opened doors toward her eventual escape from the confines of home. The rabbits' – and especially Peter's – appearance in *Pigling Bland* brings Potter's story full circle. Kutzer writes that “it's as if the rabbits who gave [Potter] her first taste of freedom are finally letting her go to cross that bridge into a life of private happiness” (152). Accomplishing a definitive break from Bolton Gardens, Potter established new levels of internal and external autonomy. Her priorities shifted further outward after her marriage, and the picture books which follow *Pigling* bear the evidence of this marked alteration. The titles of Potter's late-period writing rarely attain the masterful storytelling and artwork of her early- and middle-career works, *The Tale of Johnny Town-Mouse* being a notable exception. Warne's constant pressure for new books (especially due to financial and managerial woes within the company) failed to move Potter, and indeed, annoyed her greatly (*Letters* 259). She still loved to write, but she intended to create on her own terms and for her own pleasure; Potter had achieved tangible independence in her daily life, a freedom that once only writing provided for her.

**“We Have a Little Garden, a Garden of Our Own”**

*Pigling Bland* marked a watershed moment in Potter's career. After *Pigling's* publication, her literary output slowed dramatically for numerous reasons, not the least of which being the onset of the First World War. Other obstacles combined with Potter's waning literary drive, including failing eyesight which hindered the new creation of her hallmark, finely-detailed illustrations. She continued to publish, but these later-authored titles never attained the masterful insight of Potter's earlier picture books, even though she conceived many of these stories and their artwork earlier in her career. *Appley Dappley's Nursery Rhymes* (1917) and *The Tale of the Faithful Dove* (posthumously published in 1955), for example, were originally planned for 1905 and 1908, respectively, and while 1918's *The Tale of Johnny Town-Mouse* stands out as Potter's best work of this period, its story is adapted from Aesop's fable *The City Mouse and the Country Mouse*.

At forty-seven, Potter had taken the literary world by storm, gained financial and physical freedom, found a balance between duty and following her dreams, and settled on the Lake District properties she adored with the husband she loved. Given the extraordinarily restrictive circumstances of her childhood and adult experiences, she gracefully and tenaciously worked with what assets she had, patiently and single-mindedly pursuing the desires closest to her heart. She wrote to achieve freedom, a freedom that extended and expanded through many levels of definition as the years progressed. Potter's accomplishments are noteworthy, given that the success she attained as a farmer and an author were not readily accessible for the majority of women during her time. Her literary achievements remain especially remarkable and important, specifically for the fact that her titles are picture books.

Potter overcame two difficult stigmas on her thorny path to success; the first was escaping her parents' ideological and psychological grip as a child trapped in the Victorian nursery; second, and equally significant, was Potter's struggle early on as an ambitious female in a culture dominated by men. In the end, Potter silenced her critics through the complexity of her storytelling and the determination and dignity which characterized her work and her life. While she published far fewer picture books in her later years, the tension between Potter's conservative and subversive tendencies found their outlet in the form of prizewinning farming, a growing political activism, and sustained environmental conservation efforts in the Lake District around Hill Top Farm.

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