“So I Shall Tell You a Story:”

the Subversive Voice in Beatrix Potter’s Picture Books

During the Victorian and Edwardian periods, Children’s Literature flourished and, with the great quantity and quality of titles produced, for the first time was recognized as its own distinct literary genre. Beatrix Potter authored her celebrated picture books at the height of this “golden age,” and since their creation, the books have garnered high praise for the sharp, precise wording of their stories and for their meticulously detailed illustrations. Yet the 1966 publication of Potter’s secret journal opened new avenues for interpreting the picture books, even as it revealed previously undiscovered complexities in Potter’s own personality. Facing society’s restrictions and limitations both as a child and a woman in Victorian culture, Potter found intellectual freedom through keeping a hidden journal, and in it she coded her social observations, astute cultural critiques, and personal dreams in an alphanumeric language of her own creation.

Potter worked within, yet against, the ideological system of her day, employing her creative talents to achieve emotional, financial, and physical independence from the patriarchal domination of Victorian English society and the manipulative, confining environment of her parents’ home and nursery at Bolton Gardens. She ceased recording her coded journal entries when she turned toward picture book writing as her key creative outlet. Potter’s picture books quickly proved her most successful source of income, but
at the same time they functioned as a repository for the subversive voice she had long expressed exclusively within her journal’s pages. These books clearly represent a continuation of the social and personal observations Potter first began in her journal.

With Leslie Linder’s decoding and publication of *The Journal of Beatrix Potter: 1881-1897*, scholarly perceptions of Potter’s life and works began to change. No longer was she viewed as a typical Victorian spinster writing moral tales for little hands; her unconventional and adventurous spirit, her scientific mind, and her keen cultural observations caused biographers and scholars alike to reexamine more than two decades of established scholarship. However, the *Journal*'s influence on critical interpretations of Potter’s picture books has been much slower in coming. Only recently has serious scholarship begun to read the books as a continuation of the *Journal*'s code-language; many of the same themes and topics Potter recorded in her journal recur within the picture book stories and address her maturing perspectives on the issues she wrestled with all through her life.

Representations of domesticity appear in almost every tale Potter wrote. She incorporates domestic themes in order to represent and slyly challenge Victorian, upper- and middle-class existence in terms of marriage, child-rearing, and the ordinary relations of power that ultimately prove to be unsettling relations of predation. From *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* to *The Tale of Little Pig Robinson*, Potter critiques the peculiarities of her own society, coding her subversive reactions to the excesses and hypocrisies of Victorian culture through the benign, unquestioningly moral, and socially acceptable format of the child’s picture book. Images of the eater and the eaten fill the majority of Potter’s works,
and she employs the systemic threat of physical consumption as a reaction against the imbalance of power and privilege in Victorian culture and its practices.

For this project, I selected three representative titles from Potter's collection of picture books; each book reflects certain characteristics of Potter's career, her everyday life, and her concerns during the major divisions in her writing life. *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, Potter's earliest and most well-known picture book, was first published commercially in 1902, and Potter recognized it held the means of reaching the financial and physical autonomy she so craved. Its story establishes her unapologetic support for the rebellious characters that populate her tales, even while Peter's adventures speak to Potter's—and the Victorian woman and child's—ambiguous status at home and in British culture. By 1904, Potter's success as a children's author was assured, and she began to realize the personal freedoms she long desired. *The Tale of Two Bad Mice*, a biting reproach of Victorian domesticity—and specifically, it seems, life in her parents' house—was written and published that year, just before Potter became engaged to her editor, Norman Warne, and purchased a home of her own, Hill Top Farm. After Warne's sudden and unexpected death, Potter increasingly utilized Hill Top as a refuge to write and draw. The books produced during the following "Sawrey" years are widely considered Potter's best, with the last title of this group, *The Tale of Pigling Bland*, reflecting the pull between duty and desire that Potter experienced throughout her lifetime.