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# Hidden kisses, walled gardens, and angel-kinder: A Study of the Victorian and Edwardian conceptions of motherhood and childhood in *Little Women*, *The Secret Garden*, and *Peter Pan*

Leah Marie Kirkpatrick  
*James Madison University*

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Hidden Kisses, Walled Gardens, and Angel-kinder:  
a Study of the Victorian and Edwardian Conceptions of Motherhood and Childhood  
in *Little Women*, *The Secret Garden*, and *Peter Pan*

Leah M. Kirkpatrick

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## Abstract

In this paper, I explore the evolving conceptions of childhood and motherhood as expressed in Victorian and Edwardian children's literature generally, and specifically in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, and J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*. An overview of the history of children's literature and its development with relation to the changing cultural concept of childhood, as well as a discussion of social, economic, and creative factors impacting the ideological position of women at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century provide the necessary background for said exploration. A variety of primary and secondary sources relating to relevant social history, artistic and literary movements, and the specific authors were consulted to ascertain the prevalent and emerging attitudes about women and children, and to determine how these were manifested in the books mentioned above.

The woman as the "Angel of the House" and the child as innocent were prevailing ideologies embraced in both America and Britain at the time. All three authors incorporate these ideas into their work, but each appropriates them uniquely, revealing personal biases. For Alcott and Burnett, the mother characters function as spokespersons for the metaphysical beliefs of the authors. *Little Women* retains traces of the Puritanical preoccupation with sin while simultaneously reflecting Alcott's progressive social attitudes resulting from her Transcendental roots. Marmee March embodies this duality by both advocating and challenging conventional femininity. Influenced by New Thought, Spiritualism, and Theosophy, Burnett adopts a hopeful view in which mothers, represented chiefly by the Madonna-like Mrs. Sowerby, and children are collaborators in bringing about physical and mental healing. Barrie's approach to the mother-child

relation, rather than metaphysical, is gendered and semi-erotic. He depicts a sustained tension between innocence (the child) and experience (the mother). Wendy Darling functions as the girl-mother through which Barrie probes the schisms between child and adult, male and female. Together, the three highlighted works provide a fairly comprehensive representation of the cults of childhood and the household angel as manifested in The Golden Age of children's literature.

## Introduction

The last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early ones of the 20<sup>th</sup> marked a time of great social upheaval in both England and America: new scientific, economic, and intellectual developments led to the divestment of older belief systems and modes of existence. The works of Freud, Darwin, and Marx all played a part in the crumbling of Christendom and the gradual replacement of an essentially religious worldview with a secular one. To fill the void left by religious disillusionment, new ideologies arose, providing a new center of meaning and comfort to replace the old. Among the most pervasive and lingering of these ideologies was the glorification of the Hearth and Home, with the innocent child and his ministering angel, his mother, at the center.

Intellectuals and artists of the day participated heavily in the creation and perpetuation of these ideologies. Of particular influence were Ruskin, Rousseau and Wordsworth, who between them created a comprehensive ideology about the separate spheres of the sexes and the inspired innocence of the child. Newfound middle class prosperity brought on by industrialization allowed middle class parents the novel luxury of catering to their children, and the installment of the woman as spiritual muse to her family within the cloisters of the home. The prevalence of bourgeois ideologies grew exponentially and ensured the propitiation of the new ideals of childhood and motherhood. The reinvention of childhood and motherhood occurred in tandem with the development of children's literature as a unique genre, one specifically aimed at celebrating the newly valued attributes of the child, youth and the imagination.<sup>1</sup> The idea of literature solely for the entertainment of the young was a significant departure from

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<sup>1</sup> Through out this discussion, the generalized term, "children's literature" refers specifically to children's literature of the Western world, which is distinct from the literary traditions of other world cultures.

older forms of literature for Western children, which had assumed the supremacy of original sin and aimed at moral and religious instruction. The period of explosion of children's literature in the late Victorian age is appropriately referred to as "the Golden Age of Children's Literature," for at this time, famed authors such as Lewis Carroll, George MacDonnell, Kenneth Graham and many others created some of the most enduring classics of the genre. Among those who remain popular even today are L.M. Alcott's *Little Women*, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, and J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*.

Written over a span of four decades and two continents, these three novels provide great insight into the pervading culture of the Golden (and Gilded) Age. All three have much to tell us about the nature of motherhood and childhood as conceived by the Victorians and Edwardians. Additionally, the diversity of authorial experience encompassed by these three particular writers allows for a multi-faceted examination of these ideologies from the perspectives of female and male, married and single, American and British, religious and secular, activist and sentimentalist. Finally, Alcott, Burnett, and Barrie, all incredibly popular both with their contemporaries and modern audiences, simultaneously perpetuated and critiqued the conventions of their day. The multi-layered nature of their texts lends them continued relevance in the intellectual discourse about gender relations and the nature of motherhood and childhood.



## Chapter 1: The Invention of Childhood and the History of Children's Literature

The years 1865 to approximately 1914 have been aptly deemed the “Golden Age of Children's Literature.” During this period, which began in the mid-Victorian era and extended through the Edwardian era,<sup>2</sup> English-speaking writers on both sides of the Atlantic produced some of the most enduring classics in the Western canon of children's literature. Yet, children's literature as a distinct genre was a relatively new phenomenon. In fact, the first book written expressly to entertain child readers did not appear until 1744, when John Newberry published *A Little Pretty Pocket Book: Intended for the Instruction and Amusement of Little Master Tommy and Pretty Little Miss Polly* (Georgiou 34). Prior to this landmark publication, children turned to adult fiction for entertainment, while books for children focused on religious, moral, or intellectual instruction.

The emphasis on instruction and lack of entertaining literature for the young are telling symptoms of cultural attitudes towards children prior to the Victorians. Before the Victorian era, childhood was not considered a particularly enviable state: families struggled to feed and clothe their numerous offspring and child mortality rates were high. Children were expected to contribute as soon as possible to the family's economic wellbeing, to obey and defer to their elders, and to somberly contemplate their spiritual standing before God because of the all too real possibility of an early death. This stern view of childhood does not, as some have argued, mean that parents during earlier ages

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<sup>2</sup> “Current scholarship employs loose subdivisions when defining the Victorian era: early (1837-1850), mid, or high (1850-1870s), and late (1880s-early 90s). While there are overlaps between these categories, each can be characterized by distinct attitudes” (Moran 2). Edward VII reigned from 1901 to 1910, but for the purposes of examining intellectual trends, the “Edwardian” era can be said to extend from the 1890s to August 1914, ending with the inception of the World War I (Hynes vii).

did not have strong affection for their children. Though it was once commonly accepted among scholars that parents in the Middle Ages and Renaissance practiced an emotional detachment from their offspring bred out of a psychological need to deal with the uncertainty of their survival, further study of primary sources and the depiction of children in the contemporary art and literature give a much more complex image of the parent-child relationship. Though normal treatments of babies and children (such as leaving babies perpetually swaddled and often unattended for long periods) appear negligent to modern eyes, these actions were generally performed out of ignorance rather than cruelty. The remorse expressed at the death of children in numerous accounts speaks to the verity of parental love. Yet, the attachment of parents and children was constantly threatened by the realities of high mortality rates for all ages, and the pressing necessity of survival (Cunningham 70). The family unit was in continual jeopardy: “the rate of break-up of the family through parental death in all centuries up to the twentieth century was roughly equivalent to our twenty-first century rate of breakup through divorce” (Cunningham 22).

The fragmentation of the family and the pressures of subsistence living often did facilitate cruel treatment of children, whether intentional or not. Suffering and death were somber realities, and childhood was a vulnerable period best outlived as quickly as possible. Ideological conceptions about the child’s physical, emotional, and spiritual capacities were shaped largely by the Catholic church in the Middle Ages and, following the Protestant reformation, by the Puritans. Early pagan Anglo-Saxon culture had viewed children as marginal, “almost sub-human” members of society, and infanticide was a relatively common practice into the Middle Ages (Cunningham 26). The adoption of

Christianity brought an improved status to the child because of the emphasis of salvation for each individual soul. Though some religious authorities expressed a belief in the inherent innocence of children even during this early time, “spare the rod and spoil the child” remained the pervading mantra of Medieval Christian child rearing (Cunningham 27- 29).



Fig. 1. “A domestic scene from 16<sup>th</sup> century France: mother with swaddled baby, a toddler in a walking frame and another child tempting the dog. Fires were normally in the center of rooms and coroners’ records reveal that babies and toddlers left on their own all too frequently had accidents. Godparents at baptisms were told to ensure that parents safeguarded their child from fire and other dangers” (Cunningham- color plates following p. 96).

During the Middle Ages, books were extremely costly and most people were illiterate, but an oral tradition mainly composed of Bible stories and chivalric tales of Arthur and Robin Hood provided a common literature. In extremely wealthy households where literacy and books existed children contented themselves with adult literature such as *Beowulf*, *Song of Roland*, and *El Cid*. In the European Renaissance (1500-1650), literacy was on the rise and books became slightly more affordable, but “most books

specifically for children were textbooks or educational books. Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Book Named the Governor* (1531) and Roger Ascham's *The Scholemaster* (1570) are two examples of 'books of courtesy,' giving lessons in proper behavior for young gentlemen" (Russell 5). The Renaissance shared the religious focus of medieval times, and *The Book of Martyrs* (1563), a gruesome anti-Catholic book, was extremely popular in England. A century later the first picture book ever printed appeared in the form of Comenius's *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, a book using pictures to instruct students in Latin (Russell 6).

The seventeenth century witnessed two significant influences on the evolution of childhood: the rise of Puritanism and the writings of John Locke. Following the Protestant reformation, the Puritans emphasized the existence of original sin in all people, as argued by Jonathan Edwards in *Original Sin*:

And that little children have a negative virtue or innocence, in relation to the positive acts and hurtful effects of vice, is no argument that they have not a corrupt nature within them: for let their nature be ever so corrupt, yet surely it is no wonder that they be not guilty of positive wicked action, before they are capable of any moral action at all. A young viper has a malignant nature, though incapable of doing a malignant action, and at present appearing a harmless creature. (Edwards 423)

Prompted by their fervent belief that each individual was responsible for his own salvation and that the Bible was God's infallible word, the Puritans fostered literacy as an essential spiritual tool for accessing spiritual texts. The Puritans were prolific writers of sermons and religious tracts, and under their influence the literacy of men, women, and children thrived. The high value placed on literacy was, however, aimed at encouraging

piety, not education alone: reading material for all ages was strictly censored and entertaining texts then circulating in inexpensive chapbooks, particularly traditional folktales, were frowned upon as both frivolous and, worse, morally corrupting (Georgiou 28-29). The two most widely read texts (excluding the Bible) were *The New England Primer* (1690), a doctrine-saturated set of rhymes designed to teach the alphabet, and Cotton Mather's *Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes in Either England, Drawn from the Breasts of Both Testaments for Their Souls' Nourishment* (1649). The "necessary preparation for death" and emulation of children who lived and died in an exemplary fashion were common literary fare (Georgiou 29). John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), though not specifically a "children's book" was eagerly consumed by adults as well as children (Norton 48). The adventurous action of the story sublimated beyond its moralizing intents, remaining popular long after its somber spiritual message fell from favor. The other two favorites from the period, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels*, were also written for adult audiences but found their way in to youthful hands. These two books foreshadowed the popular adventure stories written for children in the next century.

By the late seventeenth century, Western culture began to look beyond its fundamentalist beliefs, and the groundwork was laid for a massive overhaul of traditional conceptions about human nature, including the nature of children. The Age of Reason produced John Locke, whose theory of the child as a "blank slate" forever altered the popular conception of childhood (Russell 7). In his seminal work, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), Locke placed new emphasis on the impressionable nature of the child's mind: "the little and almost insensible impressions on our tender infancies

have very important and lasting consequences" (Locke 1). Because of this impressionable nature, Locke warned against teaching children folklore about goblins and magical beings, stressing instead that children "should be provided with easy, pleasant books suited to their capacities—books that encouraged them to read and rewarded them for their reading efforts but that did not fill their heads with useless 'trumpery' or encourage vice" (Norton 49). Perhaps even more significant was Locke's recommendation of milder child rearing methods, and his belief that the child is neither innately sinful, as the Puritan creed "In Adam's fall/ We sinned all" implies, nor born with an innate logical sense. Rather, he believed in the "gradual unfolding of this conscious mind," a "tabula rasa" shaped by experience and education. Locke memorably stated that: "I think I may say, that of all the men we meet with, nine parts of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education. "'Tis that which makes the great difference in mankind" (Locke 1). Corruption and sin, once thought to be inner demons, were now outside forces to be guarded against by watchful adults.

Another major contributor to the evolving conception of the child psyche followed closely on the heels of Locke: Jean Jacques Rousseau. Set forth in his book, *Emile* (1762) Rousseau's ideas about child development are in direct contrast with Locke's (Russell 9; Cunningham 114). While Locke emphasized the child's malleability and adult responsibility for impressing virtue upon children, Rousseau expounded on the attributes of the "noble savage," the natural state of the human being when he is uncorrupted by society. Children, argued Rousseau, because of their lack of exposure to society, were unpolluted. Advocating "the spontaneous and natural" and the "joyous unfolding of a child's powers through a free, happy life," Rousseau believed in

“accompanying” rather than guiding children in their search for knowledge (Georgiou 35; Norton 52). Childhood, he felt, was the one time in life of true happiness, and should be allowed to go on unhindered for as long as possible:

Love childhood, indulge its sports, its pleasures, its delightful instincts.

Who has not sometimes regretted that age when laughter was ever on the lips, and when the heart was ever at peace? Why rob these innocents of the joys which pass so quickly, of that precious gift which they cannot abuse? Why fill with bitterness the fleeting days of childhood, days which will no more return for them than for you. (Rousseau 51)



Fig. 2. *The Age of Innocence* (c. 1788) by Joshua Reynolds. This portrait of Reynold’s niece typifies romantic painting of children in the late 18th century.

Fig. 3. *The Wood Children* (1789) by Joseph Wright. The allusion to childhood play and the unrestrictive clothing hint at new child-rearing practices.



Fig. 4. *A Matron Old, Whom We School-mistress Name* (1791) in a tableau by Frances Wheatley inspired by ‘The School-Mistress,’ a poem by William Shenstone. “Dame schools were where many children learned to read. Later heavily criticized, here there is a sympathetic, almost sentimental, rendering, in line with the poet’s wish to show ‘how modest worth neglected lies’” (Cunningham: plates following p. 96).

Rousseau’s ideas found their way into churches, schools, and homes. From the mid-eighteenth century on, the child, at least in middle and upper class households, began to assume a new position as someone to be nurtured and valued rather than repressed and chastened. Practical expressions of this new freedom were demonstrated by the abandonment of swaddling infants, the adoption of simple, comfortable clothing for boys and girls, and approbation of play as an appropriate activity for children. There was also a marked increase of parental involvement, particularly maternal involvement, in the day-to-day doings of children. Breastfeeding became popular in the middle and upper classes and wet nurses more rare. Aside from nutritional benefits, this ensured closer parental



supervision. All of this served to improve the quality of life and survival rate of children (Cunningham 120-21).

On the literary front, Rousseau's ideas had an ironic impact. He himself opposed filling childish days with "bitterness" (i.e., lectures and moralizing), but his literary disciples wrote didactic stories intended to instruct children on how to be "good and proper human beings" (Cunningham 114; Russell 9). Many of these stories, particularly those by Maria Edgeworth, found a wide audience. "The Purple Jar" (1796) by Edgeworth, is the best known of these stories. In it the heroine shops for much needed shoes, but squanders her money. She pays for her frivolity when she is unable to participate in many activities because she does not have shoes. The authors of these moral tales were primarily female as writing children's literature was considered beneath the dignity of male authors (Russell 9). Though his writings did spawn mediocre didactic literature, Rousseau also inspired the literary giants of his age. His ideas dovetailed with the emerging Romantic concepts of the essential goodness and potential of the individual, and particularly, the child. Beginning with William Blake in the 1780's, an increasing number of poets rejected Puritan ideas about original sin in children and returned again and again to the theme of purity and innocent joy experienced only in childhood. Transformed by the works of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Clare in the Romantic era, childhood became an enviable state to be cherished, and, if possible, prolonged. Lines 64-70 of William Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" captures the Romantic vision of the child as innocent and sacred, as yet unblemished by life:

But trailing clouds of glory do we come

From God, who is our home:  
 Heaven lies about us in our infancy!  
 Shades of the prison-house begin to close  
 Upon the growing Boy,  
 But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,  
 He sees it in his joy. (187-88)

This new conception of the child was in harmony with the increased prosperity and influence of a growing middle class, who had time and money to lavish on their offspring. Emphasis on individualism, materialism, and nationalism were all qualities of this expanding class. “Economic success and intellectual achievements, particularly those linked with industry, consolidated the power and status of the bourgeoisie” (Norton 56). Celebrating the technological and scientific advancements of the time, the Great Exhibition (the first World's Fair) was held at the Crystal Palace in 1851, to international acclaim. But under the shining surface of the newly industrialized West lay a more tawdry reality.

The benefits of industrialization and new philosophies were slow to trickle down to the working poor. Increasing industrialization and subsequent exploitation of working class children was an ugly reality in Victorian England and America. “The rise of a highly competitive industrial technology, the growth of cities and the decline of rural traditions,” all placed poor children at great risk (Norton 56). Exploitation was widespread:

By 1841 the Select Commission reported that some children were kept at lace-making machines twenty-four hours a day; in 1843 the Miners

Commission reported that mine-working children and women were “chained, belted, and harnessed like dogs in a go-cart.” If they refused to work they could be sent to prison. (Bingham 149)

Though many middle and upper class Victorians were shocked by such reports, they were reluctant to question them because of the traditional notion that “society had a place for everyone and everyone should accept his lot according to the laws of creation... Even proposals of compulsory education, as well as meals for grossly undernourished children, were at first strenuously opposed as infringements of the rights of parents. Opponents felt that such assistance would also, along with undermining the family, lower personal initiative” (Bingham 149). Gradually, the plight of the poor improved as a series of reform bills were passed for their protection.<sup>3</sup> These reforms culminated in the creation of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1895, which gave children their first legal protection in history (Bingham 150). With the reform of working conditions came educational reform. Under the British Elementary Education Act of 1870, basic State Education became free for every child under the age of ten. Similar reforms were passed in America on a statewide basis: in 1854 Massachusetts was the first to implement compulsory school attendance (Bingham 155). The Sunday School movement was another powerful educational force, particularly in America. The purpose of the movement was to provide all children with religious and moral instruction and suitable reading materials, something that reformers felt were sorely lacking.

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<sup>3</sup> In 1886 the Age of Consent was raised to sixteen, making it illegal for children to be sold into prostitution by parents. The Prevention of Cruelty Act and the Poor Law Adoption Act of 1889 and the Custody of Children Act of 1891 protected children from abusive or neglectful parents (Bingham 154-57).

Though the Victorian age is often associated with an “emphasis on strictly controlled social behavior and Christian piety,” it was actually during this era that the pervasiveness of Christian orthodoxy in secular society began to lose its grip (Norton 56). One can almost say that the Victorians clung to the old ways that were about to be discarded with a fervent nostalgia for a simpler past and fear of an unbounded future. “Spiritual principles and outlooks were gradually eroded by the loss of confidence in Christianity, the decline of the Church’s importance in social affairs, and the growth of state power” (Moran 148). Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859), along with discoveries about fossils and geology, challenged core Victorian ideals about the origin of man and the role of God in the universe (Moran 57). In what seems to have been a collected attempt to create order in this increasingly confusing world, “middle class devotion to individualism and a fervent Evangelical Christianity were systematically embedded in cultural practices, ranging from ‘natural’ laws of free market economics to guidebooks on self-help” (Norton 67). Despite this institutionalization of religion, eroding religious orthodoxy spawned by both Romantic Humanism and advances in the sciences ushered in an era of both uncertainty and freedom. The public became increasingly secularized and with this secularization came a new acceptance of entertainment for its own sake.



Fig. 5. “‘Infant Joy,’ plate 25 from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (c. 1815-26) by William Blake. The luxuriant plant, its vast petal holding mother, baby and an angel, envelops the words of Blake’s poem, a celebration of life in its outset and of mother’s love. ‘I happy am/ Joy is my name,’ says the baby. ‘Sweet joy I call thee,’ replies the mother. ‘Thou dost smile’ I sing the while/ Sweet Joy befall thee.’ These lines, from *Songs of Innocence*, first published in 1789. The darker side of life was portrayed in *Songs of Experience* (1794)” (Cunningham- plates following p. 96).

Fig. 6. *The Mother’s Hope* (1808) by T. Rowlandson. This child, throwing toys and refusing to go to school, is a reminder that real children often failed to live up to the angelic ideal set forth by the Romantics. The child’s spirited independence is partially admired by the adult who wonders if he will be a “second Bonaparte” (Cunningham- plates following p. 96).

Entertaining books for children began to appear. Newbury's *A Little Pretty Pocket Book* was the first, openly claiming to "entertain" as well as "instruct" children. A handful of entertaining stories based on traditional folk tales followed on the international scene, reflecting the Romantic idealization of the rustic. Among the most popular were Charles Perrault's *Tales of Mother Goose*, Grimm's *Fairytales* (English version 1824) and *The Fairy Tales of Hans Christian Anderson* (1846), as well as original folk tales from American author Washington Irving, most notably *Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle* (Georgiou 37-39). Though some of these titles were not specifically for children, they garnered great approval from the young. Dime novels appeared in 1860, and provided cheap access to detective fiction like *Deadwood Dick* and imitations of novels by famous writers such as Dickens or Sir Walter Scott (Russell 16). Children's magazines were enormously popular. The numerous publications were often gender specific, providing boys and girls with literature specifically geared towards their distinct interests, as well as providing an attractive venue for inculcating and reinforcing socially approved gender behaviors (Russell 17). Some of the most popular of the magazines in America were *Youth's Companion*, published 1827-1929, *St. Nicholas* (1873-1940) edited by the famous Mary Mapes Dodge, author of *Hans Brinker; or, the Silver Skates* (1865). Popular British magazines were *Aunt Judy's Magazine* for girls, and *Union Jack* and *Pluck* for boys (Russell 17).

1865 was a landmark year for children's literature: it saw the publication of Lewis Carroll's (Charles Dodgson's) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Prior to this, the new books for children, though vastly more entertaining than their predecessors, were relatively simple moral tales dressed in bright colors. With *Alice*, all of the former rules

of the fledgling genre were ripped wide: “a delightful mixture of satire and nonsense and almost devoid of instructional moralizing, it is usually considered the first important work for children that completely broke the bonds of didacticism” (Russell 13). From this point forward, it was accepted that children’s books could and probably should embrace the whimsical. The Golden Age of Children’s literature had officially arrived. Authors of great import no longer considered a youthful audience beneath their dignity and flocked to conquer this new genre. Along with Lewis Carroll, R. M. Ballantyne and Anna Sewell wrote mainly for children, while other authors such as Anthony Hope and Robert Louis Stevenson wrote mainly for adults but are today considered children’s authors.

Several branches of children’s books emerged, most of them targeted at juveniles as opposed to younger children. Though widely varied in subject and tone, most Victorian children’s literature shares certain attributes:

An emphatic sense of duty to God and parents, the rise of the public school and Sunday School movements, and the beginning of a belief that children are individuals in their own right are among the characteristics of the Victorian era identifiable in the children’s literature of the time. Much Victorian children’s literature stresses the development of conscience, the merit of striving for perfection, and the male and female roles exemplified by family members. (Norton 67)

An enthusiastic transatlantic exchange of literature thrived during the Golden Age, and both British and American boys, in particular, craved the adventure stories foreshadowed by the earlier *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver’s Travels*. Mark Twain’s (Samuel L.

Clemens') *Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), though written for adults, became instantly popular with young people. In England, the expansive British Empire inspired stories often set in exotic locals, most memorably in Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) (Russell12).

As a focus of Victorian Life, the Home and Hearth were as significant in Victorian children's stories as were faraway lands. Frances Hodgson Burnett skillfully melded the realities of the day-to-day English culture with a touch of serendipity, foreign mystique, and American optimism to create deeply satisfying stories like *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1886), *A Little Princess* (1905), and *The Secret Garden* (1911). Another popular subgenre of Victorian children's literature melded the older tradition of moralizing with new demands for entertainment was "Domestic Fiction." Though many books of this school are too sentimental and preachy to appeal to modern audiences, several remain enormously popular, notably Louisa May Alcott's masterpiece of domestic drama, *Little Women* (1868), and later, in the Edwardian period, Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) and Eleanor Porter's embodiment of "sweetness and light," *Pollyanna* (1913).

Children's literature continued to serve a moral function, but did so in a more subtle fashion. Almost exclusively targeting a middle-class audience, this new genre inculcated the middle class values of the day. It "presented children with an ideal concept of selfhood for emulation... encouraging children to confront a dog-eat-dog world with courage, temperance, prudence, courtesy, self-reliance, and presence of mind." (Norton 58). When authors did address the lower classes, they often assumed a benevolent condescension, teaching readers to be kind to those less fortunate than



themselves. Orphan stories in which protagonists go from rags to riches were prolific. Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1885) and *A Little Princess* (1905), Jean Webster's *Daddy Long Legs* (1912), and Eleanor H. Porter's *Pollyanna* (1913) all romanticize the discomforts of their orphaned protagonists and provide a *deus ex machina* by which the unhappy orphan is transported to a life of comfort, affection, and, in some cases, opulence. The temporary sufferings of the child result in greater appreciation for newfound happiness, warding off any dangerous sense of entitlement or selfishness. This moral underpinning closely resembles the old didactic and religious tales' extortions to bear life's sufferings patiently in anticipation of the heavenly rewards to come.

Two "typical story patterns" identified by Robert Gordon Kelly encompass much of the literature of the era. The first is the "ordeal" in which a child is removed temporarily from the umbrella of protection provided by an adult. During this separation, the child encounters a situation which forces her to act. The circumstances "often seem contrived to emphasize sound character rather than sound reasoning." Once the child successfully passes the test, she is returned to the family circle and rewarded for her virtuous actions (Norton 59). Susan Archer Weiss's "Nellie in the Light House" (1877) is a perfect example of the "ordeal." The second pattern story is the "change of heart" in which a child who has not yet attained the "ideal of self-discipline and sound moral character realizes the need for improvement" (Norton 59). This pattern is easily recognizable in the character Mary Lennox in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1909).

Views on the child necessarily impacted Victorian conceptions on the role of the parents, and, specifically, mothers. Though they butted heads on many other issues, both the Romantics and the Evangelicals placed great emphasis on the intense bond between mothers and children (Cunningham 142).

Woman was at the center of the age's cult of the family, "the angel in the house," tending to the domestic altar. She was viewed as man's inferior—less rational, weaker, needing his protection; but at the same time, she was exalted for her spirituality, her moral influence. Man was the active one, the doer; woman was the inspirer and the nurturer. The spheres of work in the world and in the home were rigidly divided between the sexes. (Stark 4)<sup>4</sup>

Children's literature absorbed these clearly defined sex roles. It also reinforced racial prejudices of the imperialist England and slave-holding America. Illustrations for Victorian children's literature clearly capture the stereotypes being propagated at the time:

manhood [was] shown in the heroics of courageous soldiers or brave frontiersmen; lessons of race demonstrated by the examples of barbarous natives or uncivilized Dutchmen; and the complicated relationship between choice and duty set forth as an insistent expectation that the wars of school led to the games of war. A close relationship was established between the world of boys and the world of men. (MacDonald 33)

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the construction of Motherhood, see Chapter two.

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, so did the rule of Queen Victoria. Reigning from 1837 to 1901, Victoria came to embody the multifarious and sometimes contradictory values of the era during which she reigned (Norton 56). The following years, termed the Edwardian period, elude easy summarization. This relatively brief period is generally viewed as a “transitional phase, still very Victorian but gradually becoming modern, interesting mainly as a field of cultural ‘conflict of old and new’” (Rose xi). “Edwardian responses to Victoria’s death were a mixture of feelings: nostalgia for the order, confidence, and material well-being of the Victorian Golden Age; grief for the queen who had become a symbol of security; hope for the New Age to come; anxiety and apprehension for what the New Age might bring; deep depression at the late decline of High Victorian Idealism” (Hynes 16). One observer of the Queen’s funeral procession, Elinor Glyn, captured these conflicting emotions in her diary:

It was impossible not to sense, in the stately procession, the passing of an epoch, and a great one; a period in which England had been supreme, and had attained to the height of her material wealth and power. There were many who wondered, doubted perhaps, whether that greatness would continue; who read in the failures of the early part of the Boer War a sign of decadence, and, influenced perhaps unduly by Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* and by my French upbringing, I felt that I was witnessing the funeral procession of England’s greatness and glory. (qtd. in Hynes 17)

The long stasis of social order under Victoria had produced “an ossification of authority that encased and cramped the new: the forms of values had become the values; institutions had become more important than the ideas they embodied. If propriety

expresses the forms of morality without convictions, then the Edwardian period was an Age of Propriety, of propriety carried to absurd extremes” (Hynes 6). Conventional standards of behavior with origins in the evangelical ethics of the eighteenth century “had become rigid and empty gestures of decorum, important not because of their implied moral rightness, but because they seemed to protect social stability, public morals, religion, and the British Empire against the threat of change” (Hynes 6).

And so, there was a never-ending tension for the Edwardians to simultaneously cling to and cast off the old standards. Pushing for a cultural revolution, the Decadent movement in art and literature tested the boundaries of art through witty and stinging critique of Edwardian society. Other writers and intellectuals sought to find a balance between old and new, replacing religious piety with a worshipful attitude towards life itself without being specifically irreligious (Ellmann 196). Among these were James Joyce, William Butler Yeats, Joseph Conrad, and Kipling. Realism and Naturalism replaced the overly sentimental and moralistic Victorian novel, and authors explored and critiqued the world of the middle class, everyday life of ordinary people, and the expansion of the British empire.

Outside of the literary realm, the populace suffered from uncertainty about the future course of England. The prevalence of reform groups reflects the anxiety of the more conservative segments of society. Sanctioned by the evangelical wing of the Church of England and by Roman Catholics, voluntary organizations with the goal of bettering the morals of others were so prevalent that by “1910 there were enough in London alone to be collectively organized as a Conference of Representatives of London Societies Interested in Public Morality” (Hynes 280). In 1895, Oscar Wilde’s infamous

trials for homosexual acts prompted a sharp public reaction against Decadence and reaffirmation of traditional modes of thinking. Circulating libraries attempted to impose censorship of any materials that could lead to the moral deterioration of readers (Hynes 300-302).

The concern for and interest in children begun in the old era flourished in the new. The ideas about children begun in the Victorian era were now widely recognized: it was acknowledged that “children are different from adults; they have different needs, sensibilities, and habits of thinking; that they cannot be educated, worked, or punished like adults; that they have rights of their own independent from their parents” (Rose 178). In support of these beliefs, there were continued reform acts all aimed at improving the status of children. Free school meals became available in 1906, school medical inspections in 1907, subsidized milk dispensaries in 1899, and the “Children’s Charter” of 1908, “a comprehensive child-welfare bill directed against parental abuse and mistreatment of juvenile offenders. Additionally, a series of reform acts between 1902 and 1907 doubled the proportion of children attending secondary school” (Bingham 149).

Following the publication of William McDougall’s *Introduction to Social Psychology* (1908), “elementary schools began to allow students more freedom to study at their own pace, choose their own reading, learn by discovery, and indulge in creative art” (Rose 179). Poor children began to benefit from the beneficence towards the young: orphanages were gradually displaced by more welcoming foster homes, cottages, and residential schools, and charitable organizations, including the Fresh Air Fund which provided slum children the opportunity to spend time in the countryside (Rose 179). Municipal playgrounds and school athletic programs also flourished as the “child’s right

to play” became acknowledged. Though much of the child-welfare movement was probably the result of disinterested altruism towards children, it can be argued that the adults active in these reforms were indulging in their own nostalgia about childhood as an escape from the unsettled adult world. Games and sportsmanship quickly became a fascination for Edwardians of all ages. “Games had become a mania, even at girl’s schools, and the British upper and middle classes were thoroughly steeped in the cult of sportsmanship. School nostalgia found expression in the old boy’s associations, most of them founded between 1885 and 1902. Through these alumni groups graduates supported their old teams, celebrated their old victories, and continued to play cricket and football with their old school rivals” (Rose 181).

Another expression of this childhood nostalgia was the continued development of rich and plentiful children’s literature. “No other generation in English history has produced so many children’s classics as the Edwardians” (Rose 181). “By 1895 the editors of the Publishers’ Circular declared that ‘so-called juvenile works are nowadays so well written, that often they suit older readers quite as well as those for whom they are primarily intended’” (Rose 183). From that year forward, the editors actually abandoned their former practice of classifying literature by age group (Rose 183). The fascination with childhood and popularity of juvenile literature led to the exploration of a new narrative style: for the first time, authors attempted to write from the point of view of a child. Earlier works by the Victorians, such as *Jane Eyre* and *David Copperfield* employed an adult narrator reminiscing about childhood. The Edwardians took the next logical step. The approach was pioneered by Kipling in his *Jungle Books* (1894, 1895), followed closely by Kenneth Graham in *The Golden Age* (1895). The new narrative form

evolved in complexity until Barrie could declare of his *Peter Pan* that “All the characters, whether grown-ups or babes, must wear a child’s outlook as their only important adornment” (Rose 183).

The line between fantasy and reality became increasingly blurred as authors played with their ideas of a child’s perception. Many of the titles of the era that have stood the test of time are fantasies, including George McDonald’s *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), Rudyard Kipling’s exotic and fanciful *Jungle Book* (1894), Beatrix Potter’s charming *Tales of Peter Rabbit* and friends, J.M. Barrie’s enigmatic play-turned-novel, *Peter Pan* (1904),<sup>5</sup> and Kenneth Graham’s luminous work, *The Wind in the Willows* (1908). Though fantasy of the period tended to be more popular with the British than the pragmatic American youth, American author L. Frank Baum broke the mold with his uniquely American fantasy, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) (Russell 13). The Golden Age, particularly its Edwardian portion, is marked by an appreciation for fantasy, magic, and humor unmarred for the first time by religious censure (Darton 256-57). This genre provided the perfect retreat for authors, children, and adults from the uncertainties of the age.

Though the Edwardian era lingered after the death of its namesake, the beginning of the end of the era coincided with his death. At least to the public, Edward VII showed the face of the typical Englishman as understood by the Victorians: “‘ordinary, philistine, independent, dutiful,’ it is an image derived from an imperial age of solidity and confidence, and has little relation to the changing political and social realities of Edward’s reign.” The king died on May 6, 1910, and with him died the popular

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<sup>5</sup> See chapter four.

“conception of what it meant to be English” (Hynes 350). Edward had in many ways attempted to carry the torch of his Queen mother. With his death came the contemplation of uncharted territory after a long period of predictability. Shortly after Edward’s death, a contemporary journalist for the *New Age* pondered, “If it is felt, as it is clearly felt, that the era of Victoria is indeed and at last over, who is so bold as to dare forecast the nature of the epoch that is now opening?” (Hynes 350). Four years later, the beginning of the first World War definitively ended the Edwardian Era and ushered in the Age of Modernism.



## Chapter 2: An Angel in the House: the Victorian and Edwardian Wife and Mother

The nineteenth century witnessed the creation of the household “angel,” a saintly wife and mother presiding over her domestic sanctuary. Centered around this angelic figure, “The Cult of Domesticity” found expression in all facets of culture, including juvenile literature. The shift from a community-based family identity to the glorification of the nuclear family stemmed from industrialization and the subsequent migration of paid work out of the home. Men commuted to their work and the “family lost its function as an economic unit.” Home became self-contained and privacy paramount; hence, the “spatial development of suburbs in urban areas as families sought single family dwellings were they could be even more isolated from others.” Women, formerly accustomed to working alongside their husbands, were increasingly marginalized, becoming “cultural hostages” in their own homes (Lavender 1).

If they did go out to work, middle class women were largely restricted to “nurturing” roles like teacher, governess, or companion. The trend of middle-class women earning their living by caring for spoiled children or aged relations is demonstrated in Alcott’s *Little Women*, when both of the eldest March sisters must help support their family, Meg as a governess and Jo as companion to her Aunt March. Feminine employment was considered by most a necessary evil rather than vocational, as was men’s work: societal rules dictated that middle-class women give up work outside the home after they married. Writing was one of the few professions in which women could experience a measure of prestige, but here again, their work was limited to “topics and genres deemed suitable to their sphere and expertise: the refined arts, the management of the home, love, courtship, marriage, family life and fidelity” (Moran 37).

Despite these limitations, “eminent writers like George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning demonstrated women’s intellectual and artistic talents, while popular authors like Ellen (Mrs. Henry) Wood, Margaret Oliphant and Mary Elizabeth Braddon proved that women could succeed in the commercialized literary marketplace” (Moran 37). A handful of ambitious women in other fields, notably the nurse, Florence Nightingale, achieved professional success, but such cases were exceptional. As the workplace became increasingly masculine,

the world of the home was defined as female. Part of its value lay in its leisurely aspects. Woman increasingly became a complement to leisure, a kind of useless but beautiful object, set off by her special setting. The nineteenth-century household was cluttered with beautiful, ornate objects... Colors were muted--dark and velvety--all to surround, darken, and deepen the quiet of the home, and to accentuate the softness, submissiveness, and leisure of the woman within it, the angel of the house (Lavender 1).

Dickens captured the ideal home life in his “Sketches of Young Couples:”

Before marriage and afterwards, let [couples] learn to centre all their hopes of real and lasting happiness in their own fireside; let them cherish the faith that in home... lies the only true source of domestic felicity; let them believe that round the household gods, contentment and tranquility cluster in their gentlest and most graceful forms; and that many weary hunters of happiness through the noisy world, have learnt this truth too late, and found a cheerful spirit and a quiet mind only at home at last. (Dickens *Sketches* 1)

The private home was the bedrock of Victorian culture, superior in its moral influence to public institutions. In Chapter XII of *Self-Help* (1859), Samuel Smiles called the Home “the crystal of society—the nucleus of national character; and from that source, be it pure or tainted, issue the habits, principles and maxims which govern public as well as private life. The nation comes from the nursery” (2). “As constructed by... cultural commentators, home and family were potent forces, amounting, at least in the abstract, to a secular religion” (Nelson 6). In his lecture entitled “Of Queens’ Gardens,” delivered in 1864 and published the following year as a part of *Sesame and Lilies*, John Ruskin depicted the home as an extension of the feminine: “And wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her. The stars only may be over her head; the glowworm in the night-cold grass may be the only fire at her foot: but home is yet wherever she is” (Ruskin 146-47).

As set forth by Ruskin and other like-minded writers, “this ideal of womanhood had essentially four parts... ‘piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness’ (Lavender 1). In place of the older model of the Puritans in which the man was the spiritual leader of the home, the Victorian woman became the spiritual advisor of the family. Hand in hand with piety came the emphasis on feminine purity. Women were exhorted to zealously guard physical and moral transparency, their primary contribution to society:

She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise— wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side: wise, not with the narrowness of insolent and loveless pride, but with the passionate gentleness of an infinitely variable, because

infinitely applicable, modesty of service — the true changefulness of woman. (Ruskin 147)

This is why Victorian women (and those who advised them) were so concerned about maintaining all appearances of propriety, sometimes to the point of absurdity. It was during this period, for example, that legs were first referred to as “limbs” and it became the vogue to disguise chair legs with upholstery lest they call to mind their indecent human counterpart. In the name of protecting purity, “women’s bodies were policed through social instruments, ranging from clothing fashions to the ready acceptance of sexual double standards which punished women, but forgave men, for erotic experience outside marriage.” Women who stepped outside of the bounds of propriety risked social exclusion and, in cases of sexual indiscretion, institutionalization (Moran 36).



Fig. 7. August Egg’s *Past and Present* (1858) depicts the downward path of an adulterous woman. Though the room is conventional, it contains many hints of the household’s disorder: “the painting over her husband’s portrait on the right is of a

shipwreck, over hers on the left the expulsion from the Garden of Eden; her children play with a pack of cards, a clear sign she is a bad mother who allows them knowledge of gambling; and...their house of cards is built on... a French novel... ‘Balzac’” (Flanders following 228).

Fig. 8. “George Elgar Hick’s triptych, *Woman’s Mission* (1863), shows three stages of womanhood: as mother, as caregiver to the elderly, and here, as wife or, as Hicks named her, ‘Companion to Manhood.’ ...The breakfast table has been carefully set, with her husband’s post neatly arranged in front of a bright fire; he wears embroidered slippers, presumably stitched by her, and, as he flinches from the bad news contained in the black-bordered letter in his hand, she rushes to his side, half-supporting, half-clinging: the model wife” (Flanders: following 228).

Women were expected to derive pleasure and satisfaction solely within the context of family relationships. In her advice book, *Daughters of England*, Mrs. Ellis praised the woman whose “whole life, from cradle to the grave is one of feeling, rather than action; whose highest duty is so often to suffer, and be still; whose deepest enjoyments are all relative; who has nothing, and is nothing, of herself; whose experience, if unparticipated, is a total blank” (qtd. in Robson 56). In other words, women were to find all of their personal satisfaction in making others happy, with no thought to their own desires. That this was sometimes thankless work only heightened the sacred nature of the woman’s calling as wife and mother. Coventry Patmore idealizes the long-suffering wife in Canto IX, Book I, “The Sahara” of his *The Angel of the House*:

Man must be pleased; but him to please  
 Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf  
 Of his condoled necessities  
 She casts her best, she flings herself.  
 How often flings for nought, and yokes  
 Her heart to an icicle or whim,  
 Whose each impatient word provokes  
 Another, not from her, but him... (1)

The Victorian home emphasized a separation of spheres, the world of work belonging to men, that of the home, to women. Ruskin famously articulated these spheres in *Sesame and Lilies*. In Ruskin's model,

Man was to be the risk-taker, the protector, the partner toughened by contact with the world. His strength, and his willingness to be coarsened morally by his exposure to conflict and corruption, would provide a safe place for woman to carry out her own duties, including not only the maintaining of a pleasant and tranquil home but also the moral uplifting of its occupants. Home would therefore function both as a respite from the knockabout public sphere and as an antidote to it—even, perhaps, a means of transforming it, if the woman succeeded in expanding her domestic power to serve and improve the state, as Ruskin encouraged her to do. If man's protection of woman enabled home to exist, the woman would use the home she ruled to protect the man in turn. (Nelson 6-7)

Nineteenth century religious dogma reinforced the separation of spheres and domestic calling of women. “Evangelical ideas had linked... womanliness to women carrying out their biological destiny—to being wives and mothers... To expect to have any other job was a rejection of their God-given place” (Flanders 13). Though she reigned as ministering angel within her home, the woman was considered particularly vulnerable to the evils of the world outside. “She feels herself weak and timid. She needs a protector. She is in a measure dependent. She asks for wisdom, constancy, firmness, perseveredness, and she is willing to repay it all by the surrender of the full treasure of her affection. Women despise in men everything like themselves except a tender heart. It is enough that she is effeminate and weak; she does not want another like herself” (Burnap 47). Ideally, then, the man and the woman each brought unique strengths to marriage, together forming a united front against the evils of the world. These strengths, rather than individual, were firmly gendered, the male physically and mentally stronger, the woman morally superior.

The science of the day provided further support for the Cult of Domesticity. Victorian scientists and physicians assumed that women were physically inferior to men based on their smaller stature, their tendency to faint (though generally caused by the lack of exercise and restrictive dress), and the assumption that menstruation basically incapacitated women on a monthly basis. In fact, it was believed that menstruation could bring on temporary insanity. The female reproductive system was central to Victorian understandings of female health: illness of any sort was attributed to a flaw in a woman’s reproductive system. In addition to being physically fragile in comparison to men, women were also deemed intellectually inferior. This assumption was partly based on the

smaller size of the female brain, although brain size has no known correlation with intelligence.

Certain pervading views of human sexuality also impacted nineteenth century gender roles. For one, it was commonly believed that the human body is a closed system with a limited amount of energy. “The expenditure of energy must, therefore, be closely regulated, because one activity would drain energy from another” (Lavender 1). Excessive sexual activity was therefore considered dangerous, particularly for pregnant or breastfeeding women who needed to focus their energies on their child. Another assumption was that the sexual instinct is strong men but largely absent in women (at least, in well-bred women). Women, it was assumed, had a lesser amount of “life force” than men, and were therefore encouraged to refrain from rigorous intellectual or physical activity, particularly during the reproductive years. Men, in turn, were encouraged to moderate their sexual activities to prevent overtaxing their “life force.” The female’s assumed indifference to sex was lauded as a natural check on men’s virility. Sexual appetite in women was threatening because of its potential to sap the strength of a man’s system.

Just as too much sexual activity was considered harmful, abstinence also had negative effects. Because Motherhood was woman’s intended function, spinsters and celibates were “fated to experience a greater incidence of physical and emotional disease, a shorter life span, and a reproductive system under constant pressure and therefore prone to cancer and degenerative ills” (Lavender 1). The ideal for both genders from a health perspective, then, was sex within the temperate environment of marriage. Though a moderate amount of sexual activity was deemed healthy, romantic attraction was



considered secondary to other considerations in marriage. “A union founded primarily upon physical attraction could drag partners down by emphasizing their lower natures. Conversely, one founded upon feelings of mutual responsibility and self-sacrifice would raise a husband and wife alike to a higher level” (Nelson 28). Victorian thought attributed natural spirituality to the woman and animalistic qualities to men: therefore, it was primarily the woman’s responsibility to create a virtuous framework for sexual relations. In the February 1892 publication of *The Nineteenth Century*, Lady Mary Montgomerie Singleton argued, “that women enter into sexual union because they long for the responsibility and purification that running a home and starting a family were expected to entail for Victorians of a certain class; men enter these unions because they long for physical release” (qtd. in Nelson 37). “Many Victorians believed that [wives] existed to tame and control such desire, turning it into the motivation to protect and provide for one’s spouse and children rather than focusing on sensual gratification” (Nelson 19).

Part of the Victorian wife’s ability to continually captivate her husband was the exclusivity of her sexual experience within her marriage, that is, her sexual innocence. “For some men, this criterion was so important that their symbol of romantic perfection became the girl rather than the woman... The Victorians had inherited from their forbearers of the late eighteenth century a readiness to celebrate the “girl-wife,” young, sweet, and clinging” (Nelson 19). The idea was that the world-wearied man was refreshed and his faith restored by the loving trust bestowed upon him by his naïve wife. Her complete dependence instilled in him renewed self-respect and a determination to succeed in order to protect and provide for his helpless wife and children. “The child-



practicing such schemes as may be for the real benefit of mankind, becomes in her, a matter of ridicule, a subject for merriment, impertinence not to be endured” (qtd. in Flanders 248).

In contrast with her role in the family parlor of an evening, the day job of the middle-class wife was far from simple.

Middle class wives’ jobs typically included keeping the account books, overseeing home decoration, planning menus in consultation with the cook, ordering groceries and household supplies, sewing or purchasing clothing for all members of the household, hiring and firing employees to care for the house and the children, teaching the youngest children, maintaining the family’s network of acquaintances by making and receiving morning visits, and acting as hostess at social occasions from children’s parties to formal dinner. (Nelson 26)

Housework was considered to be an ideal occupation for women, “as its unending, nonlinear nature gave it a more virtuous air than something that was focused and could be achieved and have a result” (Flanders 16). “Housekeeping was a source of strength for women, through which they could somehow mystically influence their husbands and improve their own natures” (Flanders 16). In Dickens’ *Bleak House*, Caddy Jellyby hopes to become “better-tempered and more forgiving” through learning domestic skills like sewing and buying a leg of mutton. By contrast, Mrs. Jellyby’s absence from home and subsequent neglect of her chores is projected to lead to her husband’s ruin (Dickens *Bleak* 276).

If a woman failed to live up to her duties in keeping home peaceful and tidy, she could blame no one but herself if her husband sought solace elsewhere.

The man who goes home from his work on a Saturday only to find his home in disorder, with every article of furniture out of its place, the floor unwashed or sloppy from incomplete washing, his wife slovenly, his children untidy, his dinner not yet ready or spoiled in the cooking, is much more likely to go “on a spree” than the man who finds his house in order, the furniture glistening from a recent polishing, the burnished steel fire-irons looking doubly resplendent from the bright glow of the cheerful fire, his well-cooked dinner laid on a snowy cloth, and his wife and children tidy and cheerful. (Wright 189-90)

In *Little Women*, Meg nearly escapes alienating her husband by allowing her attentions to her twins to usurp her wifely duties. It is only after a heart-to-heart with her mother that she comes to realize her mistake and to mend her ways. Meg’s attempts at reconciliation appear very conventional, consisting of putting the children to bed early, dressing nicely, and having a good meal ready when her husband returns home from his work. Through Marmee, however, Alcott adds a progressive twist to her advice for restoring nuptial bliss. When Meg comes to Marmee with her marital woes, Marmee does not blame Meg or make her feel unwomanly in her discontent; instead, she reminds Meg that in order to successfully fulfill her job as “the sunshine maker of the family,” Meg must care for herself as well as her family. She encourages her to go out more and not to “shut herself up in a bandbox because she is a woman,” but to educate herself about politics and other matters of public interest so that she can provide her husband with intellectual food as

well as a full stomach (Alcott 308). These added ingredients for a successful marriage, care for one's personal happiness and valuing of a woman's intellectual capacity, are probably part of the reason for *Little Women's* continued popularity. Alcott's forward-thinking attitude was rare in the prevailing literature, however, and many books, particularly those in the advice genre, preached the high road of self-mortification on the altar of domesticity.

Advice manuals aimed at middle class women were extremely popular. Popular titles in this genre include Isabella Beeton's *The Book of Household Management*, (1861) and Sarah Stickney Ellis' series, begun in 1839, on female domestic roles (*The Women of England, The Wives of England, The Mothers of England, The Daughters of England*).

Such works provided a number of desirable things to their readers, including the recognition that wifehood did not always come naturally and that the job of the middle-class Victorian wife was neither uncomplicated nor easy... They often contained not only recipes but also advice on meal presentation, laundry... the managing of kitchen staff, household economy, and the like; Beeton, indeed touches upon subjects from drainage and ventilation to domestic law. (Nelson 26)

Women were continually exhorted by advice book authors to practice selflessness. *Female Piety, or The Young Woman's Friend and Guide* advised readers that "It is essential to your making home happy, that there should be much self-denial—a spirit of forbearance—an occasional surrender for the sake of peace...-- willingness to forgo what you can righteously claim as your own" (qtd. in Flanders 313). Ellis put the situation quite bluntly: "It is quite possible you may have more talent [than your husband], with

higher attainments, and you may also have been generally more admired; but this is nothing whatever to do with your position as a woman, which is, and must be, inferior to his as a man” (qtd. in Flanders 14). This separation of personal ability from the responsibilities of wife and mother are present even in juvenile literature. In *Little Women*, Jo is often despondent because her ambitions to write and her natural inclination towards “boyish” dress and pursuits are at odds with her destiny as a “little woman.” Her eventual fate as wife to a middle-aged German scholar and mistress of a boy’s school attempts to redirect her longings into an acceptable framework. In *Peter Pan*, Mrs. Darling is described as possessing an “innermost box and a kiss in the corner of her mouth,” both of which are unattainable to her husband (Barrie 69). Despite his inability to truly know his wife, “Mr. Darling used to boast to Wendy that her mother not only loved him but respected him. He was one of those deep ones who know about stocks and shares. Of course no one really knows, but he quite seemed to know, and he often said stocks were up and shares were down in a way that would have made any woman respect him” (Barrie 69-70). Respect for his place as the head of the house, rather than emotional intimacy, is what ultimately spells success in marriage to Mr. Darling.

Another worrying situation often addressed in the advice books is the frequent absence of the father and his resultant ignorance of the household he was supposed to rule. The advice book’s antidote for this complaint was a reaffirmation of the male’s supremacy as breadwinner for the family: “The most important person in the household is the head of the family—the father... Though he may, perhaps, spend less time at home than any other member of the family—though he has scarcely a voice in family affairs—though the whole household machinery seems to go on without the assistance of his

management—still it does depend entirely on that active brain and those busy hands” (Farningham 10ff). This idea of the absent but esteemed father is clearly depicted in *Little Women*: Mr. March is away at war but continues to exert great influence over his daughters through his letters. Later, on his return, he remains in the background:

To outsiders, the five energetic women seemed to rule the house, and so they did in many things; but the quiet man sitting among his books was still the head of the family, the household conscience, anchor, and comforter; for to him the busy, anxious women always turned in troublous times, finding him, in the truest sense of those sacred words, husband and father.  
(Alcott 190)

In addition to her devotion to her husband and managing her household, the Victorian woman was expected to be a model mother. This task was complicated by the “professionalization” of motherhood in the second half of the century. Doctors, teachers, and others took it upon themselves to prescribe advice on all facets of motherhood. A *Few Suggestions to Mothers on the Management of Their Children* (1884), for example, was confident that mothers could not act “without knowledge or instruction of any kind... [The belief that they could] is one of the popular delusions which each year claims a large sacrifice of young lives” (Flanders 50-1). Despite professional concerns about the fitness of mothers to rear their children effectively, women were generally their children’s first teachers. Lessons for both genders began at age two or three. Boys went to school at age seven, but mothers were generally responsible for the entire education of daughters. Governesses were more scarce than we commonly think: it was the aspiration of the middle class family to employ a governess, but in reality, “there were over 30,000

upper-class families by mid century, with 25,000 governesses listed in the census of 1851. If we assume that only half of these families had young children, that leaves a mere 10,000 governesses to be spread among the families of the 250,000 professional men listed in the 1851 census” (Flanders 86).

“The mystique surrounding motherhood was partially based on an awareness of the discomfort and danger that accompanied producing a baby” (Nelson 47). Childbirth was not the principal cause of death [tuberculosis was], but “it was nonetheless perceived as involving more physical peril than any other part of the average woman’s life... For every thousand living infants born, approximately five mothers died” (Nelson 47). Women giving birth in hospitals were at great risk of contracting puerperal fever from inadequate sanitation: between 1885 and 1896, the death toll from this cause peaked at 2.6 per thousand newborns. Miscarriages, accounting for 20 percent of all pregnancies, were riskier than live births, raising maternal mortality even further. Finally, women who sustained more than five pregnancies were at greater risk for complications (Nelson 47). Although Motherhood was glorified in the culture, prudish attitudes towards sex and the body made the physical realities of motherhood embarrassing subjects to be hidden from the public eye (this is when the stories of babies brought by storks or in the doctor’s little black bag first circulated). Women were expected to enter “seclusion” once pregnancy was confirmed. This often meant years of being virtually homebound for some women, for by the 1870’s, women spent “approximately a dozen years of married life either pregnant or breastfeeding... Women had an average of 5.5 births (although somewhat fewer children were born alive), with 80 percent of women having their first child within a year of marriage” (Flanders 50). Autonomy of mothers with infants was further



limited by breastfeeding, which was described by the advice writer, Mrs. Beeten, as “a period of privation and penance” continuing for “between nine and fifteen months” (qtd. in Flanders 58). “Caroline Clive, an upper-middle-class woman, referred to her child’s coming to ‘feed upon me,’ and she confessed that although she loved him now, a couple of months after his birth, ‘I did not care much about him the first two days’” (qtd in Flanders 68). The exhaustion of childbirth without any pain relief, (save chloroform after it was popularized by Queen Victoria’s use of it in labor), combined with the recommended scant diet, heavily curtained room, and complete lack of exercise, surely contributed to the indifference felt by many new mothers towards their infants (Nelson 47; Flanders 51-53). This indifference sometimes lingered, particularly in well-to-do families where the care of the children was almost entirely left to servants. The Nursery was an invention of the Victorians, providing a separate space in the home where children lived. “The separate nursery space, in retrospect, symbolizes the distance that we perceive to have been in place between parents and their children” (Flanders 68). “It appears that some parents might not merely have been ignorant of children’s daily routines and needs, but to a point were proud of being ignorant. Initially it might be thought of as a purely upper-class trait, fostered by having large numbers of servants, yet it occurred across the social spectrum” (Flanders 67). This separation between parents and children reflected the adult-centric nature of early Victorian society: namely, that children should not “interfere unduly with the comfort of the heads of the establishment” (Flanders 73). By the 1890’s, however, the ideas of the Romantics and Rousseau had taken hold, and rather than children being inconvenienced for their parents’ comfort, parents, or mothers, at least, felt it their duty to sacrifice their personal comfort for their

children's sake. This shift is evident in the diary of Marion Jane Bradley, who kept a diary of her children's first years, from 1853-1860. In about 1891, she reread it and added a note to the manuscript: "I tried to make our children fill their proper subordinate places in the family—Father always to be first considered, their arrangements to be subject to his... Not to seem anxious about their health or to fuss over their comfort or convenience, but to make them feel it was proper for them to give up and be considered secondary. Of course, this is quite old fashioned" (qtd. in Flanders 75). In her diary entry for March 10, 1835, Mrs. Gaskell also remarked on this change in her own personal child rearing philosophy:

I don't think we should carry out the maxim of never letting a child have anything for crying. If it is to have the object for which it is crying I would give it, directly, giving up any little occupation of my own, rather than try its patience unnecessarily. But if it is improper for it to obtain the object, I think it right to with-hold the object steadily, however much the little creature may cry... *I think it is the duty of every mother to sacrifice a good deal rather than have her child unnecessarily irritated.* (Gaskell 52: Italics my own)

The financial sacrifices of the same Mrs. Gaskell and her husband reflect even more keenly their focus on their children rather than themselves: "Because of the cost of Marianne's schooling and the larger house they had bought, 'we aren't going to furnish the drawing-room, and mean to be, and are very economical because it seems an addition to the children's health and happiness to have plenty of room'" (Flanders 77).

Whether the focus was on the father or his children, the woman of the household continued to be expected to accommodate the needs and wants of everyone else before her own. To be sure, many middle class women of the time express in their letters and diaries complete satisfaction with their role as household “angel,” despite its challenges: Marion Jane Bradley, the wife of a master at Rugby School, wrote in her diary:

How important a work is mine. To be a cheerful, loving wife, and forbearing, fond, wise, thoughtful mother, striving ever against self-indulgence and irritability, which often sorely beset me. As a mistress, to be kind, gentle, thoughtful both for the bodies and souls of my servants. As a visitor of the poor to spare myself no trouble so as to relieve wisely and well. (qtd. in Flanders 14)

Others were disenchanted by the extreme limitations on female autonomy. The public and artistic expression of these dissatisfactions appeared in the form of The New Women’s Movement. Seen as dangerous and blasphemous by many, proponents of the movement expressed a desire for liberation for women from the narrowly prescribed roles, and a belief that in this liberation, women would have a powerful, positive impact on humanity:

The finest achievement of the new woman has been personal liberty... The world has tried to move with men for dynamos, and “clinging” women impeding every step of progress, in arts, science, industry, professions, they have been a thousand years behind men because forced into seclusion. They have been over-sexed. They have naturally not been

impressed with their duties to society, in its myriad needs, or with their own value as individuals.

The new woman, in the sense of the best woman, the flower of all the womanhood of past ages, has come to stay — if civilization is to endure. The sufferings of the past have but strengthened her, maternity has deepened her, education is broadening her — and she now knows that she must perfect herself if she would perfect the race, and leave her imprint upon immortality, through her offspring or her works. (Cooley 31f.)

Opponents of the movement attempted to reaffirm the claim of the household Angel. A prime example of the traditionalist's defense is Mrs. E. Little's poem, "The Rights of Women," published in *The Knickerbocker* in 1849, which cites the woman's God-given rights "to labor and to pray; to watch while others sleep; woes to weep; to succor in distress, while others curse to bless," and so on. Despite these conservative efforts, many women began to express their dissatisfaction with the status quo. In her unpublished essay *Cassandra* (1852), Florence Nightingale openly attacked this "flattering characterization of the tender feminine nature," arguing that it "shackled middle-class women intellectually and forced them to attend to 'every trifler more selfish than themselves'" (Nightingale 1506). She expressed the desperate longings of bright women for meaningful employment and lamented the waste of time and talent forced upon women by convention. "What women suffer—even physically—from the want of such work no one can tell. The accumulation of nervous energy which has had nothing to do during the day makes them feel every night, when they go to bed, as if they were going mad" (Nightingale 1507–08). Regrets about the station of women came from another,

more surprising corner, that of the Queen herself. Though the possessor of wealth and power, Victoria, too felt the restraints of her own gender. In letters to her married daughter, Vicky, she frankly expressed “her belief that marriage was often a disaster from the woman’s standpoint.” On May 16, 1860, Victoria wrote to Vicky:

All marriage is such a lottery -- the happiness is always an exchange -- though it may be a very happy one -- still the poor woman is bodily and morally the husband's slave. That always sticks in my throat. When I think of a merry, happy, and free young girl -- and look at the ailing aching state a young wife is generally doomed to -- which you can't deny is the penalty of marriage. (Victoria 254)

Though “symbolically, Victoria’s role as a matriarch of a large family was crucial to her public image, the opinions that she voiced to trusted confidants such as her daughter Vicky sometimes coincided with those of nineteenth-century feminists. Nevertheless, the persona she constructed for her subjects—and that they helped to construct for her—established her as a model for women who sought their fulfillment from family life” (Nelson 6). Ironically, the actual lives of the proponents of the Cult of Domesticity were perhaps the most compelling argument against its rigid ideology. “Ruskin’s own marriage, for instance, failed publicly and spectacularly when his wife, Effie Gray, left him for the painter John Everett Millais, justifying her action by revealing that the union had never been consummated” (Nelson 7). Dickens’ marriage was also characterized by discord.

One thing is clear: though preached in pulpits and pamphlets, the ideal of “the Angel of the house” was illusive to many, and, for those without economic surplus,

nearly impossible to achieve. Hence, it was primarily a middle class conception, though some of its components trickled down to the lower classes or were imposed upon them by well-meaning reformers. A middle-class man able to hire servants could “afford a wife in delicate health, and – once she had produced an adequate number of children—he might even prize her all the more for her fragility... In theory and in sentimental fiction... an invalid wife might look especially well poised to become the moral center of the home (Nelson 16). In contrast, the working-class wife frequently worked outside the home and also was responsible for laundry, cooking, cleaning, and childcare. “If she fell ill, the family’s comfort would suffer. Workingmen were thus well advised to seek energy and competence in prospective mates” (Nelson 16).

In a society where Wifedom and Motherhood were considered the true vocations for a woman, there existed a somber reality for both the rich and the poor: “Women outnumbered men in Victorian England. In the 1850’s... there were 104 females for every 100 males, or half a million ‘superfluous’ women. This population imbalance was only partially attributable to the advantage in life expectancy that women typically enjoy over men in industrialized countries, which amounted only to... 3.27 years by 1880. It also reflected the disproportionate exodus of men to the colonies.” Marriage was neither inevitable or permanent: “the 1851 census, for example, listed more than 1.7 million spinsters and nearly 800,000 widows, over half of the adult female population in Britain.” Additionally, social problems such as “drunkenness, sexual immorality, domestic violence, and other antifamily behaviors” generally associated in the press with poverty plagued the middle class as well (Nelson 15-16).



Fig. 9. This advertisement bound into the September 1890 issue of *The Boy's Own Paper* for Brooke's Monkey Soap suggests some of the many duties of the good working-class wife: cooking, cleaning, laundering, and childcare (Nelson 16).

In acknowledgement to these realities, a series of laws were passed in Britain granting women new protections and rights. The first, the Custody of Infants Act of 1839, “gave judges more power to determine custody arrangements,” and “established that women separated from their husbands could petition... custody of children under seven and visitation rights to children under sixteen” (Nelson 8). Prior to this law, custody of children went automatically to the father. The Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 established a divorce court and made divorce more widely accessible. “The Act gave women who had separated from their spouses the legal status of spinsters, who, unlike wives, could own property and control their own money” (8). The rules for divorce differed between the two sexes: men could divorce their wives just by proving infidelity, while a woman must prove her husband guilty not only of adultery, but also of desertion, incest, bigamy, or excessive abuse (9). The 1882 Act “defined as married women’s ‘separate property’ all that came into their possession after January 1, 1883 and gave them the right to dispose of it as they saw fit. Wives could enter into contracts in

their own right and could sue or be sued” (8-9). Though the Acts stopped short of allowing women the right of “‘own property,’ which was intimately connected to the right to vote,” (something American women would not have until 1920, English women, 1928), nevertheless, “they consciously sought to protect the economic interests of women married to improvident, unscrupulous, or cruel husbands” (8-9). Similar Acts had already been passed in America, most significantly the 1848 Married Women's Property Act and the 1860 Act Concerning the Rights and Liabilities of Husband and Wife. First passed in New York State, these were extensive expansions of property rights of married women used as models for many other states from 1848-1895. The passing of such laws was significant not only in that they improved the status of women, but also in that they were a legal acknowledgement of impracticalities in the conventional ideology surrounding marriage (9).

Though attacked by reformers in the second half of the century, the ideal of the Angel of the House survived in the early twentieth century and was fully present in the juvenile literature of the day. In the majority of cases, the mothers in the Golden Age's children's literature fall into several recognizable categories: the angel mother, the absent mother, the surrogate mother, and the evil aunt. Biological mothers in these novels tend to be angels: Marmee in *Little Women* and Mrs. Sowerby in *The Secret Garden* are perhaps the best examples, embodying all of the virtues and none of the vices of the feminine. The compassion, nurturance, moral uprightness, patience, and charity exemplified by these two mothers both comfort and guide their children. Marmee is the confidant and spiritual advisor to her daughters, and the book is full of little sermonettes in which she teaches her them to conquer their faults. When Jo confides her difficulty in



controlling her temper, for example, her mother provides gentle advice likening the child-mother relationship to a spiritual relationship with God:

My child, the troubles and temptations of your life are beginning and may be many, but you can overcome and outlive them all if you learn to feel the strength and tenderness of your Heavenly Father as you do that of your earthly one... His love and care never tire or change, can never be taken from you, but may become the source of lifelong peace, happiness, and strength. Believe this heartily, and go to God with all your little cares, and hopes, and sins, and sorrows, as freely and confidently as you come to your mother. (Alcott 70)

Though she is less of an active participant in the narrative than is Marmee, Mrs. Sowerby in *The Secret Garden* embodies the maternal. Appearing unexpectedly in the garden, dressed in a blue cloak reminiscent of Mary, the mother of Christ, she encourages the children, Mary and Colin, in their transformation from illness to health by providing nurturing words and nourishing foods (Burnett 159-162).

The Angel mother, however admired and celebrated, is in actuality a rare character in the period's literature. This rarity could merely reflect the reality of maternal mortality at the time. Or, it could be that the absence of the mother provides opportunity for more dynamic storytelling: after all, a childless mother has greater opportunity for adventures and misadventures. In addition, "real mothers, in all their messy variety, would complicate the plots too much, directing the focus away from the child protagonists" (Gruner 1). Whatever the reason, the absence, rather than the presence of the biological mother is key in most books of the genre. Even in books where the mother

is still living, the author frequently contrives a separation from the mothers to allow children to navigate temporarily as autonomous beings. Hence, Marmee's departure to Washington in *Little Women* and the Darling children's trek to *Neverland*. It is necessary for the children to be separated from their mothers so that they can experience moral and physical autonomy, making their own choices and dealing with consequences without interference. And yet, the maternal influence is often still alive even when the mother is physically dead: deceased mothers in Victorian and Edwardian Children's literature assume an almost spiritual quality, leaving traces of their essence behind that both guide and torment. "It seems all a mother can be in these books is omnipresent or absent, hovering or abandoning" (Gruner 1). In this more abstract form, "mother love protects and saves without smothering or over-protecting. It reaches beyond physical boundaries and blood ties; it partakes, quite literally, of the divine" (Gruner 1). A prime example of this lingering impact occurs in *The Secret Garden*, in which the memory of Lilies Craven haunts husband and child. Tormented by his former happiness with his wife, Colin's father projects all of the bitterness of his loss onto his son: "They say as Mr. Craven can't bear to see him when he's awake an' it's because his eyes is so like his mother's an' yet looks so different in his miserable bit of a face" (Burnett 95). As a result, Colin broods over his own supposed illness and derives pain rather than comfort from the idea of his mother. The picture Colin has of his mother is usually kept covered by a curtain. When Mary asks about the covering, Colin replies that, "Sometimes I don't like to see her looking at me. She smiles too much when I am ill and miserable. Besides, she is mine and I don't want everyone to see her" (Burnett 80). The mother's happiness in the portrait is a reminder of what Colin could have had if she had lived to fulfill her role as his angel

mother. Eventually, Colin reconnects with his departed mother, and in turn, his distant father, through his love for her garden. The garden, as Mrs. Sowerby remarks, seems to contain the essence of Mrs. Craven's maternal goodness and to possess healing powers for her family: "Thy own mother's in this 'ere very garden, I do believe. She couldna' keep out of it. Thy father mun come back to thee—he mun!" (Burnett 162).

The most common type of mother in Victorian and Edwardian children's literature is the "Monster Mother" or, the "Evil Aunt." "The pattern of the "Evil Aunt" was birthed from the fairytale preoccupation with wicked stepmothers: Hansel and Gretel are abandoned by their stepmother in the woods and left to fend off the evil witch, Snow White, whose mother dies in childbirth, falls prey to a jealous step-mother, Cinderella's stepmother turns her into a scullery maid in her own home (Gruner 1). In fairy tales, these stepmothers become the antagonists over whom the protagonist child must triumph. The vilification of step-parents remained a strong tradition in the literature of the Victorians. Some well-known examples of hostile step-parents in Victorian literature are Mr. Murdstone, the cruel stepfather in Dickens' *David Copperfield*, and Elizabeth Gaskell's self-absorbed stepmother, Hyacinth Gibson, in *Wives and Daughters* (Nelson 168- 170). The depiction of the non-biological parents in literature appears to have evolved in the later part of the Golden Age: the "Evil Aunt" of Edwardian children's literature, though often hostile at first, is frequently transformed by the child's love and innocence into a better, more loveable person: orphan Anne Shirley gives new life to her guardian, Marilla Cuthbert in *Anne of Green Gables*, Rebecca wins over her two stern aunts in Kate Douglas Wiggin's *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1903), and Pollyanna transforms not only her priggish Aunt Polly, but the entire town in *Pollyanna*. The shift

of focus from oppressive guardians and their downtrodden charges to the transformative power of childhood innocence is an excellent indicator that Romantic ideals were widely accepted by the turn of the century.

The job of mothering in the Golden Age's children's literature extends beyond familiar ties: "Pamela Travers, the author of *Mary Poppins*, once said that the role of mother is the middle phase of every woman's life 'whether this is biologically true or not' (the other phases, incidentally, are virgin and wise woman)" (qtd. in Gruner 1). This idea of surrogate motherhood can, and has been, extended to include a huge variety of female characters: in *Oliver Twist*, Nancy, a street girl, becomes Oliver's imperfect but well-meaning caregiver. Wendy Darling assumes the role of girl-mother to the Lost Boys in *Peter Pan*. In some extreme cases, females of another species take on the role of mother to humans: Mowgli is nursed by Mother Wolf in *The Jungle Book*, while Nana the dog is the nursemaid to the Darling children in *Peter Pan*. Surrogates sometimes embody the spirit of the Angel mother, as in George McDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin*. Here, the great-great grandmother "is not even visible to everyone, setting up the possibility that she's a ghost, perhaps even the ghost of Irene's own mother" (Gruner 1). Princess Irene experiences maternal love through the surrogacy of her great-great-grand mother who watches over her, and

whose love safeguards even when she herself is out of reach: Irene is protected throughout the novel by a magical string spun for her by her great-great-grandmother, invisibly binding them together. The magic string that leads Irene out of the mine [represents] the invisible ties

mothers weave from their children to themselves, binding them in a web of love and sacrifice. (Gruner 1)

The physical absence of the mother in these novels in many ways strengthens her power: rather than flesh and blood with knowable flaws, she becomes the embodiment of an ideal, and therefore, infallibly perfect. And yet, it was this perpetuated ideal of perfection which ultimately made the title “Angel” so deadly to the women it described: incapable of escaping their prescribed role, women risked being stereotyped by their nearest and dearest, rather than being loved and known as individuals with their own unique talents and shortcomings. Juvenile literature for the most part perpetuated this stereotype for women, as it did the gender roles assigned to children of both sexes.

### Ch. 3: Metaphysical Mothers: Mothers in *The Secret Garden* and *Little Women*

Some of the most enduring children's books from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are "girls' stories" written by Louisa May Alcott and Frances Hodgson Burnett. Alcott and Burnett were similar in many ways: independent and gifted, they both struggled personally and professionally with gender-imposed limitations: Alcott, frustrated by the stigma associated with spinsterhood, felt confined in the role of "children's author." Burnett's independence and literary ambition contributed to two failed marriages, and her sometimes controversial writing placed her under intense personal scrutiny by the press. Despite these similarities, Alcott and Burnett were markedly different in both personality and philosophical outlook. Their literary contributions reflect these dissimilarities.

The contrast between these two authors' temperaments became apparent when both sought the Boston Mind Cure for "nervous and physical exhaustion brought on by literary overwork" ("Boston Mind Cure" 227). An interested journalist recorded that Burnett "has in a very rare degree the inspirational temperament. She has something of the mystic in her disposition. She is poetic, impressionable, receptive. Miss Alcott, while imaginative and creative, has the practical rather than the romantic and poetic temperament..." (228). Interestingly, "Frances vowed that she benefited from the treatments," but "Alcott found 'the experience of the sittings was pleasant and peculiar up to a certain number... they ceased to affect her,' and she warned people 'not to waste time and money on a system she believes to be of little or no value'" (228). It seems that Burnett was, perhaps, more impressionable and open to the power of suggestion than Alcott.

Both authors obtained financial independence through writing, an independence which allowed each to pursue their dearest personal goals. Alcott's financial good fortune bound her even more inexorably to the duty she felt towards her family: she cared for her aging parents and took on the care of her niece after her sister's death. Burnett, though philanthropic as well, primarily used her wealth to create personal sanctuaries in homes and gardens that shielded her from public censure. Alcott's was a self-sacrificial, self-censorial stance, while Burnett's was a gospel of self-liberation. These attitudes relate directly to the underlying metaphysical assumptions expressed in their writings.<sup>6</sup>

Despite their depreciative status as "girls' stories, *Little Women* and *The Secret Garden* are both novels vitally concerned with metaphysical questions. Alcott's *Little Women* (published in two parts in 1868 and 1869), is a blend of older traditions, such as the Victorian family journal with its self-consciously moral tone and adulation of middle class family life, and the author's progressive Transcendental values of individual intuition, self-knowledge and self-reliance (Douglas 44). The result is a conflicted message that strongly advocates the traditional women's traits of "piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness" while simultaneously exploring the yearning for self-discovery, self-expression, and resistance against restrictive cultural institutions and norms (Lavender 1). This conflict at the core of Alcott's personal identity emerges in her journals and letters, and is further evidenced by the juxtaposition of her public role as children's author with her alter ego, A.M. Barnard, author of sensational thrillers.

Alcott's protagonists in *Little Women*, the March sisters, strive to please their "Heavenly

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<sup>6</sup> "Metaphysics refers to the branch of philosophy that attempts to understand the fundamental nature of all reality, whether visible or invisible. It seeks a description so basic, so essentially simple, so all-inclusive that it applies to everything, whether divine or human or anything else. It attempts to tell what anything must be like in order to be at all" (Anderson "Metaphysics"1).

Father” as they renounce worldliness and perform acts of charity and self-sacrifice.

Though the sisters play with self-expression and intellectual and social equity with men, goodness is generally gained through the renunciation rather than the embrace of personal freedoms.

Burnett, publishing forty years after Alcott (1911), reaped the intellectual harvest sewn by her transcendental forbearers. She wrote *The Secret Garden* in a fundamentally different climate, one in which confining Victorian values had yielded to the new optimism and generosity of the Edwardian age. The “metaphysical religions,” Theosophy, Spiritualism, Christian Science, and New Thought were in vogue, challenging Christianity. The individual as depicted in her *Secret Garden* is an autonomous being able to derive self-knowledge and morality from the inspiration of a universally benevolent “Big Good Thing” manifested through Nature, personal intuition, and in the common elements of all of the major religions. Communion with the Creator is found through exercising positive thinking in order to free mind and body of limiting negativity.

Influenced by their philosophical beliefs, both Alcott and Burnett both affirmed and challenged traditionally held ideas about motherhood and the woman’s sphere. Exemplifying the Romantic notion of the mother as the household angel endowed with spiritual wisdom, the archetypal mothers in the novels, *Marmee* and *Mother Sowerby*, function as the moral mouthpieces through which their creators expound their philosophical worldviews. Through interaction with these women, the child characters move towards moral maturity and a sense of purpose and belonging in the world, while troubled adults gain insight and healing. Though both mothers share the goals of



goodness, happiness, and physical and spiritual wholeness for the people they love, the modes advocated by Marmee March and Mother Sowerby for obtaining these goals are widely divergent, reflecting the authors' unique metaphysical vantage points. To underscore the significance of mothers, the authors not only provide exemplary archetypal mother figures; they also depict the harm caused by mothers who fail in their role as spiritual guardian, either because of their untimely deaths or through their negligence. The values expounded by these fictional mothers create the framework for the expression of childhood within the novels, as the children seek to conform to the instruction of their biological or spiritual mothers.

Once described depreciatingly by its author as "moral pap for the young," *Little Women* has nonetheless had a tremendous staying power in the canon of children's literature (Douglas 44). This is probably because the novel bears a stamp of authenticity: as Alcott wrote to Mary E. Channing Higginson on the 18<sup>th</sup> of October, 1868, "The characters were drawn from life, which gives them whatever merit they possess; for I find it impossible to invent anything half so true or touching as the simple facts with which every day life supplies me" (Alcott *Journals* 419). The strongly moral flavor of the book seems to appeal to rather than repel its adolescent audience: "Our insurgent age has discarded nineteenth century New England with a great fanfare, yet here is our hopeful youth addicted to the double distilled essence of New England, to the very thing we were at such great pains to get rid of for their sakes" (Vincent 554). To understand the moral underpinnings of *Little Women*, it is helpful to briefly outline nineteenth century New England's religious and philosophical life and the placement of the Alcott family within it.

By the mid eighteenth century, Unitarianism had gained popularity while the spiritual descendant of Puritanism, Congregationalism, declined. Born out of the liberal wing of the Congregationalist church, Unitarians “departed from orthodox Calvinism in two respects: they believed in the importance and efficacy of human striving, as opposed to the bleaker Puritan picture of complete and inescapable human depravity; and they emphasized the unity rather than the ‘Trinity’ of God” (Goodman 1). Many Unitarians also disavowed the divinity of Christ (1). Spiritual sects of all types were grappling with the implications of new advances in science and philosophy. The Unitarians “used Locke both negatively, to undermine the orthodox Calvinist belief in original sin (if the mind is a blank slate at birth it cannot be innately depraved) and positively, to underwrite belief in the special dispensation of Christianity through the evidence of Jesus' miracles, sensory testimony of his spiritual power” (Bickman 1). While the Unitarians moved towards the material, sensorial world to affirm their belief, the Transcendentalists responded in the opposite way. Though they agreed with Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing that human beings “partake” of Divinity and that they may achieve “a growing likeness to the Supreme Being,” the Transcendentalists, a loosely associated group formed in the 1830’s, had a fundamental disagreement with the Unitarians on the way that humans can “know” spiritual truth (Goodman 1). The Transcendentalists, unlike the Unitarians, agreed with skeptic David Hume’s assessment that religion could not be proved through empiricism. As Emerson said, “We have no experience of a Creator,” and therefore, we “know of none” (Emerson *Journals* 2). They sought an alternative to the Lockean empiricism in German Idealism, English Romanticism, mysticism, and Vedic thought (B. Alcott 35-42; Thoreau 1343). Transcendentalism relied

not on the physical senses or established religious creeds to determine truth, but on the intuition of the individual. As Emerson wrote in his essay "The American Scholar," "We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds ... A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men" (Emerson "American" 850). Because they valued individual intuition, the Transcendentalists were in frequent disagreement with one another, but they shared several core tenants. One of the most significant of these was that "the intuitive faculty, instead of the rational or sensical, became the means for a conscious union of the individual psyche... with the world psyche also known as the Oversoul, life-force, prime mover and God..." (Reuben "American" 1). Thus, through self-knowledge, one could come to understand the universe. The goal of the Transcendentalist was to move beyond self-assertion towards the self-transcending to achieve greater good. They believed that Evil, rather than coming from a malevolent force, was merely the absence of good (1). Moral activism, then, was a watchword with the Transcendentalists.

Daughter of one of the original members of the Transcendental Club, Amos Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott was submersed in the Transcendental movement as a child. Bronson Alcott, philosopher and unorthodox educator, significantly influenced his daughter's understanding of God, spirituality, and the soul, specifically, the child's soul. His belief that children emanated from the preexisting Oversoul led him to echo Wordsworth's assertion in "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" of the child's spiritual innocence at birth. With this in mind, he did away with traditional educational methods of rote memorization and strict discipline, replacing

them with a Socratic method designed to discover the child's latent spiritual knowledge. Disciplinary methods were based on the child's desire to please adults based on love rather than fear. This approach was in direct opposition to current educational methods, and it is no surprise that he often met with adamant opposition, leading to his frequent unemployment (B. Alcott 97; 151-52; 260). His daughters were his most constant pupils, and Louisa recalled, "My father taught in the wise way which unfolds what lies in the child's nature, as a flower blooms, rather than crammed it, like a Strasbourg goose, with more than it could digest" (Cheney 29). Bronson Alcott's attraction to fads resulted in frequent moves for his family. One memorable period was their sojourn at Fruitlands, a utopian society. The childhood experiences at Fruitlands made an indelible mark on Louisa's metaphysical makeup: unable to reconcile spiritual goodness with physical ease, she came to equate self-denial with goodness: "The kingdom of peace is entered only through the gates of self-denial; and felicity is the test and the reward of loyalty to the unswerving law of Love" (Alcott "Transcendental" 88).

With Louisa, duty was inextricably tied up with faith. As an early biographer noted, "Her father truly called her 'Duty's faithful child', and her life was consecrated to the duty she recognized as specially hers" (Cheney 115). In "Recollections of My Childhood" Alcott recorded her own assumption of adult duties this way:

We were now beginning to play our parts on a real stage, and to know something of the pathetic side of life with its hard facts, irksome duties, many temptations and the daily sacrifice of self. Fortunately we had the truest, tenderest guides and guards, and so learned the sweet uses of

adversity, the value of honest work, the beautiful law of compensation which gives more than it takes, and the real significance of life. (433)

From an early age, Louisa worked to supplement her family's scant income through sewing, teaching, and nursing: she eventually became the primary breadwinner.

Preferring to write Gothic thrillers, she admitted, "...though I do not enjoy writing "moral tales" for the young, I do it because it pays well. But the success I value most was making my poor dear mother happy in her last years & taking care of my family.

The rest soon grows wearisome & seems very poor beside the comfort of being an earthly Providence to those we love" (Alcott *Journals* 425).

Another significant influence on L.M. Alcott was her neighbor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom she once described as "the god of my idolatry" (Alcott 58). In a journal entry (27 April 1882) recording Emerson's death, Alcott called him: "The man who has helped me most by his life, his books, his society. I can never tell all he has been to me... his essays on Self-reliance, Character, Compensation, Love, and Friendship helped me to understand myself and life, and God and Nature" (Cheney 345). Louisa's personal religious experiences reflected the influence of her mentor: she recorded in *Recollections of My Childhood*,

... pausing to rest in the silent woods [I] saw, through an arch of trees, the sun rise over river, hill and wide green meadows as I never saw it before.

Something born of the lovely hour, a happy mood, and the unfolding aspirations of a child's soul seemed to bring me very near to God, and in the hush of that morning hour I always felt that I "got religion" as the phrase goes. A new and vital sense of His presence, tender and sustaining

as a Father's arms, came to me then, never to change through forty year's vicissitudes, but to grow stronger for the sharp discipline of poverty and pain, sorrow and success. (Alcott 430)

In addition to shaping Alcott's conception of divinity, the Transcendental movement was also formative in her understanding of the "woman's sphere." Like Rousseau and the Romantics, the Transcendentalists felt that women were particularly attuned to spiritual things. An early historian of the transcendental movement, Octavius Brooks Frothingham, held that "the belief in the spiritual eminence of woman was part of the creed of the Transcendentalist; it was intimately connected with his reverence for interior, poetic, emotional natures; with his preference for feeling above thought, of spontaneity above will" (Frothingham 456). Not only were women supposed to be spiritually gifted, they also were entitled, as part of the universal Oversoul, to equality with men. As Theodore Parker, Louisa May Alcott's minister, once said,

Woman I have always regarded as the equal of man—more nicely speaking, the equivalent of man; superior in some things, inferior in some others; inferior in the lower qualities, in bulk of body and bulk of brain; superior in the higher and nicer qualities—in the moral power of conscience, the loving power of affection, the religious power of the soul; equal on the whole, and of course entitled to just the same rights as man; the same rights of mind, body and estate; the same domestic, social, ecclesiastical, and political rights as man, and only kept from the enjoyment of these by might, not right; yet herself destined one day to acquire them all. (Parker 194-95)

As a natural consequence of these sentiments, many Transcendentalists became advocates for women's rights and suffrage. Her mother, Abigail May, the model of "Marmee" March, was an early and ardent abolitionist and feminist. In *Little Women*, Marmee, whose "greatest happiness and pride [is] to feel that my girls confide in me, and know how much I love them," is the purveyor of sage advice and gentle homilies encouraging her daughters on their pilgrim path (70). Marmee's highly developed moral system is derived from Alcott's composite memories of her own mother and father. Abigail May, though in many ways similar to her fictional representative, was not nearly so refined a saint. While for Marmee, an unruly temper was a sin of the past, Abby was notorious for her hot temper for the majority of her life (Bedell 85). Despite this character flaw, she had many virtues: an "affectionate, open nature, unselfish generosity, and great industry" (Cheney 13-14). Her "rules for her guidance were: 'Rule yourself. Love Your Neighbor. Do the duty which lies nearest you'" (57). Louisa wrote of her mother, "Mother's motto was 'Hope, and keep busy,' and one of her sayings, 'Cast your bread upon the waters, and after many days it will come back buttered,' capturing Abby's common sense and faith in providence (55). This blend of practicality and cheerful morality are quintessential qualities of Marmee March.

In *Little Women*, Father and Mother March are of one mind, with any interpersonal difficulties firmly in the past: their experiences provide stock from which to feed their daughters' spiritual needs. The marriage of the real Alcotts was not nearly so tranquil as that of the fictional Marches: though both admirable in many respects, they were often at odds. Abby's frustration with her husband's "scientific" experiments in child discipline on her daughters, coupled with her anxiety over his unrealistic schemes

for a utopian life, led to considerable friction (Bedell 85). Bronson was frustrated with his wife's inconsistent discipline of the children and her lack of self-repose: the chaos at home prompted him at times to leave her with all child-rearing and household responsibilities while pursuing his own intellectual interests elsewhere (74-5). The conflicts between Abby and Bronson regarding their children were largely resolved when Bronson temporarily took over the majority of the nursery duties when Louisa was a toddler to try out some of his new child rearing philosophies. He was quite successful in taming both Anna and Louisa into obedience. Bronson's relatively brief but formative period of intimacy with his two eldest daughters is recorded nostalgically by Alcott in *Little Women*, both in the relationship of Mr. March with his daughters, and later with Professor Bhaer carrying out some of Alcott's unusual instructional methods with his students. Though there was often unrest in the Alcott nursery, and the parenting methods of Bronson and Abby varied greatly, there was general agreement between the parents about the values they desired to instill in their daughters: "self-sacrifice, service to others, Christian charity" (85). The parental turmoil, caused largely by Louisa's unmanageable temperament, is smoothed over in *Little Women* to create a calm, united, parental front for which Marmee is the primary spokesperson because of her husband's absence. Thus, Marmee becomes the conduit for both the common sense of Abby Alcott and the idealism of Bronson Alcott, expounding both philosophies with the same breath.

The Transcendental movement's popularity faded by the early 1850's and its most famous member, Emerson, wrote of it, "All that can be said is, that she represents an interesting hour & group in American cultivation" (Emerson qtd. in Rose 208). *Little Women*, with its emphasis on the moral and spiritual maturation of the unworldly



Marches, provides a fascinating glimpse of that brief but influential period in the development of America's psyche. Early on in *Little Women*, Alcott introduces the primary concern around which the entire book revolves: the spiritual and physical maturation of the March sisters from "girls" to "women." The book opens on Christmas Eve, and the sisters are indulging in a pity party because they have resolved to have no gifts out of solidarity to the suffering soldiers. Each girl confesses her chief burden: Meg's is working as a governess to spoiled children, Jo's is being a companion to her cranky aunt, Beth's the drudgery of housework, and Amy's the shame of being less wealthy than her classmates. All of these burdens are partially inflicted on the girls because of the family's financial difficulties, but for each, it is an underlying character flaw, rather than the actual life circumstance, which produces discontentment. A well-timed letter arrives from the absent Mr. March exhorting the girls to "do their duty faithfully, fight their bosom enemies bravely, and conquer themselves so beautifully, that when I come back I may be fonder and prouder than ever of my little women" (17). The girls are moved and chastened by their father's words and resolve to make him proud. Because Father March is relegated to the background, it is the mother, "Marmee," who bears the chief of the parenting responsibilities in the novel. She contrives a practical method for helping her daughters to embark on their journey towards righteousness:

Do you remember how you used to play Pilgrim's Progress when you were little things? Nothing delighted you more than to have me tie my piece-bags on your backs for burdens, give you hats and sticks, and rolls of paper, and let you travel through the house from the cellar, which was

the City of Destruction, up, up, to the house-top, where you had all the lovely things you could collect to make a Celestial City....

We never are too old for this... because it is a play we are playing all the time in one way or another. Our burdens are here, our road is before us, and the longing for goodness and happiness is the guide that leads us through many troubles and mistakes to the peace which is a true Celestial City. Now, my little pilgrims, suppose you begin again, not in play, but in earnest, and see how far on you can get before father comes home. (17-18)

To direct their progress, Marmee gives each a “guide book,” the New Testament, as their only Christmas gift. And so, the girls begin in earnest to imitate Christian in *Pilgrim’s Progress* as they used to do in jest as younger children. Mrs. March expresses her goals for her daughters this way: “I want my daughters to be beautiful, accomplished, and good; to be admired, loved, and respected, to have a happy youth, to be well and wisely married, and to lead useful, pleasant lives, with as little care and sorrow to try them as God sees fit to send” (84). These goals appear very straightforward, but when one examines the actual content of the book, the girls are truly embarking on a transcendental journey. The unspoken motto of the March family is the transcendental objective summed up in Socrates’ exhortation: “Know Thyself,” coupled with Abigail Alcott’s injunction to “Rule Yourself.” Spurred on by their saintly mother, the March girls endeavor to know and cultivate their strengths, know and crush their weaknesses, and to emerge from that sometimes painful process of self recognition as women.

Passivity has no place in the March household; indeed, with the Marches, industry and self-reliance is next to piety:

Work is wholesome, and there is plenty for everyone; it keeps us from *ennui* and mischief; is good for health and spirits, and gives us a sense of power and independence better than money or fashion... Have regular hours for work and play; make each day both useful and pleasant, and prove that you understand the worth of time by employing it well. Then youth will be delightful, old age will bring few regrets, and life become a beautiful success, in spite of poverty. (99-100)

Later, when Mrs. March leaves to nurse her wounded husband, she exhorts the girls to “Go on with your work as usual, for work is a blessed solace. Hope and keep busy; and, whatever happens, remember that you never can be fatherless” (135).



Fig. 10. May Alcott’s illustration for the 1868 edition of *Little Women*: “They all drew near the fire, mother in the big chair, with Beth at her feet; Meg and Amy perched on either arm of the chair, and Jo leaning on the back” (Alcott *LW* 4).

Adherence to personal conviction rather than social dictates is perhaps the strongest Transcendental trait of the Marches'. As a result, the Marches frequently must navigate against the cultural current in order to live up to their lofty values. After attending a fancy party at which she has allowed her friends' flattery and finery to cloud her judgment, Meg admits, "It *is* nice to be praised and admired, and I can't help saying I like it." To which her mother responds: "That is perfectly natural, and quite harmless, if the liking does not become a passion, and lead one to do foolish or unmaidenly things. Learn to know and value the praise which is worth having, and to excite the admiration of excellent people by being modest as well as pretty, Meg" (83). Self-denial, so often required in order to maintain ethical and moral purity, is rewarded: the sacrifice of the simple Christmas breakfast to a poor immigrant family results in the reward of a lavish dinner provided by their benevolent neighbor (26). Selfishness always results in pain: the most dramatic example is the episode on which Meg and Jo decline to visit the poor Hummels as admonished by their mother. The faithful Beth goes, although she feels unwell, with the result that she contracts Scarlet Fever, an illness she survives but leaves her susceptible to the illness which later kills her (142). If Jo and Meg had done their duty, it is subtly implied, it is possible that their sister would have survived to adulthood.

*Little Women* is essentially a champion of middle class morality, with the relatively poor Marches becoming bastions of light to their rich neighbors, the Lawrences. In *Little Women*, Mrs. March is depicted as a gentlewoman in reduced circumstances: though the March girls call themselves "poor," they have a house, food, clothes, even a servant. In the public realm, Mrs. March's goodness is expressed through the mode of benevolent beneficiary as she aids "the poor." She retains "aristocratic

tastes” despite her temporary poverty, and inculcates these into the training of her daughters. “Little Women seeks to be radical about race and class, but it is the radicalism of philanthropy. Its benevolence demands the needy, lesser other to justify its existence. How could Mother March, the “Marmee” who would prefer to be marred than to mar, succor the poor if there were no poor?” (Stimpson 594). The poor Hummels provide an outlet for Marmee’s charity: ““Some poor creature came a-beggin', and your ma went straight off to see what was needed. There never was such a woman for givin' away vittles and drink, clothes and firin',” replied Hannah, who had lived with the family since Meg was born, and was considered by them all more as a friend than a servant” (20). When the girls obey their mother’s lead and donate their breakfast to the immigrant family, they achieve status of Angels in training:

“Das ist gut! Die Engel-kinder! cried the poor things as they ate and warmed their purple hands at the comfortable blaze.”

The girls had never been called angel children before, and thought it very agreeable, especially Jo, who had been considered ‘Sancho’ ever since she was born. (22)

Mrs. March, the model for and guide to her little women, is constantly “working out her salvation,” either for her family, or for the benefit of a needy friend or neighbor (Phil 2:12-18). She is described as “a stout, motherly lady, with a “can-I-help-you” look about her which was truly delightful” (15). Laurie Lawrence, the grandson of the March family’s affluent next-door neighbor, Mr. Lawrence, benefits from the altruism of all of the March women. His first encounter with his kindly neighbors is as a recipient of their neighborly attentions during an illness, attentions which are all the sweeter for their

humble simplicity because he, the recipient, is rich, and they, the givers, poor. This continues for the duration of the book as the Marches welcome Laurie into their home as a brother, providing warmth and moral guidance that he has lacked in his splendid home next-door.

While firmly placed above the ignorant poor, the Marches are the moral superior of the gaudy, worldly rich. Meg, for example, is put off by the coarse, “Nuevo riche” of the Moffets, who are vulgar, particularly in their blatant intention to marry their daughters off for money (75-81). Rather than chasing wealthy suitors to ensure financial security, Mrs. March encourages her daughters to marry men who will love and respect them.

My dear girls, I *am* ambitious for you, but not to have you make a dash in the world, -- marry rich men merely because they are rich, or have splendid houses, which are not homes, because love is wanting. Money is a needful and precious thing, -- and, when well used, a noble thing, -- but I never want you to think it is the first or only prize to strive for. I'd rather see you poor men's wives, if you were happy, beloved, contented, than queens on thrones, without self-respect and peace. (84)

Marmee's goals are shown in relief against those of the worldly Mrs. Gardener, whose primary concern is the advantageous marriage of her daughters. Meg is encouraged by her parents to marry John Brook, a poor but kind and honest man. Sally Gardener's empty yet opulent marriage is contrasted with Meg's happy, modest one in the second installment of *Little Women*, demonstrating the triumph of Marmee's advice to marry for love rather than wealth. Jo receives approbation for refusing Laurie, her wealthy

childhood friend: “I don't think you suited to one another. As friends you are very happy, and your frequent quarrels soon blow over; but I fear you would both rebel if you were mated for life. You are too much alike, and too fond of freedom, not to mention hot tempers and strong wills, to get on happily together, in a relation which needs infinite patience and forbearance, as well as love” (260). Ever solicitous of her daughter’s spiritual health and maturation, Marmee even approves Jo’s brief stint in as a governess in the big city, though it is clear that she believes marriage to be the ultimate fulfillment of womanhood: “You I leave to enjoy your liberty till you tire of it; for only then will you find that there is something sweeter” (260-61). Liberty, in Marmee’s eyes can only provide a transient pleasure. This is not because women must be married to be fulfilled, (“Better be happy old maids than unhappy wives), ” but because marriage provides an atmosphere naturally conducive to a woman’s fulfillment. For Marmee, fulfillment comes through cheerful service to others and in the enjoyment of the give and take of familial relationships (84). To be free from such bonds is to have liberty, but lack the intimacy which breeds self-knowledge, the ultimate goal of her little pilgrims. Professor Bhaer is the best match for Jo according to her mother’s standards because he holds her to the highest moral standards, providing her the greatest incentive for personal betterment: “She valued his esteem, she coveted his respect, she wanted to be worthy of his friendship” (278). To put it in the biblical terms, “Iron sharpens iron” (Prov 27:17).

For Alcott, the ideal of womanhood, and, truly, personhood, is equated with conquering personal faults through ever increasing self-knowledge and intimacy with the Divine and with others. In his letter, Mr. March urges the girls to “conquer themselves” that he might be even prouder of his ‘little women’” (17). The author systematically

creates incidents where each girl must face her pet fault and conquer it. During this process, Marmee functions as a guide and mother confessor to her daughters, aiding them in laying aside their personal passions in favor of serenity and unselfish altruism that is the mark of a gentlewoman. In this, the novel reveals its transcendental framework: the individual must decrease that the Universal good may increase. Each surviving sister acquiesces some of her girlish dreams for the realities of her married life. Amy, though achieving her aspiration to be rich, gives up her dreams of being a great artist. Meg relinquishes her social aspirations and settles down as a modest hausfrau. But the most controversial development in *Little Women: Part Second* is the marriage of Jo to the middle-aged, awkward, and penniless professor Bhaer. Prior to her marriage, “Jo is an experimental heroine through who Alcott can explore the tensions of female experience in nineteenth-century America: between being a dutiful member of the woman’s sphere and being an independent, self-reliant woman” (Estes 568). Jo faces the most difficult challenge because her struggle is about her fundamental identity: in order to grow into a woman, she must reconcile her affinity for traditionally male pursuits with what is both socially and morally acceptable for women. Her admiration for her mother and fierce devotion to her family is the most effective incentive for Jo to squelch her impulsiveness and behave like a “proper young lady” (Alcott *LW* 17). That this is an achievable goal even for the tempestuous Jo is made clear by Marmee’s own testimony: she confides that to Jo that her own temper was once just as untamed, but that her mother, husband and her Heavenly father helped her to learn self-control and patience:



“I am angry nearly every day of my life, Jo; but I have learned not to show it; and I still hope to learn not to feel it, though it may take me another forty years to do so.”

The patience and the humility of the face she loved so well, was a better lesson to Jo than the wisest lecture, the sharpest reproof. She felt comforted at once by the sympathy and confidence given her; the knowledge that her mother had a fault like hers, and tried to mend it, made her own easier to bear, and strengthened her resolution to cure it, though forty years seemed rather a long time to watch and pray, to a girl of fifteen. (68-9)

This confession binds Jo to her mother even more strongly, and strengthens her resolve to be equally successful in taming her “bosom enemy.”

Many would argue that Alcott effectively negates the uniqueness of Jo’s temperament by identifying her core character traits as past faults of her saintly mother; faults which must be carefully suppressed. There is a duality in Jo March as there was in her creator: she is, on the one hand, unfailingly, passionately loyal to her family, and uses all of her talents and energies to secure their happiness. She is also exceedingly uncomfortable in her own feminine skin, saying with her author, “I was born with a boy’s spirit under my bib and tucker. I can’t wait when I can work” (*Alcott Journals* 411).

The fundamental dilemma for Jo is that she desires to “be good” for the sake of her adored family, but her definition of “goodness,” being a “proper young lady” is abhorrent to her (*Alcott LW* 17). The result is that she must, in order to earn her mother’s affirmation, attempt to change her very nature, or at least, channel it into an acceptable

venue. Jo's transformation from fiery, outspoken author of sensational tales to matronly mistress of a school for boys is too much for many readers to stomach. Alcott herself was somewhat chagrined by this turn of events. She wrote to Elizabeth Powell on 20 March, 1869,

“Jo” should have remained a literary spinster but so many enthusiastic young ladies wrote to me clamourously demanding that she should marry Laurie, or somebody, that I didn't dare refuse & out of perversity went & made a funny match for her. I expect vials of wrath to be poured out upon my head, but rather enjoy the prospect. (*Alcott Journals* 421)

Critics as well as fans have been outraged by Alcott's decision: the fans because they hoped to see Jo and Laurie make a match, the critics because Alcott felt pressured to sell out on her feminist ideals. Estes and Lant assert that

In order for Jo to live fictionally, to maintain her position within the narrative framework Alcott has constructed, Alcott must murder Jo spiritually. Given Jo's lust for independence, her devotion to her own power and development, Alcott could never have allowed her to marry for love—in other words, to marry Laurie—for, as the novel demonstrates with Meg's marriage to John Brooke, marriage for love reduces women to “submission” (Estes 569).

Estes and Lant go on to claim that “Careful to leave no trace of blood in this children's novel, Alcott quietly substitutes for Jo an impersonation of the perfect ‘little woman,’ the dead and selfless Beth Jo” (582). In other words, through nursing her sister, a selfless, feminine act, Jo imbibes Beth's passive qualities and renounces her own identity.

Though intriguing, this depiction of Jo as a living corpse post-Beth seems an inadequate description of Jo's transformation. Conceived by an author who continually found a tenuous line between self-denial and self-expression, Jo's marriage to the professor and vocation as teacher and professional mother seem a fitting and realistic compromise in which she can retain a semblance of self while fulfilling the role of "little woman."

She chooses the life work of herself and her partner, and provides the setting for their new school. She and her professor enlarge the family beyond the ties of blood, putting women's traditional strengths to work in an arena far wider than that of the immediate household. As Jo says, "no one can say I'm out of my sphere now, for women's special mission is supposed to be drying tears and bearing burdens. I'm to carry my share, Friedrich, and help to earn the home" (372). He learns to carry his share as well, in making that home. (Dalke 563)

It is not the dashing existence envisioned by youthful Jo, but it is a full and rewarding one which affirms the values of her beloved Mother. Alcott's personal life was full of this type of compromise: for her, happiness in life was often tied to familial duty rather than personal gratification. As Alcott once advised her readers in her article "Happy Women," "Be true to yourselves; cherish whatever talent you possess, and in using it *faithfully for the good of others* you will most assuredly find happiness for yourself, and make of life no failure, but a beautiful success" (148-49). The same metaphysical belief system that required scrupulous self-discipline also produced tremendous freedom within the family unit to love and be loved unconditionally, because it assumed the fundamental equity of all persons.

The impact of this equality on familial relationships in *Little Women* is key, particularly with regards to the interaction of the sexes. Marriage is depicted as a partnership, not a patriarchy: “walking side by side, through fair and stormy weather, with a faithful friend, who is, in the true sense of the good old Saxon word, the house-band” (313). Rather than emphasizing the Victorian norm, a separation of the male and female spheres, Marmee advocates sharing of roles within the home:

...Don't shut [your husband] out of the nursery, but teach him how to help in it. His place is there as well as yours, and the children need him; let him feel that he has his part to do... and it will be better for you all... That is the secret to our home happiness; [Father] does not let business wean him from the little cares and duties that affect us all, and I try not to let domestic worries destroy my interest in his pursuits. Each do our part alone in many things, but at home we work together, always. (307)

Each of Marmee's daughters, though they make personal sacrifices, also reap the reciprocal benefits of shared responsibility with their husbands:

Love becomes, by the novel's end, not the power play described by Fetterley, but rather an act of service performed mutually by both sexes as men and women share the roles of breadwinner and nurturer... The household in *Little Women* is ‘the center of all meaningful activity... physical and spiritual, economic and moral, whose influence spreads out in ever-widening circles.’ The family offers a blueprint for revising the world, for reforming the human race. Alcott offers the March home as an

alternative to the fashionable and pugnacious activity conducted outside its boundaries. ((Tompkins 95-98 qtd. in Dalke; Dalke 562)

Marmee, who like Jo, struggled with an unruly temper, found her cure in the act of mothering her children.

...I must try to practice all the virtues I would have my little girls possess, for I was their example. It was easier to try for your sakes than for my own; a startled or surprised look from one of you, when I spoke sharply, rebuked me more than any words could have done; and the love, respect, and confidence of my children was the sweetest reward I could receive for my efforts to be the woman I would have them copy. (69)

Her love for her children had redemptive power not only for her children, but for herself as well. Her daughter Jo also finds her redemption through the act of mothering: “Jo chooses to surround herself with the boys she has always loved, not, as Heilbrun suggests, ‘because she has no interest in insignificant girls,’ but because of Alcott’s belief in the salvation available through the power of motherly love” (Helibrun, *Reinventing* 190 qtd. in Dalke; Dalke 563). Mothers, for Alcott, are not only able to redeem their children, but are redeemed themselves through the acts of self control required by motherhood. Thus, only by becoming a mother can Jo fulfill her objective, to simultaneously conquer her faults while finding a fulfilling expression of self.



Victoria Roberts's cartoon first appeared in Ms., February 1988, page 96. ©Victoria Roberts, Cartoonists & Writers Syndicate. Reprinted by permission.



Fig. 11: Cartoon: "Little Women: Meg, Amy, Beth, Jo, and Marmee Face Life in the '80's" by Victoria Roberts (Alberghene 5-6).

Mother love, so key in the pilgrim journey detailed in *Little Women*, also plays a central role in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*. The book is part spiritual treatise, part fairy tale, and part wish fulfillment. The death of her beloved son, Lionel, from consumption in 1890 was perhaps the most pivotal experience of her life, leading

her to become deeply interested in various expressions of metaphysics, including Theosophy, Spiritualism, and New Thought. *The Secret Garden* was an opportunity to rewrite her son's life through the lens of the metaphysical optimisms she came to embrace: the invalid boy in the novel, rather than succumbing to his illness, is miraculously healed through the "magic" of positive thinking. The source of the magic in the garden is the spirit of Colin's deceased mother: its priestess is the practical, sunny Mother Sowerby. In rewriting her son's destiny to her own satisfaction, Burnett "left future child readers a healing legacy in her portrayal of the garden as an image of powerful motherhood" (Bixler 291).

The conception of motherhood in *The Secret Garden* is strikingly different from that in *Little Women*. This is partly because of the authors' different life experiences. For Alcott, the mother figure as viewed through the eyes of a devoted daughter embodies all that is sane and good, but she is also a limiting force: Marmee's primary function is to check her daughters at impulsive moments, and to remind them of their moral, social, and familial obligations. Burnett, rather than defining "Mother" as a limiting force, clearly wishes to affirm the efficacy of mothers in a world where mothers so often fail their children. Burnett also struggles to reconcile the dueling conceptions of the Victorian and Edwardian married woman: the child-wife and the cheery matron. Failing to unite these two very different types of mothers in one character, she provides her characters with two mothers. Lilies Craven remains eternally youthful, "sweet and clinging," a newborn mother baptized by birth but uninitiated in the realities of mothering (Nelson 19). Mother Sowerby, the living, wholesome matron, possesses the humor and common sense required for gaining the children's confidence and tending to their practical needs. These

two mothers in *The Secret Garden*, shown in sharp relief against Mary Lennox's worldly, indifferent mother, together achieve the complete expression of Burnett's ideal conception of womanhood.

France Hodgson Burnett's biography provides ample insight into the development of her views on motherhood. Frances' mother, Eliza Hodgson, was "a gentle, angelic soul whose mind remained until her death like that of an innocent, serious, young girl—with a sort of maidenly matronliness" (Gerzina 14). Ideally fitted for life as a well-to-do wife and mother, Eliza was left to run the family business and raise her five children after her husband's untimely death at thirty-eight (14). Her lack of business know-how led to the financial ruin of her family and their resultant move from England to rural Tennessee when Frances was fifteen (26). At eighteen, Frances was a successfully publishing writer, providing financial support for her mother and siblings. Eliza died in 1870, leaving Frances head of the family (39). After her marriage, Frances continued to write, sometimes leaving her children for extended periods with their father in order to pursue her literary career, a circumstance which contributed to her divorce. In *The Secret Garden*, she creates mothers who embody all that she has wished to provide and to be provided with: unconditional love, reassurance of goodness in the Universe, and mental and physical wellbeing.

Unlike the girls in *Little Women*, who are carefully guided in their spiritual training by their mother, the maternal influence over the children in *The Secret Garden*, though powerful, is less direct. "In *The Secret Garden*, effective motherhood means giving children tools to help themselves rather than making them tools for satisfying one's own egoistic desires" (Bixler 292). The children appear to be largely autonomous



in their quest, but Burnett clearly envisioned Mrs. Sowerby as the spiritual center of the book:

On October 1910, she wrote to her English publisher, William Heinemann... '[T]here is a moorland cottage woman who is a sort of Madonna with twelve children—a warm-bosomed, sane, wise, simple Mother thing. You only see her for a moment at the end of the book but she is the chief figure in it really. 'Mother' baking and washing in her cottage on the Yorkshire Moor makes all things happen merely because she is'. (Burnett qtd. in Gerzina *End* 181)

An Earthy Mary, Mother Sowerby hears confessions, provides a Eucharist of coarse brown buns and milk, affirms the children's fascination with Magic and expounds on metaphysical precepts in her wonderful Yorkshire English. She rarely censures the children's behavior, merely encouraging them in their self-discovery. The only instance of Mrs. Sowerby correcting a child is relayed by Martha: "I was in a bad temper an' talkin' ill of folk, an' she turns round on me an' says: "Tha' young vixon, tha'! There tha' stands sayin' tha' doesn't like this one an' tha' doesn't like that one. How does tha' like thysel'?" (Burnett *SG* 38). Negativity is the one sin which Mrs. Sowerby cannot abide: her gospel of cheerful optimism is a reflection of Burnett's own metaphysical conclusions, which spurned all negativity.

Burnett was reluctant to fully identify herself with any one religion, but she related to ideas in many different movements: "I am not a Christian Scientist, I am not an advocate of New Thought, I am not a disciple of the Yogi teaching, I am not a Buddhist. I am not a Mohommedun, I am not a follower of Confucius. Yet I am all of these things"

("Mrs. Burnett and the Occult" 259). Because of her affinity for ideas coming from many different veins of thought, and her tendency to focus on overarching similarities rather than particular differences, Theosophy greatly appealed to Burnett. Theosophy is an inclusive belief system seeking to identify universal truths in all major belief systems for the purpose of finding unity and balance in the universe. Because of its very nature, Theosophy is impossible to define neatly: "It is the wisdom of the gods, or of nature. This means, that evolution, slowly progressing will bring out new truths and new aspects of old truths, thus absolutely preventing any dogmas or 'unequivocal definitions'" (Judge 1). The three identifiable goals of Theosophy are to achieve a universal brotherhood of man, the serious examination of ancient world religions with the goal of gleaning from them a set of universal ethics, and the identification and development of humanities' "latent" divine powers (Blavatsky *Key* 1). At age sixty, Burnett expressed her Theosophical views to her nephew Archie: "The great truth is the foundation of all these beliefs, whatsoever they call themselves. All philosophers have taught them, but it has seemed to remain to this age to apply them on a practical working basis to every day life... Good is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate to a mind cleared of all darkness and smallness. Nothing is impossible because it is God's self" (Gerzina *FHB* 260). Theosophy in *The Secret Garden* is demonstrated by the following exchange between Colin and Mrs. Sowerby:

"Do you believe in Magic?" asked Colin after he had explained about Indian fakirs. "I do hope you do."

"That I do, lad," she answered. "I never knowed it by that name but what does th' name matter? I warrant they call it a different name i' France an' a different one i' Germany. Th' same thing as set th' seeds swellin' an' th' sun shinin' made thee a well lad an' it's th' Good Thing. It isn't like us poor fools as think it matters if us is called out of our names. Th' Big Good Thing doesn't stop to worrit, bless thee. It goes on makin' worlds by th' million--worlds like us. Never thee stop believin' in th' Big Good Thing an' knowin' th' world's full of it--an' call it what tha' likes. Tha' wert singin' to it when I come into th' garden." (161)

In addition to the mysticism of Theosophy, Burnett was also interested in aspects of the Occult<sup>7</sup>. Spiritualism, a form of Occultism that first appeared in the 1840's, is a monotheistic religion most commonly known for its belief that individuals can communicate with the spirits of the dead. Many prominent Spiritualists were women, and most followers of the movement also supported causes such as the abolition of slavery and women's suffrage (Braude 296). Though beliefs vary within Spiritualism, the movement has several core tenets. Most Spiritualists believe in a "monotheistic, omnibenevolent, natural, pantheistic God" (Carroll 248). Spirits can be communicated with through spirit mediums. Spirits are not stagnated at death or sent forever to heaven or hell: the afterlife is fluid, allowing for spirits to move to higher spheres of planes. Because communication with spirits who have progressed to a higher plane is possible, spirits are a valuable source of guidance for living humans (Carroll 248; Braude 296).

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<sup>7</sup> "Occultism, referring to the extension of knowing (extrasensory perception, including telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, retrocognition, and mediumship) beyond the usually recognized fields of human activity" (Anderson 1)

Burnett, devastated by her son Lionel's death, was desperate to regain connection with her son in some way, but was often disheartened by her experiences with Spiritualism:

She had toyed with mediums recommended to her by good friends, and “once or twice she took part in ‘slate writing’ demonstrations, but she always came away disheartened and disgusted, describing what she saw as ‘trumpery exhibitions... But for all that she was disappointed in her search for definite proof, she could not down a feeling that there might be something in it all. (Gerzina *FHB* 103-04)

She began to formulate her own method of communing with her dead son, through writing to him in her journal and asking for his help and guidance for herself and her remaining son, Vivian: “I feel as if I were writing a letter to you—‘To Lionel, in the Fair, Far Country.’ And it seems quite natural to ask you to do things for me. Will you watch over Vivvie and take care of him. I can give him the things of earth, and if he has an angel brother to stand by him, his life must be beautiful. He is so clever and bright and gay. He needs a hand to guide and hold him.” (Burnett qtd. in Gerzina *FHB* 148).

Burnett's struggles to reconcile herself to Lionel's death forced her to a spiritual crisis during which she vacillated between a comforting sense of her son's nearness and the mercy of a benevolent God, and pessimism and hopelessness when she felt cut off from that mercy.

She called on [Lionel] to advise her, asking him to “bend before the White Throne and say for me, ‘Great, dear Father, my mother asks... that there may never pass by her, unknown, one kind, helpful thing she might have done for one who needed. However a little thing it may be, do not let her

miss it. Help her always to see and help her to do her work so that she may always be able to give. (Burnett qtd. in Gerzina *FHB* 149)

Burnett personified her ideas about Spiritualism in the character of Colin's mother, Lilies Craven, in *The Secret Garden*. Though deceased, she is perhaps the most compelling maternal force in *The Secret Garden*. The characters are influenced by her spirit, emulating Burnett's belief that death is not the end of human relationships: "They have not gone away from you—those who have loved you every hour of their lives. They are close to you—they are a guard around you—they are talking to you—listening to you—taking care of you as you took care of them. When a helpful and uplifting thought enters your mind, one of them has put it there" (Vivian Burnett qtd. in Adams 310). In the novel, "Dickon... believes that the spirit of Colin's mother is at work since Dickon's mother has told him that 'maybe she's about Misslethwaite many a time lookin' after Mester Colin, same as all mothers do when they're took out of the world'" (Adams 310). She appears in dreams, in her portrait in Colin's room, and as a lingering presence in her garden: indeed, "the garden and garden community members [are] her living hands" (Bixler 229).

At the beginning of the novel, Colin resents his mother for leaving him. Later, once he has had his epiphany in the garden, he no longer shies from her memory. The curtain concealing her portrait is drawn back:

I wakened when it was bright moonlight two nights ago and felt as if the Magic was filling the room... there was a patch of moonlight on the curtain and somehow that made me go and pull the cord. She looked right down at me as if she were laughing because she was glad I was standing

there. It made me like to look at her. I want to see her laughing like that all the time. I think she must have been a sort of Magic person perhaps. (156)

As Colin begins to see his mother as a power for good, his own physical resemblance to her takes on a metaphysical significance. As Adams notes, Colin's

resemblance to his mother has led him to equate himself with her, particularly as a replacement for her in the heart of his father. When Mary remarks that he is so like her portrait that he might be her ghost, he replies, 'If I were her ghost-- my father would be fond of me... I used to hate it because he was not fond of me. If he grew fond of me I think I should tell him about the Magic. It might make him more cheerful.' Colin here begins to see himself as the next link in the chain of healing—that he has the potential to heal his father, sick in mind as well as body, as Mary healed him, and by similar means. Since Mr. Craven's mental illness was caused by the death of his wife, Colin thinks that he can be the means of his father's return to health. (312)

The tools instrumental in Colin and his father's restoration were laid by Liliac Craven before her death: "It was because her orders to tend the garden preceded Archibald Craven's orders to have it locked that Ben Weatherstaff continued to prune the garden after she died" (Bixler 229). Similarly, it was Liliac Craven who told Mary and Dickon to bring Colin to the garden, according to Mother Sowerby (Bixler 217). In the garden, Mrs. Sowerby becomes Mrs. Craven's surrogate:

[Colin] stood quite close to Susan and fixed his eyes on her with a kind of bewildered adoration and he suddenly caught hold of the fold of her blue cloak and held it fast.

"You are just what I--what I wanted," he said. "I wish you were my mother--as well as Dickon's!" (162)

Mother Sowerby continues to act as Liliias Craven's earthly representative, asserting that "Thy father mun come back to thee--he mun!" (162). She precipitates Archibald Craven's return by writing to him in the name of his dead wife, saying, "Please, sir, I would come home if I was you. I think you would be glad to come and--if you will excuse me, sir--I think your lady would ask you to come if she was here" (167). The letter finds him immediately following a dream of his wife, in which she implored him to find her "in the garden" (166). The mingling of the waking wishes of Mrs. Sowerby and Colin for Archibald Craven's return with his dreamful yearnings for his dead wife, and his belief that he may find her "in the garden" are evidences of Liliias Craven's spirit at work (166-67). Given voice through Mrs. Sowerby, Liliias comforts her son with hope of wellness and the restoration of his father's love, and gives her husband courage to return home, face his demons, and find happiness at last.

Liliias Craven's spirit is only part of the restoration of her loved ones: the minds of the living characters are also powerful healing tools. Burnett reveals that Colin's epiphany that he "shall get well and live forever and ever" occurred simultaneously with his father's healing trance by the European stream. This coincides with Burnett's belief that minds are in constant communication and that the concentration of multiple minds on the same outcome has a powerful impact (Gerzina 258; Burnett *SG* 165). The belief in the

power of the mind to heal demonstrates the influence of The New Thought movement on Burnett. The New Thought grew out of multiple religious denominations, notably “Unity Church, Religious Science, and Church of Divine Science” (Lewis 16-18). Like Spiritualism, New Thought has throughout its history been organized and run by women, gaining it a reputation of a feminist theology. An early advocate of the Mind Cure, Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, pioneered a philosophy that illness originated in the mind as a consequence of “wrong thinking” and that a mind open to God's wisdom could overcome any illness. (“Phineas” 1). *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, described New Thought as follows:

It is a deliberately optimistic scheme of life, with both a speculative and a practical side...

One of the doctrinal sources of Mind-cure is the four Gospels; another is Emersonianism or New England transcendentalism; another is Berkeleyan idealism; another is spiritism, with its messages of "law" and "progress" and "development"; another the optimistic popular science evolutionism of which I have recently spoken; and, finally, Hinduism has contributed a strain. But the most characteristic feature of the mind-cure movement is an inspiration much more direct. The leaders in this faith have had an intuitive belief in the all-saving power of healthy-minded attitudes as such, in the conquering efficacy of courage, hope, and trust, and a correlative contempt for doubt, fear, worry, and all nervously precautionary states of mind. (James 92-93)



Though she occasionally battled with pessimism and disbelief as she grieved over her son's death, Burnett ultimately embraced the optimism of "The New Thought that privileged hope over resignation and goodness over evil" (Gerzina 242). Frances Hodgson Burnett's New Thought, or "beautiful thought," as she called it, "had to do with optimism, happiness, sacrifice for others, and a search for beauty" (259). As Burnett expressed it,

We are to-day mysteriously conscious of this strange magic in the air that we will call the beautiful thought. It has so revitalized and stirred our souls that there has been in its most recent evolution a magnetic force that seems to me must almost stir the dead in their graves. We have a new knowledge of love, a new conception of hope, new unwritten laws of conscience and mutual helpfulness that it is no longer possible to escape, and which we are consequently in constant effort to explain. (Burnett qtd. in Gerzina *FHB* 259)

Burnett's newly articulated spiritual optimism became the subject of a play, *The Dawn of To-morrow* (1909). She said of the play: "We want plays to-day that have in them some big moment of beauty... plays that are written with the same reverence of spirit, with the same sacred allegiance to the beautiful thought with which an artist alone sees and describes" (Burnett qtd. in Gerzina *FHB* 260). "*The Dawn of To-morrow* made clear her belief that people needed no intermediaries between themselves and the 'Power'" (Gerzina 242).

Burnett, who called belief in the devil "neolithic" and "rococo," intentionally waged war on guilt and unhappiness: "I go about with a dark lantern, evading unpleasant

things. I practice a doctrine of elimination on that which will not make me happy. I am the prophet of happiness. In the early Victorian days it was fashionable to be unhappy and morose, but we have changed all that now. Unhappiness is indecent, not respectable and futile” (Burnett qtd. in West 251). She viewed Love, rather than fear, as the greatest motivating force in the universe: ‘Love is the biggest thing in the world. Not the cupid little emotion that runs around unclothed and with a bow and arrow, but big transfigured love that has wings big enough to spread over everything. It is worth while’ (251). Burnett’s fictionalized formulation of her “new thought” [in *Dawn of To-morrow*] planted the seed that would influence her writing for years (Gerzina *FHB* 140). *The Secret Garden* is the direct descendent of that earlier work’s philosophical bent.

In *The Secret Garden*, Burnett envisions a walled, secret garden as a safe place for children to grow mentally and physically. Burnett’s choice of a garden as a setting for her story was in no way happenstance: she “was clearly influenced by Rousseau’s *Emile* (1762), in which he recommends that ‘the child should be given a garden to cultivate (bk. 2, p. 38), and he described the child itself as a young plant to be carefully tended (bk. 1, p. 38)’” (Bixler 289). The walled garden is an emblem frequently associated with women and children in Victorian literature (227). In Rousseau’s, “Elysium,” for example, “Rousseau suggests not only that a married woman chooses a domestic garden over the courtly love garden of illicit passion, but also that she creates this “Elysium” especially for the sake of her young children. The birds in Julie’s garden demonstrate a ‘zeal for domestic duties, paternal and maternal tenderness’ as do the birds in *The Secret Garden*, published over a century later” (289).

At the beginning of her novel, Burnett's garden is locked and abandoned, a symbol of the maternal's inaccessibility to Mary and Colin. Before her arrival at the Misslethwaite manor, Mary has been neglected by her mother, who:

had been a great beauty who cared only to go to parties and amuse herself with gay people. She had not wanted a little girl at all, and when Mary was born she handed her over to the care of an Ayah, who was made to understand that if she wished to please the Mem Sahib she must keep the child out of sight as much as possible... She never remembered seeing familiarly anything but the dark faces of her Ayah and the other native servants, and as they always obeyed her and gave her own way in everything, because the Mem Sahib would be angry if she was disturbed by her crying. (1)

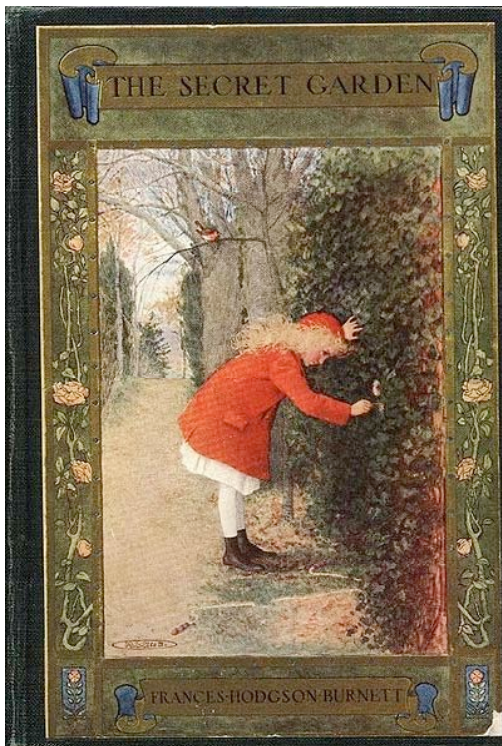


Fig. 12. Cover Art by Troy Howell for the 1911 edition of *The Secret Garden*.

This lack of attention from her mother and the resultant overindulgence from her servants is Burnett's explanation for Mary's "contrariness:" "Perhaps if her mother had carried her pretty face and her pretty manners oftener into the nursery Mary might have learned some pretty ways too. It is very sad, now the poor beautiful thing is gone, to remember that many people never even knew that she had a child at all" (8; 4). Mary's cousin, Colin, existed in a similar state of luxurious neglect. Colin's mother died as a result of his birth, and his father "supplied doctors and nurses and luxuries, but he had shrunk from the mere thought of the boy and had buried himself in his own misery" (168). Colin is a symbol of his father's pain and loss, representing "past victimization which prevents present and future happiness" (Bixler 296). The "Young Rajah" is accustomed to being obeyed in everything because of his supposedly frail state, a state perpetuated by overindulgence. By the time Mary meets him, he is "a confirmed invalid, with a vicious, hysterical, half-insane temper. He could only be kept from furies dangerous to himself by being given his own way in every detail" (Burnett *SG* 168).

Lacking a sympathetic mother or mother surrogate, Mary and Collin become completely preoccupied with self to the exclusion of all else, reflecting Burnett's view that "it is largely the treatment children receive that makes them 'nice' children" (Gerzina 244). The predominant symptom of motherlessness in *The Secret Garden* is selfishness. Interestingly, both Burnett and Alcott identify selfishness as a key issue in their books, but the impulse is manifested very differently. Alcott's characters manifest what they term "selfishness" whenever their drive for self-expression jars the peaceful unity of their home: they are bursting to express their creativity and individuality and are confined by familial, moral, and socio-economic limitations. Conversely, for Burnett's characters, the

complete absence of limitations results in absolute narcissism: unthwarted in any way, Mary and Colin are bored with everything and can only get the attention they crave through becoming “as tyrannical and selfish a little pig as ever lived” (Burnett *SG* 3).

The situation of Mary and Colin, though dire, is not beyond redemption. Because Mrs. Craven did not willingly desert her son, there is the possibility for her to redeem her family from its desolation. Her garden becomes the means of enlightening both Colin and Mary, and by extension, her husband. “When Mary arrives at Misslethwaite Manor, she learns about the garden from the first caregiver to offer her psychological as well as physical nurture, the servant Martha. In the first part of the book, Mary is still a child who needs mothering, especially because she is too “independent” and “self-contained” (Keyser 9); psychologically unconnected to others, she is also detached from her own feelings” (Bixler 291). She comes to a gradual understanding of her own “contrariness”:

Since she had been living in other people's houses and had had no Ayah, she had begun to feel lonely and to think queer thoughts which were new to her. She had begun to wonder why she had never seemed to belong to anyone even when her father and mother had been alive. Other children seemed to belong to their fathers and mothers, but she had never seemed to really be anyone's little girl. She had had servants, and food and clothes, but no one had taken any notice of her. She did not know that this was because she was a disagreeable child; but then, of course, she did not know she was disagreeable. She often thought that other people were, but she did not know that she was so herself. (9)

Young Martha Sowerby acts as a disciple of her mother, sharing cheerful industry as a remedy for Mary's moody malaise. That the humble Sowerbys are the catalysts for aristocratic little Mary's healing is significant. Unlike the genteel Marmee of *Little Women*, Mrs. Sowerby has no refinement to recommend her: she is a poor peasant with too many children crammed into a tiny cottage and not enough bread to fill their bellies. (Had she lived in the neighborhood of the Marches, she would have been on Marmee's charity list.) The fundamental difference in value of the two mothers is that Marmee March's knowledge results from a combination of piety and self-discipline combined with what is called "good breeding," while Mother Sowerby's comes from appreciation for Nature, as well as an essential optimism about the goodness of the Universe. This is a perfect distillation of the core values of the authors: Alcott with her somewhat exclusive intellectualism and strict self-discipline, Burnett with her inclusive, Naturalistic optimism.

Prompted by Martha's chatter about "Mother" and "Dickon," Mary unearths the secret garden and begins to tend it. In doing so, she gains strength physically and mentally. Through his interactions with Mary, Colin, too begins to respond to the mysterious life force of the garden. He begins to find his self-imposed prison confining, and longs for companionship: "I wish I was friends with things,' he said at last, 'but I'm not. I never had anything to be friends with, and I can't bear people.'" Mary observes to him, "I should have detested you if I had seen you before I saw the robin and Dickon" (110). And therein lies Burnett's (and Mrs. Sowerby's) remedy for selfish absorption. Through their exposure to Nature in the garden, Mary and Colin, both "spoiled and pettish" and physically frail, gradually develop not only physical health, but the attractive

traits of empathy and benevolence towards others (20). They learn morality from listening to bird song, digging in the dirt and watching buds break on the rose bushes rather than from a book or sermons. The opposite of arduous, goodness becomes almost hedonistic. Morality for Burnett is a natural result of personal fulfillment and wellness: “You must sacrifice everything to being happy. If you are happy you know you are bound to be good for you can’t be happy unless you are good” (Burnett qtd. in West 252).

Mary and Colin experience a

progressive spiritual development: first, development of the ability to “like” others and oneself, to think positively; second, development of the ability to use the imagination to further the healing process of positive thinking; and finally, development of the ability to realize that positive, imaginative thinking as part of something greater, the “magic” of God’s creative power as it manifests itself in man and nature. (Adams 303)

Each child contributes to the Garden’s metaphysical ideals. Raised in India by natives, Mary is a missionary of sorts to the English Colin, bringing her knowledge, however childish, of Eastern religion. She provides the vocabulary of “magic” which appeals so to her cousin. After her transformation in the garden, Mary joins ranks as healer with the other females in *The Secret Garden*. Just as the March sisters graduate from Marmee’s school for wives to begin their own schools, Mary practices her new maternal capacities on Colin:

In her most powerful scene Mary, summoned by the nurse to deal with Colin’s hysterics, fiercely takes charge of the frightened adults and uses a combination of bad temper and gentleness to convince Colin that he is not

deformed. A description of what the garden might be becomes her ultimate weapon, a kind of incantation, through which Mary tames Colin as if he were one of Dickon's animals. The indication of the change in him is his use of the word "please" to Martha the next morning, a word no one has hear from him before. (Adams 308-09)

Mary's refusal to believe the whispered prognosis of a crooked back and early death, and her insistence that Colin focus on the beauty in the garden, speak to Burnett's belief in the power of thought. Later, as Colin begins to believe in the Magic, Mary supports him by speaking affirmations as he attempts to stand, walk, and finally, run.

Colin's "scientific" approach to magic is not mere child's play: he is, without knowing it, a Theosophist. He proposes to study how magic works through scientific experiments, and hopes to uncover the process through which healing is achieved. His belief that the "Magic" of the universe can be studied and harnessed is a clearly Theosophical: "The exercise of magical power is the exercise of powers natural, but superior to the ordinary functions of Nature. A miracle is not a violation of the laws of Nature, except for ignorant people. Magic is but a science, a profound knowledge of the Occult forces in Nature, and of the laws governing the visible or the invisible world" (Blavatsky *Science* 1). "Taking his hint from Dickon, Colin also amalgamates the two sources of magic, the natural and the human. 'The Magic in the garden has made me stand up and know I am going to live to be a man' and 'her Magic helped me—and so did Dickon's' (*Burnett SG* 300- 01). Colin sees magic as what is positive and life-giving in man and nature and realizes that he must incorporate it into his thinking and then use the power of his thought to effect his own cure" (Adams 311).



Modern readers and critics are often frustrated by Mary's decreasing centrality towards the end of the novel as the focus shifts to Colin and his father. Keyser asserts that this is the inevitable conclusion for the novel because of Edwardian gender roles: as Colin matures into a healthy man, Mary must relinquish her role as his healer: she must, in other words, become "a woman—quiet, passive, subordinate, and self-effacing" (Keyser qtd. in Adams 310). This reading fails to recognize the triumph of Mary's success: she has achieved Burnett's ultimate praise by joining ranks with Mrs. Sowerby and Lilies Craven as a female healer. It is her presence which has allowed health to be restored to Misslethwaite Manor.

Once the nurturant "Magic" power has set Mary on the path toward health, Mary herself joins this mothering community. By bringing Colin and the garden together and then stepping back to let the garden and Colin do their work, she gives the kind of mothering she has received. This kind of mothering may not be "contrary" nor "self-assertive," but it need not be seen as totally self-sacrificial; it has its own rewards, the joy of working cooperatively with nature and other human beings, the sense of individual empowerment that can come when one participates in a nurturant power greater than any of its agents. (Bixler 292)

As *Little Women's* Jo, Mary has learned to fulfill herself through the role of nurturer, educating males within her sphere of influence about the importance of nurturance. "Women do not own houses in *The Secret Garden*; inasmuch as they can nurture, however, they fill homes with a power without which the signature deed of ownership brings little happiness (Bixler 296).

In both *The Secret Garden* and *Little Women*, the supposedly “female” sphere of feelings and spirituality take the place of ultimate significance: they are superimposed over the “male” sphere of economic and legal authority. This progressive view of gender roles which recognized the female and male need to be a whole person, regardless of sex, challenges the Victorian and Edwardian notion of strictly regimented gendered behavior. Though both Burnett and Alcott found gender-imposed limitations in their own lives frustrating at times, they ultimately affirm the ability of women to carve out a fruitful existence within the traditionally allocated role of nurturer. Paramount to the success of their female protagonists in their ability to enlighten the men around them in order to create a more equitable relationship between the sexes, one which allows women to work and men to feel.

#### Chapter 4: The Boy Who Never Grew Up, and the Girl Who Must: Gender in *Peter Pan*

Like Burnett and Alcott, J.M. Barrie, creator of *Peter Pan*<sup>8</sup>, was interested in religion and mothers, but his understanding of the relation of the two was entirely different. Rather than associating the spiritual with the maternal, Barrie creates two disparate realms, one ruled by mothers, the other by a boy-god, Peter Pan. Appropriating the name of the pagan god, Pan, as Peter's second name, and giving the boy immortality and the ability to fly, Barrie deifies the state of perpetual childhood. In the creation of a deity, Barrie has succeeded, for Peter Pan has become one of the "immortals of literature," being reincarnated by each successive generation into new versions of the original, most recently in a feature length film in 2003 (Hollindale xxvi). But *Peter Pan* is truly a "terrible masterpiece," because the boy deity, though a "wonderful boy" is horribly flawed (Carpenter 170; Barrie *PP* 148). The very characteristic which makes him distinctly "boy" rather than "man" is also the source of his pain: his inability to love forever separates him from that other realm ruled by mothers, the realm of human relationship.

Burnett and Alcott, both women writing on the relationship of mothers and their children, share a common belief in the benevolence of mother love. In *Peter Pan*, mother love is a much more complex and troubling subject. While acknowledging and sometimes praising the unconditional nature of mother love, Barrie finds its intensity both intoxicating and menacing: something to both desire and shun. For Barrie, the understanding of gender is inextricably bound up in the individual's relationship with

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<sup>8</sup> The term *Peter Pan* is used to include all four major texts by Barrie in which Peter appears. The full titles, *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* and *Peter and Wendy* are used for references to the individual texts, and the theatrical version is indicated as "the play, *Peter Pan*."

“Mother.” Under the guise of whimsical fairy tale, *Peter Pan* addresses many insecurities regarding gender: the simultaneous longing for and fear of contact with the feminine, both maternal and romantic, and the yearning to remain forever youthful and irresponsible, are core issues which haunted Barrie and are symptomatic of both personal and cultural attitudes about gender identity and relationships.

*Peter Pan* is a complex text, and part of the complexity lies in the inscrutable personality of its author. Barrie was a consummate pretender who enjoyed recreating his own persona: he had a habit in his writing and in life of assuming a half tender, half mocking tone which made it difficult to ascertain his actual opinion on anything. This “surface guise of comedy, self-mockery, and self-denigration makes possible an open declaration of almost impermissible feelings” (Hollindale xix). This practice is what Hollingdale calls “the Barrie tone,” and it is demonstrated most completely in the text of *Peter and Wendy*. Though it is impossible to ascertain Barrie’s actual feelings in many instances, the influences of his personal life on his life’s work, *Peter Pan*, are undeniable. Barrie’s complex relationship with his own mother, Margaret Ogilvy, was central to the creation of *Peter Pan*. When Barrie was six, his brother, thirteen-year-old David, died tragically in an ice-skating accident, sending Barrie’s mother into a nervous collapse from which she never truly recovered. David’s death became a lifelong fixation for Ogilvy and her remaining son, James: “If Margaret Ogilvy drew a measure of comfort from the notion that David, in dying a boy, would remain a boy for ever, Barrie drew inspiration. It would be another thirty-three years before that inspiration emerged in the shape of *Peter Pan*, but here was the germ, rooted in his mind and soul from the age of six” (Birkin 5). Determined to replace the dead boy in his mother’s affections, James

took to spending hours at her bedside. At first, he naively tried to literally become David by imitating his speech patterns and mannerisms, a morbid behavior which he later realized must have inflicted great pain.

Eventually, Barrie found that telling stories of her childhood brought his mother relief: he became fascinated with the image of her girlish self, an image which later haunted his writing: “I soon grow tired of writing unless I can see a little girl, of who my mother has told me, wandering confidently through the pages. Such a grip has her memory of her girlhood had upon me since I was a boy of six” (Barrie *Margaret Ogilvy* 25). The commonly accepted psychoanalysis of Barrie is that “The omnipresent image of his mother prevented him from achieving adult sexuality and parenthood himself. His own marriage ended in divorce after fifteen childless years; his wife revealed to friends that Barrie was impotent and that their marriage was never consummated” (Griffith 30). Compounding his sexual dysfunction were Barrie’s physiological oddities: he was inordinately short, just five foot three at full height, and had as an adult an oddly boyish appearance, lacking facial hair until his late teens and retaining black hair into old age (Hollindale xiii-xiv). He was, quite literally, incapable of growing up. The sense that he was unlike other men led him to compensate by sharpening his intellectual faculties: his strength was in his wit rather than his physical prowess.

Ironically, and to the great pain of his wife, Barrie was always greatly attracted to young mothers and their children, an affinity which led to his close friendship with Sylvia Llewelyn Davies and her five sons, to whom he later attributed the inspiration for *Peter Pan*. The name “Peter” was derived from the then youngest Davies boy, and the character ‘Peter Pan’ gradually evolved as Barrie invented stories about him to amuse the

young family. The character Peter Pan first appeared in print in *The Little White Bird* (1902), a loosely related collection of short stories on varying topics. In it, Peter is a boy who ran away to live with the birds and fairies in Kensington Gardens when he was just a day old because he heard his mother and father planning his future as a man. The narratives in *Little White Bird* provide a fascinating glimpse at Peter Pan's origins, many of which were later transcribed to *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*, the theatrical version of *Peter Pan* (first performed in 1904; first published in 1928) and *Peter and Wendy* (1911).

Fig. 13. Reprinted in *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (1906), this illustration depicts the infant Peter Pan as first conceived by Barrie in *The Little White Bird*. Here, the infant Peter consults old Solomon Caw, the leader of the birds in the Gardens, and learns that he has become a “betwixt and between,” neither bird nor boy (Rackham 1; Barrie *PP* 17).



Though carefully camouflaged in a whimsical package, *Peter Pan* is clearly an expression of Barrie's regressive yearnings. As Knoepflmacher insightfully observed,

children's books, especially works of fantasy, rely... heavily on the artist's ability to tap a rich reservoir of regressive yearnings. Such works can be said to hover between the states of perception that William Blake had labeled innocence and experience. From the vantage point of experience, an adult imagination re-creates an earlier childhood self in order to steer it towards the reality principle. From the vantage point of innocence, however, that childhood agent may resist the imposition of adult values and stubbornly demand that its desire to linger in a realm of magic and wonder be satisfied. Like Blake's two "contrary states," these conflicting impulses thus remain locked in a dynamic that acknowledges the simultaneous yet opposing demands of growth and arrest. (497)

Viewed through the lens of Barrie's life, *Peter Pan* becomes at once an attempt at escape from his unhealthy fixation with the maternal, and a recognition of the all invasive nature of that fixation. Barrie invents the boy's paradise, Neverland, where fighting, flying, and crowing are the norms, of which Peter is king. The Neverland reacts to Peter's every whim: he controls the weather, the rules of conduct, even the passage of time. It is an island of the mind where taboo behaviors can be acted upon without guilt because they are only make-believe. But the insular nature of the Neverland is its own temptation: because it is a land of make-believe, it tempts its inhabitants and the creator, Barrie, to push the bounds of acceptable behavior. It is Peter's (and Barrie's) insatiable curiosity about mothers and the domestic world they create that disturb enjoyment of this utopia. Barrie is unable to ban his mother from the perpetual utopia of the Neverland: she

intrudes in the form of the white-nightgowned Wendy, a character both loved and censured by Peter and Barrie.

The warring vantage points of innocence and experience, embodied in the characters of Peter Pan and Wendy Darling, create *Peter Pan's* enduring fascination for both adult and child readers. By bringing Wendy to the Neverland, Barrie is able to explore his problematic attachment to his own mother in the guise of make-believe as Peter and Wendy play house with the lost boys. Wendy and Peter have a dual relationship, that of mother and son and wife and husband, a relationship that is carefully platonic, further revealing Barrie's concern with his own maternal obsession (Griffith 31). The game develops a subtly erotic edge as Peter vacillates between playing "Father" to her "Mother" and calling her "Mother" himself. The implications are clearly Freudian: Barrie

faces the terrifying possibility that his passionate feeling for [his mother] will shade toward erotic desire-- and that it is absolutely taboo... Barrie's fantasy handles this precarious wish/ fear with great ingenuity. He has Peter choose for his mothers a series of girls, not quite women themselves, but on the verge of becoming so. He brings them back to the Neverland to be his mother—but once there, they play house, with Peter taking the part of the husband. All along, Barrie reminds us that this is all in play; the girl is not really Peter's mother, nor is she really his wife. Hence the incest-taboo is not really being broken. Barrie's fantasy does include a degree of eroticism, but it is assigned only to the girl/ woman, never to the boy. His innocence is preserved, immaculate. (Griffith 31-2)



On the narrative level, Peter Pan's fascination with and revulsion of mothers is explained towards the end of *Peter and Wendy*: ages ago, he decided to return to his real mother, only to find the nursery window barred and another boy in his place. This desertion wounded him deeply and robbed him of any motivation to return to ordinary life. He now functions under the assumption that all mothers are deserters: that mother love is not the solid rock which he once believed it to be. He refuses to admit that other mothers might be more loyal than his because this would make his own mother's desertion even more reprehensible. Peter's reaction to his mother's perceived fickleness is to pretend that he never wanted to grow up anyway. He says it so often that he believes it to be true himself. The stage direction from the play is telling:

PETER [*passionately*]. I don't want to go to school and learn solemn things. No one is going to catch me, Lady, and make me a man. I want always to be a little boy and to have fun.

(*So perhaps he thinks, but it is only his greatest pretend*). (qtd. in

Hollindale xxviii)

Peter's cocky bravado is both the cover and key to his core flaw: because he is determined to avoid further pain, he has become impervious to emotional entanglement with others: in short, he cannot love. One might surmise that this trait was shared by Peter's author, who years after writing *Peter Pan* scribbled in his journal, "It is as if long after writing *P. Pan* its true meaning came to me-- Desperate attempt to grow up but can't" (Barrie qtd. in Hollindale xxvii).

Though it has clearly Freudian overtones, to classify *Peter Pan* as solely the expression of an Oedipus complex is to vastly oversimplify Barrie's masterpiece. Barrie

was also exploring the ideological distinction between child and adult. Through out *Peter Pan*, Barrie attributes the ability to love to the adult rather than the child: children are described as “gay, innocent, and heartless” (Barrie 226). Because of this heartlessness, childhood is depicted as both a desirable and dangerous state, a state in which blissful narcissism reigns but the possessor is plagued continually by the nagging pull towards more adult emotions: duty, loyalty, and love. Giving into these emotions leads to the renunciation of enjoyable, childish pursuits in favor of more banal, adult occupations. “All children, except one” eventually bow to the inevitability of growing up (Barrie 71). Peter does not, and his “resistance is funny, brave, and exhilarating, and offers a fanciful escape into a comprehensive and impossible human dream” (Hollindale xxvii).

Part of Peter’s immunity to growing up lies in his masculine gender.

Barrie was particularly interested in the cultural alignment of maturity with the feminine and immaturity with the masculine. All of the lost children in Peter’s band are boys, for, as Peter flatters, “girls are much too clever to fall out of their prams” (95). Though he insists, “all children, except one, grow up” in Barrie, females appear to be prematurely wise, while males remain perpetually immature (71). Adult males in the book are represented as childish buffoons. Hook and Mr Darling, who Barrie decreed should be played by the same actor, are essentially silly, self-absorbed schoolboys.

And not only are they boys, but they are bad boys—cheaters and sulks who lack good form and who try, by unfair means, to steal attention and respect. Darling is obsessed with having the good opinion of his neighbors, his children and his wife, but he does nothing to deserve it.

He throws a tantrum when he cannot tie a tie, he cheats in the medicine-taking treaty with Michael, he uses his remorse over the children's absence to get attention for himself by moving into the kennel. Hook, too, cheats and sulks (he calls it brooding) and behaves like a petulant child.... (Griffith 33)

As Griffith notes, both Mr Darling and Hook vie with the children for "Mother's" attention, attention which she willingly bestows on children but withholds from grown men. Mr Darling "wheedles and whines for the motherly attention that Mrs Darling gives spontaneously to her children" (Griffith 34). When Wendy comforts Nana following Mr Darling's infamous trickery in the medicine affair, he shouts at her, "That's right. Coddle her! Nobody cuddles me. Oh dear no! I am only the breadwinner, why should I be cuddled, why, why, why!" (85). Hook tries to kidnap Wendy to be his own mother. Equally immature as Peter in mind, Hook and Mr Darling are his inferiors because they have bought into the rules of the female realm by growing up. Ironically, it is Peter's freedom from these constraints which allow him his greatest power: he defeats both Hook and Mr Darling: "Hook, of course, he kills, rescuing Wendy from his clutches and then spurning him with his foot. He registers his victory over Mr Darling when he casually takes 'the sweet, mocking kiss' from Mrs Darling's lips, a kiss which Mr Darling has tried and tried in vain to get" (Griffith 34). Peter is superior than Hook both because of his boyish virility and his imperviousness to the depression which plagues Hook. Emotionally immature himself, he is irresistible to both Wendy and Mrs Darling because, unlike Mr Darling, he is innocent. If he were to be seduced into growing up, Peter would lose his irresistible charm. It is, therefore, vital to his survival that Peter reject the

emotional advances of Wendy and Mrs Darling because to love is to be weakened, ruled, and then forgotten.

The gender divide in *Peter Pan* is a caricatured version of the Victorian and Edwardian separation of spheres for men and women. Trained from an early age in the distinctions of the sexes, Victorian and Edwardian males and females of all ages seem to have experienced a lack of sympathy with the opposite sex which is parodied throughout Barrie's work. Boys and girls were dressed and treated similarly as infants and toddlers, but by the age of four or so, the distinction between male and female became apparent in both dress and socialization. Women and girls belonged to the domestic sphere, and from an early age were taught that their task was to both placate and refine the cruder male sex through their gentle, moral solicitousness. To this end, girls remained at home for as long as possible: the higher the social status, the more isolated and innocent the girl. Girls who left the privacy of the home to attend school or to work were closely monitored by adults to preserve their purity. Should illness or financial straits require a family to reign in its expenses, daughters were inevitably expected to sacrifice their interests so that their brothers could carry on. Once married, women were expected to be forbearing and forgiving of their husband's faults, while maintaining impeccable personal propriety. Thus, females faced the paradox of finding identity solely through their usefulness to others, while being discouraged from expression of their true feelings about the behaviors of their husbands and sons.

Males faced challenges distinct from those of females. Boys, though educated at home until the age of seven when they attended school, received preferential treatment and often expected to be waited on by their sisters. This preferential treatment caused in

some a sense of self-entitlement akin to a perpetual childhood. Males felt great pressure to distinguish themselves as individuals distinct from their families through their vocations, social connections, and through sport. Unlike girls and women, boys and men were allowed a certain moral liberty (“Boys will be boys” was a favorite saying of the time) as long as it did not infringe on the propriety of their home life (Flanders 64-99; 292-323; Nelson 72-98). The disconnect between men and the consequences of their actions, enabled by the mandated “coddling” of womenfolk, contributed to an environment of permissiveness towards unscrupulous or childish male behavior, fostering emotional immaturity in men and female contempt for their supposed superiors.

Modern psychologists have made much of the boy’s need to differentiate himself from others in order to have a sense of identity: “Chodorow suggests that boys hold themselves apart from others, especially apart from girls and women, from mothers, seeking to define themselves as “other,” denying relationship rather than sustaining it as women have been socialized to feel fulfilled in doing” (Kissel 36). The result is a social isolation which prevents boys from reaching emotional maturity. Peter Pan epitomizes this immaturity. “John and Michael have been tempted by... the same dream that Peter Pan has had—“Pirates,’ cried John, seizing his Sunday hat, ‘let us go at once.” To be bold, to be daring, to seek out the high-spirited adventure of the moment (those deeds of daring-do which girls would be afraid to attempt), that is the goal” (Kissel 36). This romantic, though unrealistic version of manhood is the reality in which Peter Pan perpetually exists. To grow up would be to deny this reality and settle for the much more mundane existence known to adult men, the drudgery of going to the office each day and being ignored or patronized to by women each night.



Fig. 14. John Hassell portrays a bucolic Neverland and domestic bliss for this innocent version of Peter Pan and his Wendy made in 1907 (1).

Female socialization is the exact opposite of male, encouraging women to find their identity through social interaction with others. "...Wendy has been tempted away to Neverland by the idea of becoming a grown-up 'mother' and being useful and respected in her relationship to others" (Kissel 36). As much as *Peter Pan* is the tale of a boy who never grows up, it is also the story of a girl who has never truly been a child. Wendy, just like Carroll's Alice, "wants so badly to grow up, she more or less is grown-up now, probably was born grown-up" (Billone 186). Wendy is a little mother through and through: when her mother questions her about the strange leaves by the nursery window tracked in by Peter, Wendy, "who was a tidy child," exclaims at Peter's slovenliness rather than his remarkable entrance through a window that is a sheer thirty feet up (Barrie 76). Unlike her brothers, Wendy has no impulses to masquerade as a pirate: "No words of mine can tell you how Wendy despised those pirates. To the boys there was at least some glamour in the pirate calling, but all she saw was that the ship had not been

scrubbed for years” (192). It is her desire to mother rather than for adventure to which Peter appeals to lure her from her home:

"Wendy," he said, "how we should all respect you."

She was wriggling her body in distress. It was quite as if she were trying to remain on the nursery floor.

But he had no pity for her.

"Wendy," he said, the sly one, "you could tuck us in at night."

"Oo!"

"None of us has ever been tucked in at night."

"Oo," and her arms went out to him.

"And you could darn our clothes, and make pockets for us. None of us has any pockets."

How could she resist. "Of course it's awfully fascinating!" she cried. (96-97)

Once in the Neverland Wendy turns the Home Underground into a domesticated haven, making her own imaginary household with Peter as the “Father” and herself as “Mother.” She takes delight in taming the Lost Boy’s wild existence, instituting a schedule with bedtime, meals, and medicine she has been accustomed to under her own mother. The narrator remarks, “it was all especially entrancing to Wendy because those rampageous boys of hers gave her so much to do. Really there were whole weeks when, except perhaps with a stocking in the evening, she was never above ground. The cooking, I can tell you, kept her nose to the pot” (135). Barrie undercuts any dissatisfaction on Wendy’s part with her role by noting that “Her face beamed” when she exclaimed, “Oh,

dear, I am sure I sometimes think spinsters are to be envied” (135). In addition to caring for the boys’ physical needs, Wendy considers it her duty to preserve her family’s social integrity: she gives her brothers lessons “to fix the old life in their minds.” “What was the colour of Mother’s eyes? Which was taller, Father or Mother? Was Mother blonde or brunette?” Answer all three questions if possible” (Kissel 36; Barrie *PP* 136). She also encourages the Lost Boys to recall their own mothers and in the end, to return to them if they can be found. Modern readers often find Barrie’s depiction of the eager little mother frustrating. The most recent film attempts to recreate a more empowered Wendy, one who loves gore and glory, and even considers joining Hook, not as a mother, but as a pirate herself (*Peter Pan*, the film). Barrie’s depiction of Wendy was not only a symptom of his era’s sexual politics, but also an accurate recording of his mother’s childhood. Margaret Ogilvy took on the matronly duties of her father’s house at age eight when her mother died:

...she carried the water from the pump, and had her washing-days and her ironings and a stocking always on the wire for odd moments, and gossiped like a matron with the other women, and humoured the men with a tolerant smile—all these she did as a matter of course, leaping joyful from bed in the morning because there was so much to do... and then rushing out in a fit of childishness to play dumps with others of her age. (Barrie *Margaret Ogilvy* 19)

In *Peter and Wendy*, Wendy’s only dissatisfaction in the Neverland lies not in her maternal duties, but in the determinedly platonic nature of her relationship with Peter. Wendy, who is “every inch a woman, though there were not very many inches,” not only



possesses maternal tendencies, but also a thirst for romance (91). She is attracted to Peter partly in a maternal way: according to Barrie, he has all of his first teeth and his first laugh, charms irresistible to all females. But she also has romantic feelings for Peter: she admires his masculine qualities, his bravery, his sense of command, and, yes, his cockiness. In her own coy, innocent way, she attempts to gain Peter's romantic affections, affections for which she competes with both Tinker Bell and Tiger Lily. When Wendy breaks the rules of pretend by insinuating a reality of feeling behind the pretence, Peter immediately shuns her by reverting to the safety of the fictitious mother-son relationship:

She went to him and put her hand on his shoulder.

'Dear Peter,' she said, 'with such a large family, of course, I have now passed my best, but you don't want to change me, do you?'

'No, Wendy.'

Certainly he did not want a change, but he looked at her uncomfortably; blinking, you know, like one not sure whether he was awake or asleep.

'Peter, what is it?'

'I was just thinking,' he said, a little scared. 'It is only make-believe, isn't it, that I am their father?'

'Oh yes,' Wendy said primly.

'You see,' he continued apologetically, 'it would make me seem so old to be their real father.'

'But they are ours, Peter, yours and mine.'

'But not really, Wendy?' he asked anxiously.

‘Not if you don’t wish it,’ she replied; and she distinctly heard his sigh of relief. ‘Peter’, she asked, trying to speak firmly, ‘What are your exact feelings for me?’

‘Those of a devoted son, Wendy.’

‘I thought so,’ she said, and went and sat by herself at the extreme end of the room. (161-62)

The romantic element of Peter and Wendy’s relationship is a momentary distraction in the original Barrie because it is impossible for Peter to embrace it. A romance between two prepubescent children is, however, much more comfortable to modern audiences than the Freudian alternative, and so has become an important part of the surviving Peter Pan myth. The recent film adaptation underscores the modern sensitivity to the dual mother/ girl role of Wendy by eliminating all but the barest references to Wendy as “Mother.

Fig. 15. Hyman’s illustration captures Wendy’s frustration with Peter’s feigned indifference (119).



The film emphasizes Wendy's sexual coming-of-age as the primary tension. The existence of a "hidden kiss" in the corner of Wendy's mouth, the mark of womanhood, is the impetus for her flight to Neverland with Peter, a temporary stay before her expulsion from the nursery is executed. Though Wendy meets the revelation that she is growing up with dismay, and Peter tempts her to Neverland by promising she will "never have to worry about grown-up things again," she clearly desires a romantic relationship with Peter. Once in Neverland, the problematic ambiguity of their relationship in Barrie's version is redrawn in more direct lines: there is no hint of the Oedipal lurking beneath the fairy dust. Peter and Wendy's discussion about whether their relationship as husband and wife is real or pretend occurs during a luminously fairy lit, airborne dance in which one can see Peter at least trying on the idea of romantic love. One feels that the immortal boy has come very close to hanging up his wings. Wendy also feels it, and her offering of herself to Hook is a direct retaliation against the wound inflicted by Peter. Ultimately in this film, it is the gift of Wendy's "hidden" kiss that rescues Peter from a fatal blow, allowing him to finally vanquish Hook. Peter's latent sexuality is depicted as a powerful, life-giving force. Peter's rejection of adoption by the Darling family at the end of this film is a rejection of romantic love with Wendy. The obvious rejection of Wendy as a sexual partner in the film is more subtly implied in the novel: as a romantic interest, Wendy is dangerous to Peter, because romance leads to growing up: as a mother she is eminently safe, because as a little girl her mothering can never be real. Wendy's romantic feelings for Peter are very real, however, and so present a constant temptation against his resolve to remain a child.

In her simultaneous possession of both girlish innocence and womanly attraction, Wendy follows into the tradition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Cult of the Little Girl. This “cult” was a 19<sup>th</sup> century fascination with the duality of female children: their capacity to represent innocence and sexuality simultaneously. Wendy Darling combines

child and woman, dream and reality, chaste and fallen-- in constant tandem...Despite the arguments put forth in almost every critical review and reading of the play, the anxiety in *Peter Pan* does not revolve exclusively around the end of boyhood. A cultural fascination with the bounds of girlhood drives this text...While readers are always able to see a former child in Wendy, they are also haunted and thrilled by the ever-lurking image of a woman behind the eyes of the little girl, and the eternal boy simply provides a new space for old fantasies and tensions that previously flourished around female children. (Roth 48)

According to Roth, Wendy is neither girl nor woman:

Barrie continues the practice of embodying two opposing images or roles in a single female character (invariably the role of mother and daughter, mirroring the split image of Lamb’s Alice in “Dream Children”), but only as a sort of female diptych. The two identities are incompatible, so they emerge in turns—a duality that most often punished girls for becoming women by forcing them into painful masquerade and self-deception...

*Peter Pan* begins and ends as the story of a little girl who is tormented by the loss of her youth and innocence.... (Roth 52)

With the departure of Peter at the book's original end, Wendy has indeed lost her chance at perpetual youth and innocence. Barrie did, however, create a loophole: he added a chapter called, "When Wendy Grew Up," an illusion of hope for his heroine: by allowing annual spring-cleaning visits to the Neverland, Barrie maintains the connection between Wendy and Peter. Clark asserts that by doing so, Barrie allows Wendy and her female descendents to "explore their own agency, even perhaps their own feminist tendencies, without serious repercussions" (Clark 317). Indeed, no serious repercussions for the girls, their families, or for Peter, because those trips to the Neverland are trips into an unreality which cannot result in Peter's maturation or in any fruitful change in the real lives of his little mothers. Both Peter and his mothers are allowed to engage in a momentary wish fulfillment, but it has no impact on reality. Wendy and her descendants, then, are destined to follow in the footsteps of Mrs Darling.

Not surprisingly, of all persons in *Peter Pan*, mothers in general, and specifically Mrs Darling, receive the most fulsome praise and constant disparagement from both other characters and the narrator. "Peter's own attitude toward mothers is a clear expression of this simultaneous wish to be free of their bothersome presence, and to have their unlimited devotion" (Griffith 31). Peter is fiercely possessive and proud of his own real mother even though he is forever estranged from her, saying as he appraises Mrs Darling, "her mouth is full of thimbles, but not so full as my mother's was" (212). Peter's mother is clearly in the past and so can be safely romanticized. When he first lays eyes on Mrs Darling and realizes she is an adult, Peter gnashes his teeth at her, (somewhat ironically, for it is these milk teeth which are apparently so irresistible to Mrs Darling and all other women) (77). Unlike his own mother, Mrs Darling is the current threat, the embodiment

of Peter's fears of lost autonomy. Additionally, she is capable of bereaving him of both his crew and of Wendy if they are lured back to her nursery. Peter resents even the mention of Mrs Darling while Wendy is in Neverland because is, to Wendy, the unconditionally loving mother he believes to be a vicious falsehood. He also fears that Wendy's memory of her mother will deprive him of his pretend one. And yet, Peter does sympathize with Mrs Darling's plight: as he peers at her sleeping restlessly in the nursery chair he feels a stirring of remorse for keeping Wendy from her. Peter fully intends to bar the nursery window before the children's return so that they will be tricked into thinking their mother has forgotten them. He candidly states the position: "I'm fond of her too. We can't both have her, lady" (212). And yet, Peter is not absolutely heartless after all: as he watches her troubled sleep, his conscience smites him:

‘Oh, all right,’ he said at last, and gulped. Then he unbarred the window.

‘Come on Tink,’ he cried, with a frightful sneer at the laws of nature; ‘we don’t want any silly mothers;’ and he flew away.’ (212)

Whether he is referring to Mrs Darling or Wendy or both is unclear. He further reveals Mrs Darling's allure when, before leaving the Darling nursery to return to the Neverland, he takes Mrs Darling's hidden kiss with him, the kiss which neither her husband nor her children have successfully taken. Though he has already decided to reject her, Peter takes the kiss as a souvenir to remind him of his conquest. And, as Barrie says, "She seemed satisfied" (218).

The narrator alternates between admiration and disparagement of Mrs Darling's motherly nature. At one time he asserts, "You see, the woman had no proper spirit. I had meant to say extraordinarily nice things about her, and not one of them will I say now"

(208). Later he retracts this, commenting, “now that we look at her closely and remember the gaiety of her in the old days, all gone now just because she has lost her babes, I find I won’t be able to say nasty things about her at all. If she was too fond of her rubbishy children, she couldn’t help it... Some like Peter best, and some like Wendy best, but I like her best” (210). The mother’s unconditional love is her primarily redeeming quality, but it also allows the child to feel superior to his mother because of the resulting power he wields over her happiness, and despises her for her self-sacrificing spinelessness: “mothers alone are always willing to be the buffer” (Barrie 190). The narrator tartly points out the negative impact of such love on the behavior of its objects:

Off we skip like the most heartless things in the world, which is what children are, but so attractive; and we have an entirely selfish time; and then when we have need of special attention we nobly return for it, confident that we shall be embraced instead of smacked.

So great indeed was their faith in a mother’s love that they felt they could afford to be callous for a bit longer. (166)

The catch-twenty-two here can be appreciated by both child and adult readers; the child feels both guilty and exultant knowing that he is secure in the love of the mother. The mother finds endless delight and solace in her children but worries that they will leave her or become spoilt. Because she has dedicated herself to mothering to the exclusion of intimacy with her husband, she finds her true identity solely in her interaction with her children: “Mrs Darling, it seems, cannot give herself to another adult in a totally free way; it is only in her role as mother that she can open up her innermost box and give most deeply of herself to the most “gay and innocent and heartless” child of them all. And so,

childishness is encouraged in perpetuity—and with it, human selfishness, heartlessness, and irresponsibility” (Kissel 39). Once the children grow up, however, she will be utterly alone, living with a person she neither likes nor admires. It is therefore in her own selfish interests to prevent her children from growing up. By this logic, Mrs Darling unwittingly becomes Peter Pan’s accomplice.

Morse goes so far as to assert that Mrs Darling, rather than being a “woman in complete conformity with the female passivity and submission expected of her as a Victorian woman,” is in fact the creator of Neverland and Peter Pan (Morse 282). Rather than being powerless, Morse argues that the Victorian woman wielded incredible power and influence within the sphere of domesticity, overseeing household customs and the upbringing of the next generation, as well as acting as moral compass and advisor to her husband. I do not agree that Mrs Darling is the creator of Neverland and Peter, but I do see her as an enabler of her children’s fantasies about them. She has, as Barrie whimsically records, the power to examine the contents of her children’s minds while they sleep (73). This implies a level of intimacy with the thoughts of Wendy, John and Michael which make her almost an accomplice in their flight. It is she who questions Wendy about Peter and she who captures his shadow and locks it in the drawer. Again, it is she who:

dreamt that the Neverland had come too near and that a strange boy had broken through from it. He did not alarm her, for she thought she had seen him before in the faces of many women who have no children. Perhaps he is to be found in the faces of some mothers also. But in her dream he had



rent the film that obscures the Neverland, and she saw Wendy and John and Michael peeping through the gap. (77)

Barrie reflects casually that there should have been a fourth night-light: Mrs Darling's unprotected mind allows Peter to sneak into the nursery. She has guarded her children by going "from bed to bed singing enchantments over them" but she herself is unprotected from the allure of Peter Pan: his promise of preserving her children *as* children forever (86). By dismissing Wendy's tales of Peter as nonsense and by participating unconsciously in the dream world of the Neverland, she tacitly gives the children permission to follow Peter.

Barrie notes that Peter is "very like Mrs Darling's hidden kiss" (77). Because we know something of Peter, we can infer the nature of that kiss: "youth and joy" (203). So it is not only Mrs Darling's desire to possess her young ones indefinitely, but also her own secret dissatisfaction with her adult life that leaves the Darling children vulnerable to Peter Pan, the embodiment of her hidden kiss. Yet Mrs Darling as adult woman is abhorrent to Peter, and so it is young Wendy who is his mother, an unthreatening mother because her relationship with Peter is platonic, and so she cannot wield her sexuality over him to gain control over him (Morse 297). Mrs Darling can enter the Neverland only by living vicariously through her children. Eventually, the children must return from Neverland to the adult Mrs Darling, with the assurance of continued exploration for future generations of Darling girls through the annual Spring Cleaning in Neverland. Thus, Barrie maintains the unlikely compromise between two worlds, the world of the adult and of the child. The temporary trysts in the Neverland cannot abolish the fact that

Wendy and Peter have essentially incompatible natures and can never live in the same world with any permanence.

If “the riddle of Peter’s being” is found in his absolute resistance of emotional closeness, and Wendy’s identity is found only through just such closeness, then their meeting is destined for disappointment from the beginning. As Peter Hollindale remarked, “It is Peter and Wendy themselves who do not mix, and the book derives much of its comedy and poignancy from their innocent, celibate cohabitation in two incompatible worlds” (Hollindale xxiv).

For [Barrie] there was no continuum from child to adult, nor yet the usual transition from conventional boy’s make-believe to conventional adult life, but rather perhaps a no man’s land between the two. It was in Peter and Wendy that he polarized most successfully the ambiguities of his central vision—the child-in-adult and the adult-in-child. Peter and Wendy are perhaps the center-piece of Barrie’s imagination: opposite visions of the Neverchild. Wendy is the child playing adult roles and games, and in her the incipient adult and mother already control the child; Peter is the child playing adult roles also, but in him the child is inviolable, separate and free. For Peter being ‘father’ is fun only if he knows it is not and will not be true. The children are playing games, and the stories about them are also a game, played out in the no man’s land between child and adult worlds. (Hollindale xiv)

Though they meet temporarily in the Neverland, Peter and Wendy must eventually choose one world or the other. In the end, Peter makes the only choice available to him, the

choice to remain as he is, “constantly in flux, a “betwixt and between” (McGavock 196). Wendy is fixed in time, and therefore must eventually die, while Peter is immortal. And yet, it is a lonely immortality because his friends must inevitably leave him as they change and die and he remains the same. Barrie reveals in the last chapter that Peter has, to Wendy’s horror, forgotten Hook and even Tinkerbell on his very first trip back to take Wendy to the Neverland for spring cleaning (219). He listens with interest to the tale of his defeat of Hook. Of Tink, he merely shrugs, “There are such a lot of them... I expect she is no more” (219). Peter’s forgetfulness and self-centeredness belie his inner vulnerability, but a scene late in the book reveal the depth of his pain:

Sometimes, though not often, [Peter] had dreams, and they were more painful than the dreams of other boys. For hours he could not be separated from these dreams, though he wailed piteously in them. They had to do, I think, with the riddle of his existence. At such times it was Wendy’s custom to take him out of bed and sit with him in her lap, soothing him in dear ways of her own invention, and when he grew calmer to put him back to bed before he quite woke up, so that he should not know of the indignity to which she had subjected him. (181)

Peter, supremely self-assured in his awake state, “does so need a mother,” but it is beyond his emotional capacity to ever admit to his need. Though Wendy comforts him in his sleep, the womanly imperative to protect his self-respect by suppressing what she knows prevents any real change in their relationship’s dynamic. The simultaneous desire to protect and inability to confront are at the core of the idealized relationship of women to men in Barrie’s day, an ideal which prevents the open dialogue necessary for intimacy

and respect in relationships. This tacit understanding of surface respect with an underlying patronization is the primary component in Barrie's comedy of the sexes. Beneath the sugary admiration, there is a struggle for superiority of both male and female.

As Tavis and Wade explain in *The Longest War*, "Differences by themselves need not cause animosity. It is only when one group considers the other to be immoral, deficient, or dangerous that conflict arises... Both sides in the war between the sexes, as *Peter Pan* reveals, need the other sex yet hold the opposite sex in disdain" (Tavis 3). Both males and females in *Peter Pan* engage in undermining the other sex. "While seeking to persuade Wendy to fly away with him to 'mother' the lost boys, Peter admits to himself that he thinks mothers are 'very overrated persons'" (Kissel 33; Barrie 90). Wendy, though outwardly polite, reflects self-righteously "How exactly like a boy!" when she discovers that Peter has been attempting to adhere his shadow to his foot with soap (90). Later, in the Neverland, Wendy adopts her mother's policy that she will never hear "complaints against father," but always defer to "father's" decisions, "no matter her private feelings;" however, she derives a sense of self-righteous superiority over Peter from the forbearance of this public stance, and because her private feelings are infinitely superior to his own (157-58).

Because gender roles were so strictly imbedded in the culture, they were nearly insurmountable to individuals who were dissatisfied with their assigned roles. The expected interests and behaviors of females and males were so widely divergent that they made true understanding between men and women extremely difficult, if not impossible. The result, according to Barrie, was the adoption of at best, a patronizing tolerance by

one sex of the other. The underlying tragedy of this seemingly comic battle of the sexes was all too clear to Barrie, who experienced it firsthand in his own life. The sometimes poignant and wistful tone of *Peter Pan* implies that Barrie privately wished for a way to bridge the gulf between male and female, but seeing no solution, resorted to comedy as a balm. In this he is like Peter, who, on contemplating Wendy's desertion of himself in favor of growing up, "nearly cried; but it struck him how indignant she would be if he laughed instead..." (181). Levity is for Barrie, like Peter, a defensive covering over a raw spot. In writing *Peter Pan*, Barrie imagined a space in which he could safely explore the troubled nature of his and his own culture's understanding of gender relations, particularly in regard to mothers as objects of admiration, resentment, and desire.

## Conclusion

In Barrie's *Peter Pan*, Burnett's *Secret Garden*, and Alcott's *Little Women*, the influences of the cults of childhood and motherhood as conceived by the Victorians and Edwardians are clearly evident. Each author appropriates these conceptions uniquely, revealing personal biases. The earliest of the three works, *Little Women* retains lingering traces of the Protestant work ethic and the Puritanical preoccupation with sin, while simultaneously reflecting the socially progressive leanings of Alcott's Transcendental circle. The duality of *Little Women's* ideological axis is personified in Marmee Alcott as she both challenges and upholds conventional femininity in her instruction of her children. This duality is further explored as Jo March's longing for freedom and self-fulfillment is checked by her desire to do her duty to her family and to please her saintly mother. Jo's personal conflict between self-determination and family duty are the beating pulse of the book, the reason for its continued appeal. To the disappointment of many a modern reader, Alcott flirts with feminist tendencies in the character of Jo, but she provides fairly conventional eventualities for her character, bowing more, one suspects, to the demands of publishers and fans than to personal inclination. Though her women do not behave in an actively revolutionary way, Alcott does challenge the traditional separation of spheres by causing her male characters to participate increasingly in traditionally female activities. This more subtle critique of gender roles was a pragmatic and clever solution to what must have been a tiresome problem for so independent a woman as L.M. Alcott.

Frances Hodgson Burnett, untroubled by the long shadow of Puritan New England, writes in *The Secret Garden* an escapist narrative which allows her to

renegotiate her painful personal experience as a bereaved mother. Reflecting the hearty optimism of her adopted country, America, Burnett assumes an essentially hopeful view of both mothers and children, negating the negative or perplexing in favor of a world in which nothing is impossible, and mothers and children are collaborators for bringing about social justice and physical and mental healing. Creating a benevolent Earth mother in Mrs. Sowerby and a ghostly benefactor in Mrs. Craven, Burnett provides her child protagonists with two maternal figures who empower them to heal themselves through positive thinking and tending the garden. Burnett's metaphysical optimism, born of her discipleship to New Thought, Theosophy, and Spiritualism, is symptomatic of her culture's great need for religious solace, something that became increasingly elusive with the approach of modernism. The popularity of her many books is a testament to the public hunger for books that promised positive outcomes despite widespread unease and confusion.

J.M. Barrie is simultaneously the most creative and the most fatalistic of the group. Like Burnett, Barrie writes an escapist narrative allowing him to safely renegotiate a painful experience, but unlike Burnett, his narrative brings him no closure. Both admiring and fearing the immortal boy, Peter Pan, and all-loving mother, Mrs Darling, he alternates between effusive praise and withering derision of both, ultimately retreating to a whimsical tone which allows him to keep a safe distance from his topic. In Barrie, there is no resolution, only a sustained tension as the two incompatible states, innocence (the child) and experience (the mother), attempt cohabitation. Wendy Darling, the girl-mother, provides the necessary conceit through which Barrie is freed to explore the problematic schism between child and adult, male and female. To claim that Barrie

either endorsed or rejected the traditional gender roles, or worshiped at the altar of undying youth, is to oversimplify the complexity of his work: he merely described psychological and social reality as he saw it, with its many contradictions, holding these simultaneously in his mind and attempting to encapsulate them all into one work of fiction. Both motherhood and childhood were, to him, states to both awe and fear, for he saw both the glorious and the horrible implications of each. To have eternal youth is to be heartless; to be a mother is to have too much heart. Neither is a state, ultimately, to be envied.

Diverse and many layered, the works of Alcott, Burnett, and Barrie provide a fairly comprehensive representation of the cults of childhood and the household angel as manifested in Victorian and Edwardian Children's literature. The four decades after 1900 continued to produce exceptional children's literature rich with potential for gender studies relating to children and mothers. For a uniquely American perspective, Laura Ingalls Wilder's "Little House" series (1932-1943) provides ample material for exploring the ideology of the American West as it was expressed in the domestic sphere. Another potential goldmine for examining the maternal ideal is P.L. Traverser's *Mary Poppins* series (1934-1988), in which the magical nanny sweeps in as surrogate mother to the Banks children and sets all things right.

Yet another logical extension of gender studies in Western children's literature might be to explore the changing conception of masculinity. The rise of the sports hero and advent of war, among other factors, had a huge impact on the ideal of boy and manhood at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Theodore Roosevelt's *Strenuous Life* (1900), with its manifesto of the honest, hardworking American male, marks a significant



milestone in the formation of American masculinity. One might contrast the delicate and aristocratic *Little Lord Fauntleroy* of 1886 with later works such as *The Hardy Boys* (1927-), which feature boys who would probably rather die than be seen in curls and velvet pants.

Whatever the specific focus, the literature created by the late Victorians and the Edwardians for their children continues to retain a remarkable cultural currency. Many of these books are handed down from one generation to the next as a literary right-of-passage. The Victorian and Edwardian conception of childhood has left an indelible mark, one that will not vanish as long as children continue to read.

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