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Fantastic Journeys: Resisting Growth in Golden Age Children's Novels

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Abstract

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During the Golden Age of children’s literature (1865-1914), authors both clung to the Romantic ideal of the innocent child and desired to acknowledge the child’s capacity for agency. This Romantic ideal of innocence was necessarily threatened by the child’s potential for agency—the more power the child wielded, the more likely she was to have her innocence tainted by experience and knowledge. This dissertation contends that the tension between the ideas of the child as innocent and the child as powerful led to the invention of a trope that I have named the “fantastic journey.” The fantastic journey occurs when a child character travels to a marvelous space (such as fairyland), has an adventure there, and returns to her ordinary world without her adult guardians ever discovering that she has been away because the journey has been either an out-of-body or an out-of-time experience. The journey may be explained as a dream or vision, or as an instance of time travel where the child returns to the same moment that she left in her ordinary world. The purpose of the fantastic journey is to allow a child to wield agency without any damage to her essential child identity. Each journey does this in different ways, but all allow child characters to gain knowledge and experience or to perform actions that would normally cause them to move closer to adulthood without losing any part of their child identity. Additionally, the journey also results in metamorphosis—abrupt change that is not the result of progress or process—for the child. This change always either enhances or protects the protagonist’s essential child identity. It is not
change toward adult maturity. This dissertation traces the development of the fantastic journey through five texts, beginning with its initial formation in *The Water-Babies*; continuing through its various forms in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, *At the Back of the North Wind*, and *The Story of the Amulet*; and concluding with its deconstruction in *Peter Pan*. 
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Soli Deo Gloria
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Introduction

It is not surprising that when we look at some of the most successful novels from the Golden Age of children’s literature, we find journeys at their centers. The novel and the journey have been linked from the inception of the genre—consider Robinson Crusoe’s journey to the deserted island, Christian’s journey to the Celestial City, and Gulliver’s journeys to Lilliput and Brobdingnag. Before the novel, the epic poem was also centered around the journey of its hero, from Odysseus sailing home to Dante touring the circles of hell and heaven. Long narrative forms are, of course, particularly suited to the narration of a journey. As the protagonist travels through time and space in the story, the audience travels along the length of the narrative—protagonist and audience arrive at their end goal simultaneously.\(^1\) Traditionally, the journey is also associated with change, which often manifests as the progressive development of the central character. Crusoe is changed from a rebellious son to a sober, religious man (albeit with a persistent weakness for travel); Christian turns from sinner to saint; Gulliver from a man possessed of ordinary sentiments to a would-be Houyhnhnm.\(^2\) Within this tradition of travel and individual development rose the genre of the Bildungsroman, a journey which takes a young protagonist from unformed naiveté to self-aware maturity.\(^3\)

So far, the association of the journey with the children’s novels of the Golden Age seems reasonable—even inescapable. In particular, the Bildungsroman, which often

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charts a journey from childhood to adulthood with the protagonist’s maturity growing in tandem with the journey’s progress, appears a particularly comfortable fit for the genre of children’s literature. In fact, one of the best known nineteenth-century Bildungsroman narratives, *Jane Eyre*, famously begins with Jane as a child and follows her into wifedom. Each important stage of her development is marked by a journey: from Gateshead to Lowood as she becomes a schoolgirl, from Lowood to Thornfield Hall when she becomes a young woman, from Thornfield Hall to the Moor House as she becomes a mature woman, and finally to Ferndean when she becomes a wife. Yet, when the journeys depicted in certain influential Golden Age children’s novels are examined, they do not resemble Jane’s journey at all. In fact, they do the opposite of carrying a child into a maturity, acting in some ways as an anti-Bildungsroman.

In this dissertation, I will argue that a trope I call the fantastic journey evolves during the Golden Age. In a fantastic journey, a child character travels to a fantasy space without the knowledge of her adult guardians—it appears to adults that the child has never been gone because the journey occurs either outside of the child’s body or outside of the flow of ordinary time. These journeys seek both to preserve their child travelers as children by preventing them from reaching adulthood, and to transform child travelers into better children through a sudden process of metamorphosis rather than one of growth or development. In order to fully introduce the concept of the fantastic journey, I will first

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4 Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Random House, 1944); Sharon Locy, “Travel and Space in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre,“* *Pacific Coast Philology* 37 (2002): 105-21, 107. As Locy points out, some critics question the possibility of a female Bildungsroman for nineteenth-century women who were predestined for the domestic sphere since the typical male Bildungsroman calls for a journey, but “*Jane Eyre* is atypical in its appropriation of the male pattern of development” (p. 107). Children, too, are considered to belong to the domestic sphere throughout the nineteenth century, and the Bildungsroman does not flourish in nineteenth-century children’s literature.

5 Because the primary texts feature both male and female protagonists, I variously refer to “the child” as “he,” “she,” and “it,” throughout the dissertation, depending on what is most appropriate in the context.
define the vocabulary I have developed to describe it. I will next discuss the state of children’s literature criticism and explain how my own argument plays into a recent turn in the field. Finally, I will explore the concept of the fantastic journey and place it in its literary context before concluding with an overview of my chapters.

Terms

In order to describe and discuss this previously unidentified trope, I have developed a special vocabulary for its parts and functions. The first and most prominent word is “fantastic,” which I have chosen because it can be equally applied to the fantasy portions of the considered texts without interfering with the special vocabulary of any of them. “Magical,” for example, would not have worked since magic has a specific meaning in E. (Edith) Nesbit’s Psammead trilogy (the subject of my third chapter) that it does not in George MacDonald’s *At the Back of the North Wind* (which I discuss in chapter two). Similarly, “supernatural” would mean something in MacDonald’s Christian fantasy that it could not in Lewis Carroll’s more secular *Alice’s Adventure in Wonderland* (the subject of chapter one). “Fantastic” is used to mean any event or space that cannot be explained by the ordinary, realist world.

A primary purpose of the fantastic journey is to allow the child to change without growth, so metamorphosis is also a part of the trope. Although the metamorphosis I will discuss in the different texts takes correspondingly different forms, I use the term to mean abrupt change that is not the result of process or progress. I borrow the term from Gillian Beer, who identifies metamorphosis as a key idea entangled with nineteenth-century understandings of growth and development. Referencing Ovid’s pronouncement that “Everything changes, nothing dies,” she defines metamorphosis as “the essential self
transposed but not obliterated by transformation,” as were the subjects of Ovid’s stories. For example, Daphne’s transformation into a laurel tree both protects her from Apollo’s pursuit and preserves her essential self. Metamorphosis, which “emphasises abrupt disconnection, the apparent fissuring of past and present,” stands in contrast to growth since “[t]wo essentials in growth are time and movement … transformation and metamorphosis may take place almost without time. Growth cannot.” Beer goes on to claim that the Victorians were unable to let go of either idea in their understanding of the narrative of human existence: “Metamorphosis and development offer two radical orders for narrative—the tension between the two orders and the attempt to make them accord can be observed in many Victorian fictions.” Beer argues that it was possible to make metamorphosis and development accord by understanding metamorphosis as the preservation of the inner identity, while development over time brought change to the outward identity. Darwin’s evolutionary theory may be understood as “the older concept of metamorphosis prolonged through time, transformation eked out rather than emblazoned.” But in the fantastic journeys I discuss, this accordance is absent. Instead, the fantastic journey emerges out of the doubt that the essential identity of the child can truly be preserved in the face of development. The purpose of the fantastic journey and its accompanying metamorphoses—abrupt changes disconnected from developmental time—is to resist growth. Metamorphosis and growth cannot be made to accord. The essential child cannot grow yet remain essentially the same. Thus, she must be preserved

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8 Beer, pp. 105 and 101.
9 Beer, p. 105.
10 Beer, p. 104.
through the metamorphosis enabled by the fantastic journey, which permits change while eluding growth.\textsuperscript{11}

Although “child” can be used to refer to persons anywhere between newborn and eighteen years old, I will use the word exclusively to mean children who are prepubescent. The Golden Age texts that I examine in the following chapters feature child protagonists under the age of thirteen (a majority are closer to seven). It is crucial to the definitions of children and childhood in all but the last of these texts that children are defined as asexual, although not quite genderless, so the ages must be kept young.

Another trait of young children important to the fashioning of the fantastic journey is a certain ignorance which allows them to believe in marvelous occurrences. Children who have been too educated will lack the necessary belief to carry them through a fantastic journey. Nesbit, focus of my third chapter, acknowledges this necessary condition of child belief at the beginning of her Psammead trilogy. She remarks to her imagined child audience, “Grown-up people find it very difficult to believe really wonderful things, unless they have what they call proof. But children will believe almost anything, and grown-ups know this. That is why they tell you that … the earth goes round the sun, when you can see for yourself any day that the sun gets up in the morning and goes to bed at night like a good sun as it is … Yet I daresay you believe all that about the earth and the sun, and if so you will find it quite easy to believe that before Anthea and Cyril and the others had been a week in the country they had found a fairy.”\textsuperscript{12} Through amusing rhetoric, Nesbit puts acquired knowledge about the shape of the earth into the same category as the fantasy story she is about to relate, indicating that both her

\textsuperscript{11} Throughout the dissertation, I use “transform” and “transformation” interchangeably with metamorphosis.

\textsuperscript{12} E. Nesbit, \textit{Five Children and It} (Devon, UK: Dover, 2002), p. 4.
characters and her imagined audience have not yet been taught that fantasy is false, so are able to experience fantastic narratives as true.

“Children’s literature” is a term equally beset by broad usage and can refer to anything from board books for non-verbal children, to sophisticated and explicit novels for older adolescents, to books originally intended for adults that have been reassigned to children’s bookshelves. In this dissertation, however, I will use “children’s literature” to mean texts that have characters, plot, and themes appropriate for and appealing to a child audience (with the exact criteria determined by the text’s contemporary culture), and whose original producers—author, editor, publisher, bookseller—target children as a primary audience for the book (although not necessarily as its only audience). Under this definition, *Jane Eyre*, which begins with a child protagonist and is sometimes given to children to read, is not children’s literature. *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, written with children in mind and published in a format intended to attract young readers, is children’s literature, despite its wide audience of adults.

Context and Argument

The trope of the fantastic journey developed in tandem with the Golden Age of children’s literature and emerged from a specific shift in thinking and writing about children. The Golden Age is universally acknowledged as the period of approximately fifty years when children’s literature underwent a radical transformation to become what we now recognize as the modern version of the genre.\(^\text{13}\) The changes that occur in

\(^\text{13}\) I find it useful to date the Golden Age from 1865, the publication of the most famous early Golden Age children’s book *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, to 1914, the beginning of World War I and the destruction of many Victorian ideals in British culture. However, Humphrey Carpenter’s study of the Golden Age begins with Charles Kingsley’s *The Water-Babies* (published 1862) and extends through A. A.
children’s literature during this time are many, but Peter Hunt usefully sums them up as an “empathetic, rather than directive narrative relationship with children.”¹⁴ Narrative voices become much more interested in creating a tone of camaraderie, suggesting that the narrator can enter into the child’s point of view with sympathy for those aspects of the child’s perspective that were previously chastised or belittled, or at least seen as limiting. This holds true even in overtly didactic Golden Age texts—although the adult agenda to mold the child into a more acceptable form is clear, the tone adopted is one which claims to view the desired transformation from the child’s perspective. Compare, for example, an episode from the second volume of evangelical writer Mary Martha Sherwood’s The History of the Fairchild Family (published in 1842) to the also evangelical Juliana Ewing’s short story “The Brownies” (published in 1870). In Sherwood’s tale, a little girl has taken such poor care of her clothing that she literally has nothing fit to wear and consequently loses a delightful outing. In Ewing’s story, a little girl is in disgrace for taking poor care of her toys and neglecting her chores. Both children are in tears, but the difference in the narration is revealing. Sherwood describes her character as “sitting at the foot of the bed without a frock, and sobbing and crying most piteously.”¹⁵ This is a flat description that makes no effort to enter into the child’s feelings. Instead, the crying is presented as the direct consequence of misbehavior. In Ewing’s story, on the other hand, the narrator describes the character in an empathetic way: “She neither tied up her locks, nor dried her eyes, however; for when one is miserable, one may as well be completely complete.


In this case, the narrator suggests a familiarity with the child’s feelings—the narrator can speak with authority of those moments “when one is miserable” and conveys the situation not with any tone of judgment but with both humor and sympathy.

This attempt to recreate the child’s point of view in order to speak more effectively to the child is the basis for a seminal work of children’s literature criticism: Jacqueline Rose’s 1984 *The Case of Peter Pan, or, The Impossibility of Children’s Literature*. In an argument that changed the shape of the field of children’s literature studies, Rose claims that children’s literature is a fraud, in fact, that it has nothing to do with real children and their identities and desires, and everything to do with adults’ desires to possess and control children’s identities and desires. The great con of children’s literature, Rose argues, is that children’s literature claims to “represent the child, speak to and for children, addresses them as a group which is knowable, and exists for the book … much as the book exists for them,” when in fact it does not and cannot do those things. Rose further claims that the purpose of children’s literature is to “build an image of the child inside the book … in order to secure the child who is outside the book.” At stake is the adult’s attempt to control both the child’s sexuality, which being “polymorphous” threatens adult heterosexual norms, and language: children’s literature rests on an assumption that “both the child and the world [are] knowable in a direct and unmediated way,” and the language used in texts for children is therefore fixed. Rose

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18 Rose, p. 2.
19 Rose, pp. 4 and 9.
embraces a colonial narrative that identifies the adult writers of children’s literature as colonizers and their targeted child audiences as the colonized.

In the wake of *The Case of Peter Pan*, the field as a whole moved in a strongly psychoanalytical direction. Immediately after Rose, Humphrey Carpenter published *Secret Gardens: A Study of the Golden Age of Children’s Literature*, which argues that the turn in children’s literature was the result of “the search for a mysterious, elusive Good Place … an attempt to find something to replace [conventional Christianity]” and interprets the texts of eleven major Golden Age authors in light of a perceived psycho-spiritual lack in each writer. 1992 saw the publication of another key critical text, James R. Kincaid’s *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*. Kincaid argues that the child is culturally defined as “not simply the Other we desire but the Other we must have in order to know longing, love, lust at all.”20 In Kincaid’s view, all texts for and about children must be read with an understanding that adults view children as unreachable vessels of desire. In 1998, U. C. Knoepflmacher published *Ventures into Childland: Victorians, Fairy Tales, and Femininity*, where he argues “the writer who addresses children is inevitably involved in a reconstruction of his or her own early selves … The childlands my authors construct and the child selves they choose to feature have much to do, directly, or indirectly, with their early relations to their parents or siblings, their own parenting … and their avuncular interest in a special child.”21

Although Rose’s argument remains important, in recent years the field has shifted into a more complex view that simultaneously acknowledges the validity of Rose’s points

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about the construct of the child and the limiting way in which it is often presented, but also claims children’s literature authors conceive of children as participants in the socio-cultural matrix with identities distinct from the authors’.22 David Rudd points out that Rose “ironically … holds on to a residual notion of the Romantic child, in that children’s fiction is only really impossible if we see children as distinct from adults, standing outside society and language, rather than being actively involved in negotiating meaning.”23 Perry Nodelman, in his hunt for the unifying characteristics of children’s literature texts, suggests that far from being an attempt to fix and contain language, each seemingly simplistic text also contains a “shadow text” that consists of complicated social and cultural references and positioning. The shadow text is available to adult readers but also, to some extent, child readers. In fact, the interplay between the simple and the shadows texts is crucial to the reader’s understanding of the text.24 Marah Gubar raises concerns that Rose’s “highly charged rhetoric resurrects the very image of childhood to which Rose herself so cogently objects … implying that child readers invariably succumb to adult efforts to regulate and exploit them.”25 In contrast, Gubar argues that critics ought to “follow in the footsteps of the Golden Age authors who so carefully acknowledge the tremendous power that adults and their texts have over young people, while still allowing for the possibility that children—immersed from birth in a sea of discourse—can nevertheless navigate through this arena.”26 Gubar’s major arguments about Golden Age texts coalesce around this idea that Golden Age authors conceptualize

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23 Rudd, pp. 290-1.
26 Gubar, pp. 32-3.
children as participants, albeit unequal ones, in a shared discourse. Finally, Victoria Ford Smith argues that in nineteenth-century Britain “new paradigms of children's fancy led authors of children's literature to partner with the young as creative collaborators.”

Far from depicting children as the prey of adult authors, Smith argues for children as creative co-participants, and she supports her argument with compelling case studies of authors such as Robert Louis Stevenson and his stepson Lloyd Osbourne.

My own critical position is in close alignment with those of Rudd and Gubar. Rose’s argument was important in stirring up a critical field that had been, perhaps, too lax in its treatment of children’s literature texts. By forcing a highly suspicious examination of the texts’ child constructs, Rose engendered a new branch of argument that was unable simply to celebrate the stars of the children’s literature canon.

However, precisely because it is so forceful, Rose’s argument can also be crippling to critical thought. An unreflective acceptance of her claims greatly lessens the interest and steamrolls over the vast complexity of the genre. If the purpose of every children’s literature text is to colonize child readers, then the texts themselves would seem to become interesting only as reflections of adult conscious and unconscious desires, and this view does indeed seem to limit children as “other,” setting them outside the possibility of discourse.

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28 The unique reading life of children’s literature endows its criticism with peculiar pitfalls. As the only genre that is widely read by both children and adults with equal (if different kinds of) pleasure, it tends to attract scholars who have a deep, personal, and lifelong attachment to the genre. While this has its advantages in fostering a depth of passion and sense of community in the field, it also means that many critics must work through sentimental attachments to the texts and overcome personal resistance to some readings that may threaten a longstanding ideological bond between them and the text. Take, for example, Carpenter’s assessment of the Golden Age, in which he champions the allegedly secular ideals of texts such Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland over the “pious trash that the Sunday Schools handed out as ‘reward books’” (p. 17). On the other hand, he remains blind to Alice’s staunchly middle-class upbringing that seems to exclude the possibility of true childhood among working-class children.

29 Gubar, p. 30.
At stake in my dissertation is an advancement of this turn in the field from adherence to a colonizing narrative to a more complex understanding of Golden Age authors’ attitudes and beliefs about children. Without denying that the child in the book is an ideological construct or that the texts are necessarily tainted by their authors’ nostalgic understandings of childhood, I have instead asked how examining the texts with the understanding that authors are simultaneously asserting their own desires for a Romantic child identity while at the same time acknowledging that children are capable of wielding—in fact, ought to wield—agency, changes our readings of these texts. Specifically, I argue that the attempt to balance the desire for the ideal child and the acknowledgement of child agency produces a trope that shapes several of the most famous and influential children’s fantasy novels of the Golden Age. Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, MacDonald’s *At the Back of the North Wind*, Nesbit’s Psammead trilogy, and J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* were all successful at their debut and have been hailed as children’s classics ever since. In the following chapters, I demonstrate that the trope I have named the fantastic journey begins, develops, and finally collapses over the course of these texts. It is a trope that lies at the heart of the narratives, shaping each text’s definition of the child and what that child’s relationship with its culture ought to be.

Before the advent of the Golden Age, there are surprisingly few journeys in children’s texts. In the first century of publishing books exclusively for children, the focus of the texts was primarily didactic, and journeys were not favored as a means of imparting useful lessons.\textsuperscript{30} Although they were also intended to please, the children’s

\textsuperscript{30} John Newbery, who published *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* in 1744, is generally credited with the commercial origin of the genre.
books that were marketed for the expanding audience of middle-class children (and, just as importantly, the parents who purchased the books) were meant to help children grow up in the right way. Andrew O’Malley describes this as a “conception of the infant mind as the site on which the aspirations of republican middle-class ideology could be realized,” fueled by a belief that “[s]tarting from a position of equality, unhindered by obstacles to their development, and … unaided by unfair hereditary privilege and hierarchy, the children who would naturally succeed would be those who had received the best education and who, by dint of industrious application, had acquired the most useful skills and knowledge.”

Parentally sanctioned children’s literature focused on teaching children the virtues of obedience, thrift, and literacy. Chapbooks full of fantasy and adventure did persist into the beginning of the nineteenth century, but aside from their reputation among children’s educators as being unhealthy for young minds, they tended to focus on fantastic figures, such as Jack the Giant Killer. Those who traveled in chapbooks were not the privileged middle-class children we see in the later Golden Age texts, and the children in the approved children’s books are nearly always home-bodies. At most, they might travel to school or to visit a relative, but these journeys are always a part of ordinary life, with nothing fantastic about them. For example, Sherwood’s *Fairchild Family* chronicles keep the home at the center of the story. The children regularly visit neighbors and friends, but they always return home by the end of the episode, or else are shown back at home in the beginning of the next. In *The History of Sandford and Merton*, another highly popular and influential eighteenth-century children’s text, Tommy Merton, son of a wealthy man, spends his early years in Jamaica.

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However, this foreign upbringing is portrayed as morally detrimental and dismissed in the first paragraph of the book, and Jamaica receives only one other mention during a school lesson.\textsuperscript{32} Tommy’s travel experience is erased except for its usefulness in teaching him about natural phenomena.

Another useful example of the relationship between children and travel in eighteenth-century children’s literature is in Joachim Heinrich Campe’s \textit{The New Robinson Crusoe; An Instructive and Entertaining History for the Use of Children}.\textsuperscript{33} Campe was a German disciple of Rousseau, and his revisionist \textit{Robinson Crusoe} was widely popular and translated into multiple languages, including English.\textsuperscript{34} Campe sets the narrative within a new frame tale—a father is reading the story of the new, younger Robinson Crusoe to his children. The English version of the text reworks the frame tale so that its characters become representative of an upstanding middle-class family. The frame works to instruct readers on how they ought to respond to Robinson’s adventures. Instead of desiring to emulate Crusoe’s adventurous spirit, the Billingsley children take lessons from him about being content at home. In fact, young Richard declares that he does not like Robinson Crusoe “because he seems to make nothing of leaving his father and mother without their permission.”\textsuperscript{35} Rather than being inspired to explore far off and exotic places, the children learn how to explore these places from home. They do this through books, such as “Sealy’s Geographical Dictionary, which describes all the known world, and contains maps of every country, to which we can refer from time to time for


\textsuperscript{33} Joachim Heinrich Campe. \textit{The New Robinson Crusoe; An Instructive and Entertaining History for the Use of Children of Both Sexes}, [1779], Trans. [unknown] (London: John Stockdale, 1789).

\textsuperscript{34} Martin Green, \textit{The Robinson Crusoe Story} (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1990), p. 50.

\textsuperscript{35} Campe, p. 12.
fuller information, it being the most correct and complete work of the kind ever
published. This dictionary is also enriched with a great number of beautiful views of the
most celebrated cities and towns.”36 The children can view “celebrated cities” through the
book and have no need to travel themselves. Middle-class child characters in children’s
literature preceding the Golden Age are not encouraged to leave home.37 Thus, even from
its commercial beginnings, children’s texts resisted exposing their child characters to the
kinds of change traditionally associated with travel. In adult narratives of travel and
change, including the traditional Bildungsroman, characters strike out on their own or
with a few trusted peer companions. They achieve maturity by exposing themselves to
risk and grappling with difficult challenges to their safety, identity, and ideology.
Children in pre-Golden Age texts, however, are presented as needing shelter from risk.
They learn not by facing challenges but through the careful guidance of parents. The
children in need of such guidance are devoid of personal resources. Often penned by
Dissenting writers, these children are tainted with original sin and are in need of moral
teaching and correction. Furthermore, they are ignorant. They are vessels that must be
filled with knowledge before they can become properly contributing members of society.

But even as writers continued to pen such moralizing, didactic texts well into the
nineteenth century, the Romantic idea of children, with its roots in Rousseau’s
understanding of the child of nature, was also gaining traction. Critics most often typify
this Romantic view of the child via William Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of

36 Campe, p. 18.
37 Nodelman argues that one definitional feature of children’s literature is a home-away-home pattern, in
which child characters become discontented with their home, leave it, and then return with a new
appreciation for home’s safety and provision (pp. 80-1). It is notable that of Nodelman’s six representative
texts, the only one published before the Golden Age of children’s literature (Maria Edgeworth’s 1801 “The
Purple Jar”) does not feature a child protagonist striking out on an unsupervised journey. Instead, the
heroine’s visit to a shop is closely supervised by her mother.
Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.” Wordsworth describes himself as looking back upon his own earliest childhood with a profound sense of loss, since “[h]eaven lies about us [only] in our infancy.” Wordsworth describes a mythology of the soul which postulates a pre-existence in the presence of God before the descent to earth and birth. In his first years, a child has a divine understanding of the natural world around him. But as the child grows, he forgets this wisdom, a process Wordsworth describes as the approaching “[s]hades of the prison house.”

This view of children as possessing divine knowledge which fades as they approach adulthood became extraordinarily influential in nineteenth-century depictions of the child. Although individual expressions of Romantic thought were varied, and Romantic views of the child were not universal, the nostalgic view of childhood as a lost paradise and the sanctifying view of the child as a semi-divine creature shaped many of the best known depictions of children during the mid nineteenth century (although before the Golden Age, this Romantic view was limited to books for adults and was not usually depicted in books marketed for children). Among the most famous Romantic child characters in adult fiction are Charles Dickens’s Oliver Twist and Little Nell. Both Oliver and Nell are marked by an innate goodness that makes itself visible on their physical bodies. Oliver is so innocent that, despite a rough upbringing in the parish workhouse and as an abused apprentice, he neither recognizes prostitutes nor understands that he is being

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39 Wordsworth, line 67.
40 Wordsworth, line 68.
41 One exception to the Romantic view of children is George Eliot’s Maggie Tulliver, who is depicted as beating her doll as a catharsis for her own fury. Instead of a divine creature, shielded from the corrupt world by a veil of innocence, the child Maggie is depicted as deeply aware of her position within a larger cultural web, and her fury stems from her helplessness to affect the social discourse that surrounds and compels her (The Mill on the Floss, ed. Gordon S. Haight [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980], pp. 24-5).
trained to be a pickpocket. When his first expedition with the Dodger (whose criminal nature he does not understand until too late) goes awry and Oliver ends up arrested, he is exonerated by a witness who knows Oliver to be innocent solely on the basis of his appearance: he looked “perfectly amazed and stupified by [the robbery].”

Similarly, Little Nell is described as speaking “with no appearance of cunning or deceit, but with an unsuspicious frankness that bore the impress of truth,” so that her voice is all the proof of her innocence that is necessary. The narrator also pays tribute to Nell’s divine origins, describing her as one of those “who are so fresh from God,” and remarking that as he and the child travel the dark streets of London together, “the little creature accommodat[ed] her pace to mine, and rather seem[ed] to lead and take care of me than I to be protecting her.”

Nell’s divinity makes her the adult narrator’s superior.

Oliver and Little Nell further differ from their children’s literature counterparts in that journeying is central to both their stories. Near the beginning of his narrative, Oliver sets off for London to escape from cruelty, a journey which proves central to the plot, since it introduces him to Dodger, Fagin, and London’s criminal underworld. He later journeys to the country and then back again to London, each journey representing some important plot development. However, contrary to the tradition of the travelling protagonist, Oliver remains unchanged by his traveling, even when it seems impossible that he should not be affected. Although he gains knowledge of criminality, his essential self remains untainted—he is as innocent when he leaves Fagin as when he first set foot in London. Rather, Oliver’s journeying serves to carry his innocent presence into the lives of people who will be blessed by their contact with him, including the prostitute

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44 Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p. 9
Nancy, lonely Mr. Brownlow, and orphaned Rose Maylie. Oliver’s journeying serves not to change him but to change the world through him. Likewise Nell, when she flees London to escape the nefarious designs of Quilp, also remains unchanged by the long journey they undertake in their search for refuge. Although Nell is companioned by her gambling addict of a grandfather and is the target of a mercenary marriage plot, she remains untainted by any form of vice and makes no advancement toward sexual maturity (she is permanently rescued from this last by her early death). She also has a beneficent influence on those around her—her grandfather is largely separated from his bad habits because of her, and she inspires generosity and from everyone but the most hardened individuals. This pattern of journeying without change is adopted by later children’s literature texts.

Early Romantic depictions of English children appeared almost exclusively in texts marketed to adults or a general audience; not until the beginning of the Golden Age do we find representations of real English children venturing into fairyland (and other fantastical places). Some late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writers did object to the heavily didactic texts for children; Charles Lamb speaks scathingly of the fleet of Dissenting writers for children: “Hang them!—I mean the cursed Barbauld crew, those blights and blasts of all that is human in man and child.” What non-didactic texts for children there were typically took the form of fairytales, with the adventurers always different and other from their middle-class British child readers. The Golden Age

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45 Hilary M. Schor argues that the blood that drips from Nell’s feet (injured by her long journey) hints at her imminent menstruation, and that “[o]n the verge of reproductive possibility, Nell must die precisely so she can stay a miniature” (Dickens and the Daughter of the House [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004] p. 42).

46 Charles Lamb to Mr. Coleridge, 23 October 1802, in The Letters of Charles Lamb, with a Sketch of His Life, ed. Thomas Noon Talfourd, (London: Edward Moxon, 1849), pp. 143-6, 144.
journeys I discuss are not like those of Oliver and Little Nell, or those of adult travelers such as Gulliver, or even those of young but developing characters such as Jane Eyre. These Golden Age journeys are something new, a trope created by the particular conflict of ideas regarding children and their literature that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, the desire to acknowledge children as participants in the cultural discourse, while refusing to relinquish the Romantic ideal of the child.

The fantastic journey works to give children a protected space in which they can wield agency—participating in the discourse and making their own decisions that influence the events around them—without acquiring the maturity that necessarily accompanies such experience. Children are both set in motion and held in place. Nodelman describes an understanding of childhood present in children’s literature at large that seems to appear in similar terms: “Childhood is therefore paradoxically static as well as dynamic.” However, he links this paradox to the necessity of change. Childhood is “a continuing process of becoming different that does not actually result in difference until childhood is finally over.” One important source of this change is, in fact, journeys. Nodelman focuses on a home-away-home pattern that he describes as an identifying characteristic of a children’s literature text. He argues: “In order to make the point that home is safe, the texts imagine children as not perceiving its benefits; childhood desire is equated with the desire for freedom from home and safety … Home is identified with constriction, stasis, and safety; leaving it is identified with freedom, process, and danger. The return home at the end seems to mean an acceptance of its constrictions in order to gain its benefits. But since child protagonists must change in

47 Nodelman, p. 78.
48 Ibid.
order to perceive that—cease being static—they return home tainted by the journey.” I would argue that the fantastic journey in the Golden Age texts is an attempt to cheat this process by creating a journey that is in some senses false. In a model fantastic journey, the children do not actually leave home—and therefore cannot be “tainted”—because the journey occurs either out of body or out of time. This enables the text to allow for the necessary dynamism of childhood while defending against the encroaching taint of innocence that must accompany new knowledge of the world.

The fantastic journey narrative stands in contrast to that of the boys’ adventure story, which also developed around this time. In those stories, the boy protagonists go on a journey that takes them out of their ordinary lives (although not to a fantastic space) and allows them to wield an agency they could not have had at home. However, this agency and its resulting experience cause the protagonists to mature and move toward adulthood. In *The Coral Island*, a Robinsonade that set the standard for boy castaway stories, the narrator remarks on the growing maturity of one his companions: “Peterkin’s manner was now much altered … there was a tone of deep seriousness in his manner, if not in his words, which made him seem … as if he had grown two years older within a few days. But indeed I was not surprised at this, when I reflected on the awful realities which we had witnessed so lately.” Peterkin ages emotionally and becomes more grown-up as a result of his journey, the taint of “awful realities.” In *Treasure Island*, the most famous boy adventure story of the Golden Age, Jim Hawkins begins the narrative as a relatively innocent boy who has been obedient to his duty and never committed any acts of real violence. However, on his journey to seek treasure, he is given the opportunity to wield

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49 Nodelman, pp. 80-1.
power as he has not before. He discovers and thwarts a mutiny, disobeys orders and sneaks away from camp, commandeers a ship, and murders a pirate. These aggressive and violent acts destroy Jim’s childhood innocence—he is a changed boy at the end of the narrative, as a result of the agency he assumed and the adventures he endured. Haunted by nightmares, Jim has lost all of his imaginative taste for adventure.\textsuperscript{51}

Fantastic journey texts do not fit the model of development presented by boy adventure stories, and they also deviate from the personal emergence narrative of the Bildungsroman; however, examining Bakhtin’s discussion of the simultaneous emergence of the individual and history in the Bildungsroman does offer an enhanced understanding of the fantastic journey. Bakhtin declares that the Bildungsroman is the greatest of the types of novels that center on “the image of man in the process of becoming.”\textsuperscript{52} This is because of the relationship between the hero and the world. In all of the other novel types about “human emergence” that Bakhtin identifies, the only dynamic element of the narrative is the hero: “man’s emergence proceeded against the immobile background of the world, ready-made and basically quite stable.”\textsuperscript{53} But in the Bildungsroman, “man’s individual emergence is inseparably linked to historical emergence. Man’s emergence is accomplished in real historical time, with all of its necessity, its fullness, its future, and its profoundly chronotopic nature … He emerges

\textsuperscript{51} Robert Louis Stevenson, \textit{Treasure Island}, chap. 34, Project Gutenberg 2006, 14 March 2014, www.gutenberg.org. Gubar claims that \textit{Treasure Island} is actually an anti-adventure story. She argues that Stevenson denies children the power to be independent and triumphant outside of their homes in a realist (if improbable) world: “Moments in which Jim triumphs … are inevitably followed by ones that undermine the idea that he functions as an autonomous agent and empowered colleague” (p. 70).


\textsuperscript{53} Bakhtin, pp. 21 and 23.
along with the world and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself.” Bakhtin understand the Bildungsroman as an inextricable triangle of man, space, and time. As the hero develops, so does history. As the time of the nation marches relentlessly forward, so must the protagonist continue to mature. This is the essence of the Bildungsroman.

This theory is useful for thinking about the fantastic journey, even though Bakhtin’s focus is on realism, and all of the texts I will examine are classed as fantasy (although all contain certain foundational elements of realism). If we consider novels in light of the question of whether they deal with human emergence, then surely a child is a human in a constant state of emergence—that is one of the definitions of childhood (“a continuing process of becoming different”). Since Bakhtin claims that the most significant narratives of individual emergence depend on a simultaneous historical emergence, then it may be that a narrative determined on suspending individual progress would seek to disrupt or contain the associated spatial-temporal (historical) development. Thus, when a child traveler embarks on the journey with all its dangers of taint, the text averts the danger by sending a child to a fantastic space that is disassociated from the child’s home and real world. This forces a simultaneous historical emergence—the invented fantastic space has no history and must necessarily emerge with the child. Then, when the mechanism that has transported the child—a dream, a hallucination, time travel—ends, the alternate reality disappears, severing the connection between historical and individual emergence.

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54 Bakhtin, p. 23.
55 It is interesting to note that the twentieth-century novel which most literally embodies Bakhtin’s definition of Bildungsroman, Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, abandons realism as an inadequate tool for describing the relationship between the individual, the nation, and time (New York: Random House, 1981).
The fantastic journey is not identical in every text that employs it. Instead, the form and function of the journey are shaped by the text’s individual definition of the child. While Carroll insists on a secure middle-class home as the necessary background for a proper child, MacDonald allows that true childhood can exist in a working-class family, so long as the parents are sufficiently moral and loving. Earlier authors are more interested in the individual child as protagonist, while later writers, such as Nesbit, depict children in groups and use the fantastic journey to protect a society of children rather than a single child body. But in each case, the journey is tailored to the kind of child who takes it.

Although the journey’s goal to protect the child from moving toward adulthood is primary, an important secondary goal is often to allow the child to change in ways that benefit the child without pushing that child closer to adulthood. This is accomplished through the process that I describe as metamorphosis: an abrupt, miraculous transformation without the passage of time and the risk of development, which is always present when children are involved. As I said in my discussion of Bakhtin, children can be seen as existing in a constant state of emergence. While children’s literature texts are unable to completely stop that emergence and deny that ultimately children do grow (indeed, it would be a tragedy if they did not), they attempt to forestall that development yet make the child dynamic and viable through metamorphosis. Child characters are rescued from the static perfection of the realized Romantic ideal, while still staving off the evil day of adulthood.

Just as the journey as a whole varies from text to text, depending on the text’s definition of the child and goals for childhood, so the kind of metamorphosis employed
also differs. Sometimes, metamorphosis is contained within the journey itself, as with Alice, who undergoes violent changes in physical size throughout her adventures in Wonderland, but then returns home with her size unaffected (and apparently free of any other form of change). Other times, the change remains with the child after she returns home, granting the child knowledge that she would otherwise have had to gain through protracted experience. In Macdonald’s *At the Back of the North Wind*, for example, the child Diamond learns courage through his fantastic journey and is able to be brave in the face of the difficult realities of working-class London. When such changes are permanent, they always serve to enhance the childhood of the protagonist, either by developing a trait of childhood that is missing or weak in a particular child, or by suggesting that certain traits normally attributed to adults should not be exclusive to them but may have a proper place in books for children.

In developing my argument, I have sought to engage with the texts in a way that acknowledges and makes use of previous criticism’s strong dependence on biography and psychoanalysis, while placing the majority of my focus on the texts themselves and arguing that they contain views of children that cannot be entirely explained by exploring the author’s unconscious needs and desires. Each chapter presents an extensive close reading of one or more primary texts, with a focus on that text’s distinct formulation of the fantastic journey and its concurrent metamorphoses, as well as the text’s individual definition of the child. These definitions include considerations of class and gender, as well as an examination of how each text adopts Romantic ideals. In each chapter, I have used a psychodynamic approach to support my reading with such biographical and cultural information as may help to explain why the fantastic journey may have achieved
that particular incarnation in the hands of the author. In particular, in the first three chapters, I have discussed each author’s relationship to Darwinism, and I argue throughout the dissertation that reactions to Darwinian theory have an important influence on the shaping of the various fantastic journeys.

The 1859 publication of *Origin of Species* might almost be said to inaugurate the Golden Age of children’s literature, and it clearly threatened the Romantic ideal of the child. The Romantic view equates childhood to paradise—the closer we are to the beginning of our lives, the closer to the natural world and the farther from the development of civilization, then the more divine we are. But in the Darwinian narrative of the human race, development (albeit by a random selective process) is king. As Beer describes in *Darwin’s Plots*, “[e]volutionary theory implied a new myth of the past: instead of the garden at the beginning, there was the sea and the swamp. Instead of man, emptiness—or the empire of mollusks. There was no way back to a previous paradise: the primordial was comfortless … Nostalgia was disallowed, since no unrecapturable perfection preceded man’s history. Ascent was also a flight—a flight from the primitive and the barbaric which could never quite be left behind.”56 If there is no Eden at the beginning of the human race, if there is no fall from grace, then the concept of the Romantic child becomes impossible.57 The child born close to nature is not born innocent but primeval. The lost self nostalgically sought in the Romantic child is not a purer self, but a monkey or a mollusk. Thus, for children’s writers unwilling to completely relinquish the notion of the Romantic child, it became necessary to insist upon an

56 Beer, p. 119.
alternative to Darwinian development. Darwin is not central to the texts I will discuss, but he is there, hovering in the background and threatening the edges of the texts that insisted on the necessity of a nostalgic looking back toward paradise, when the world around them was forging ahead.

Chapter Overviews

In chapter one, I begin my exploration of the fantastic journey with Charles Kingsley. Kingsley is credited with being the first English writer for children to send ordinary British children into a fantastic space (in this case, an underwater fairyland). I demonstrate that although Kingsley gives the trope its beginning in his novel *The Water-Babies*, he is prevented by class concerns from developing the full trope. Because Kingsley’s protagonist is a working-class child who does not fulfill the Romantic ideal, Kingsley does not use Tom’s journey to fairyland to preserve his childhood. Instead, Tom must be changed so that he can grow into a productive citizen of the empire. In the second half of the chapter, I move to a discussion of Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. I argue that Carroll, who sends a middle-class child protagonist to fairyland (Wonderland), is the first to make use of a fantastic journey to preserve a child from growth while simultaneously encouraging her to use agency appropriate (non-threatening) to her child identity. I demonstrate that Carroll uses nonsense to help Alice become powerful in Wonderland, while her body undergoes cycles of metamorphosis to keep her from maturing. In the end, however, Alice herself insists on growing physically and in maturity and is forced to leave Wonderland.

In chapter 2, I examine MacDonald’s *At the Back of the North Wind*. Like Kingsley, MacDonald features a working-class protagonist, but for MacDonald, this does
not preclude the Romantic ideal. As I demonstrate, MacDonald’s definition of Romantic childhood does not depend on class markers, but on the child’s innate spirituality. MacDonald uses the fantastic journey to enable his protagonist’s spiritual agency without causing him to mature or grow older. Additionally, MacDonald represses Diamond’s gender and even his physical growth. Instead, Diamond experiences spiritual metamorphosis in the supernatural country at the back of the north wind. Arthur Hughes’s accompanying illustrations also work to retard Diamond’s physical growth, picturing him as small, fragile, and infantile, even when he should be getting larger. Because of the spiritual agency his metamorphosis has given him, Diamond is able to bring redemption to the suffering world around him. However, when that work is done, Diamond’s scope for agency disappears, and instead his spiritual innocence is threatened by his approaching manhood. He dies while he is at the height of his child powers so that he can take up permanent residence in heaven. MacDonald ensures that growth will never diminish Diamond’s pure spirituality.

The next development in the fantastic journey is a shift to a focus on time, and in my third chapter, I examine Nesbit’s Psammead trilogy, with an emphasis on the third volume, *The Story of the Amulet*. Where Carroll and MacDonald make the journey fantastic by making it an out-of-body experience, Nesbit has her child protagonists travel through time. Despite days spent having adventures in the past or future, Nesbit’s protagonists always return to the same moment they have left—thus, they do not advance in time (grow up) in their ordinary world. An important effect of this shift to time is an accompanying change from a solitary to a multiple protagonist. Nesbit is concerned not with the bodies but with the time of childhood, and she defines childhood not as a time of
solitary imagination but of collaborative play. The children in Nesbit’s stories form a self-sufficient society, within which they fill gender-defined but non-sexual roles. Although the society does not require adult intervention, it is supported by the framework of a protective home. While Alice and Diamond are threatened by growth, Nesbit’s sibling protagonists are instead threatened by the fracture of the home that protects their childhood: the purpose of their fantastic journey is to bring an abrupt change to their own histories and reunite their family, securing their childhood. However, this childhood security is only available to the middle-class, and I conclude the chapter by discussing a later novel where Nesbit sends a working-class child on a time travel adventure. As in Water-Babies, the purpose of this time travel adventure is to correct the protagonist’s warped growth so that he becomes a productive gentleman.

My final chapter focuses on Barrie’s Peter Pan, and I demonstrate how Barrie writes a story that takes on the shape of the fantastic journey but causes the trope to fail. For Barrie, the fantastic journey cannot stop time. When children are separated from their parents, time continues for both children and parents. The only way to stop a child from growing up is to sever it completely from history. But, as is demonstrated in the character of Peter Pan, such isolation is ultimately undesirable since it prevents anything other than temporary relationships. Although he discredits the fantastic journey, Barrie does not embrace growing up as children’s unproblematic future. Gender plays an important role in determining a child’s success in growing up. Girls are naturally inclined to the work they will perform as grown women, while boys’ growth signals their loss of imagination and whimsy. Ultimately, Barrie demands that both children and adults relinquish the Romantic ideal of the child and accept the bittersweet consolation of memory instead.
Chapter 1: Kingsley, Carroll, and the Beginning of the Journey

Alice in Wonderland, a title which technically refers to the two works Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (published 1865) and Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There (published 1871), remains one of the most widely known pieces of Victorian fiction. Although this is only partly because of the number of reprints issued and purchased (and presumably read) every year, and partly because of the book’s many film adaptations,¹ most of which are intended for a primary audience of children, Alice remains a household name in much of the English speaking world and Carroll has retained a place as a canonical children’s author.² Carroll’s influence on children’s literature has been widely discussed. In Secret Gardens: A Study of the Golden Age of Children’s Literature, which was one of the earliest attempts to survey Victorian and Edwardian children’s literature with the purpose of identifying progressive trends that might bind disparate texts into a movement, Carpenter argues that Alice is a “rejection of the old secure system of beliefs … and in its anti-religious sentiments it heralded the coming of an era of skepticism,” a skepticism which Carpenter sees as fulfilled in the later works of authors such as Barrie and A. A. Milne.³ Gubar, on the other hand, in her responsively titled Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children’s Literature, reads Carroll primarily as an author uneasy with the power imbalance between children and adults, who strives to allow children imaginative agency while remaining ironically aware that children’s power must always become

¹ The Internet Movie Database lists more than two dozen film and television works with the title Alice in Wonderland. Some are straightforward adaptations of one or more of Carroll’s texts, while others are more broadly inspired narratives, but their sheer variety (from 1903 to 2010, from live action to animation, from Cary Grant to Johnny Depp) is evidence of Alice’s grip on the English language imagination for more than a century (IMDb [IMDb.com, 1990-2012], search term “Alice in Wonderland,” 5 September 2012, www.imdb.com.

² Since I am primarily interested in the text rather than the author, I have chosen to refer to Alice’s author primarily by his pen name, Lewis Carroll, rather than by his legal name, Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. As is the custom in most Alice criticism, I will treat Lewis and Carroll as first and last names respectively, rather than as an inseparable pseudonym.

³ Carpenter, pp. 68-9.
subordinated to adults’ power.⁴ Jan Susina, in *The Place of Lewis Carroll in Children’s Literature*, examines everything from Carroll’s place in the literary fairytale genre to *Alice’s* emergence as a hyper-text in the twenty-first century.⁵ Despite the wide range of their arguments, what these and other critics agree on is that after *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* was published, children’s literature changed in significant ways. The changes did not occur overnight—some of them took decades to come to fulfillment—but *Alice* was and continues to be hailed as being original in important ways. In my own study of *Alice*, I will not be departing from this consensus; what I will argue is that part of *Alice’s* original influence is the development of the trope of the fantastic journey.

Although I will write about *Alice* as the first full incarnation of the fantastic journey, Carroll did not create the journey out of whole cloth. Not only did *Alice* appear after a century of literature written and marketed for children, but not all of its predecessors were the infamous didactic texts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In the middle and later parts of the nineteenth century, the literature available for children gradually becomes more what we could call imaginative, Hunt’s “empathetic, rather than directive narrative relationship with children.”⁶ In these narratives children are invited to imaginatively participate in the book’s narrative and identify with its characters for the primary purpose of pleasure, with educational agendas downgraded or hidden. Hunt identifies this trait as beginning with “Lewis Carroll, George Macdonald, and Charles Kingsley, whose work began the ‘first golden age’ of children’s literature.”⁷ While these authors certainly built on ideas already put into practice in children’s books by authors such as Catherine Sinclair, John Ruskin, and William Thackeray, they were

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⁴ Gubar, pp. 93-124.
⁷ Ibid.
perhaps the first to embody Hunt’s “empathy” in a way that causes twenty and twenty-first-century readers still to identify books such as *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* as appealing children’s literature.\(^8\) Kingsley, Carroll, and MacDonald were not only influenced by the writers in the decades before them, but they also paid great attention to each other’s work; in fact, I argue it is all but necessary to read *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* in the context of Kingsley’s *The Water-Babies*.

In the rest of this chapter, I will trace the development of the fantastic journey from *The Water-Babies*, where Kingsley becomes the first to send contemporary children to fairyland, to *Alice’s Adventures*, where Carroll adapts Kingsley’s idea with a new sense of purpose. I will examine Kingsley and Carroll’s definitions of children in order to show where the heart of the difference between their fantastic journeys lies. I will then take an extended close look at *Alice’s Adventures* to analyze the characteristics of the fantastic journey in its first instantiation, examining Carroll’s use of metamorphosis and Nonsense, with which he attempts to preserve and improve the child by confounding the growth of her body and the linear development of her knowledge.

*The Water-Babies*

First published in 1863, *The Water-Babies* was well received and remains the text for which Kingsley is most widely remembered.\(^9\) Furthermore, the influence of Kingsley’s text on Carroll’s is clear, and it is an influence of which Carroll himself was well aware, whether or not

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\(^8\) Hunt identifies Catherine Sinclair’s 1839 *Holiday House*, John Ruskin’s 1851 *The King of the Golden River*, and William Thackeray’s 1855 *The Rose and the Ring*, among others, as “notable individualistic sparks” in the years preceding the Golden Age (pp. 30 and 51).

\(^9\) His adult novels, which are driven by ideas of masculine or social Christianity, are now mainly read by critics, while *Water-Babies* remains a text that is still, although diminishingly, read by its original intended audience of children.
he liked to admit it. He was an admirer of *The Water-Babies*, personally owning a number of copies and looking to it as a model for his first commercial production of an *Alice* text, requesting the same type of fabric be used to cover his book that had been used for Kingsley’s. Susina points out that *Alice* has similarities “in style and tone to Kingley’s *The Water-Babies* … both are book-length prose narratives, interspersed with numerous poems, in which an omniscient third-person narrator describes and makes comments on the underground, or underwater, adventures of young children as they meet and interact with many talking beasts.” However, the similarities that I am most interested in are, first, that both books send their young protagonists on journeys to realms that are wildly improbable from the perspective of their ordinary worlds, and second, that both journeys result in changes to the protagonists’ bodies. I will argue that *Alice’s* journey builds on *Water-Babies’,* but that *Alice’s* journey contains key differences which transform it into the trope I have defined as the fantastic journey.

The plot of *Water-Babies* centers around an orphaned chimney sweep named Tom. Much abused by his master, Mr. Grimes, Tom accepts violence as the way of the world, looking forward to the day when he, too, will be a master sweep who can abuse his apprentices in turn. When Tom is wrongfully pursued as a criminal, his panicked escape ends in his apparent drowning. But the narrator reveals that what has actually happened is that the water has washed away Tom’s dirty body, and the inner, essential Tom has emerged as a water-baby—a miniature child equipped with gills. Tom’s moral education begins. He becomes friends with various sea creatures and is later adopted by fairies as he gradually learns to take responsibility for himself, to be kind to others, and finally, to sacrifice himself for others. When he has completed this last task, he is allowed to return to life as a successful, professional man.

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10 Susina, pp. 77-8.
11 Susina, pp. 32-3.
12 Susina, p. 32.
Although *The Water-Babies* and Kingsley in general fell out of favor and were largely ignored by critics at the end of the twentieth century, there has been a recent resurgence of interest in his novels, particularly *Water-Babies*. Critics have read *Water-Babies* for its psycho-sexual symbolism, for its radical ecological agenda, for its push for social reform, and, most relevant for my purposes, for its engagement with the then new Darwinian theory. Kingsley, a devoted amateur naturalist, was enthusiastic about the 1859 publication of *On the Origin of Species*. He corresponded with Darwin and even began calling him “master,” a title he had previously reserved for his spiritual mentor F. D. Maurice. Unlike some of his Anglican contemporaries, like Bishop Wilberforce, Kingsley, at least at first, had no difficulty reconciling Christian doctrine and Darwin’s account of the origin of species. His attitude toward Darwin’s theories is reflected in *Water-Babies*, where the great fairy of nature, Mother Carey, who symbolizes the divine will that Kingsley argues lies behind the evolutionary process, explains to Tom that “I am not going to trouble myself to make things, my little dear. I sit here and make them make themselves.” Kingsley concluded that it was orthodox to believe in a Creator who, rather than initiating an individual act of creation for each new things, was wise enough to make things “make themselves.”

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17 Hale, p. 558.
The new Darwinian theory entered into discourse with the period’s evolving ideas about the nature of children and how they should be educated. Chief among the educators was Herbert Spencer, who proposed a system of education based on a Rousseau-like return to nature in his book *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical*, published in volume form in 1861. At the heart of Spencer’s system, however, was not a Romantic belief in the innocence of the child, but a strong adherence to the recapitulative theory—the belief that the stages of ontogeny, individual development, recapitulated the development stages of the race (phylogeny). Spencer believed that this recapitulation should be reflected in children’s education. Of his own educational proposals, Spencer writes, “on examination they will be found not only to progress from the simple to the complex, from the concrete to the abstract, from the empirical to the rational; but to satisfy the further requirements that education shall be a repetition of civilization in little, that it shall be as much as possible a process of self-evolution.”

Kingsley’s own construction of the child is deeply influenced by recapitulative theory. Jessica Straley argues that Kingsley follows Spencer: “[that] nature alone should teach the child just as it had taught the species provides the foundation for his hero’s journey throughout *The Water-Babies.*” However, Spencer’s explanations of the natural processes of discipline and education left little room for Kingsley’s persistently humanitarian and theistic views. He therefore offers a revision of Spencer. As Straley explains, “*The Water-Babies,* then, rejects Spencer’s notion of uniform, continuous evolution driven by, and answerable to, natural forces alone. It instead presents a choice between two diametrically opposed sets of rules: natural punishment and divine forgiveness. Thus staging a recapitulative education into which the telos of humanity is already woven, *The Water-Babies makes the attainment of that evolutionary end a

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19 Straley, p. 587.
function not of accident but of conscious will.”\textsuperscript{20} In Straley’s view, Kingsley puts the power of evolutionary development in individual choice. Ruth Murphy, on the other hand, agrees that Kingsley does indeed incorporate the recapitulative process into \textit{Water-Babies}, but she argues that Kingsley does not merely revise this evolutionary view of the child—he is ultimately unable to achieve a true synthesis between science and faith, and so rejects the former in favor of the latter: he “implicitly rejects [his] own construction of the recapitulative, evolutionary child.”\textsuperscript{21}

However, whether or not Kingsley successfully united the teachings of Darwin and the church is immaterial to his construction of a pre-fantastic journey: I argue that it the tension between scientific and religious beliefs that enables Kingsley to write a new kind of story, one that actively redefines the nature of the child. As Kingsley embodies Spencer’s ideas of recapitulative education, he creates the story of a journey that showcases the different possible stages of child development (and regression) in a story intended for child readers.\textsuperscript{22} Kingsley begins with a child who has started on a path of evolutionary degeneration away from Kingsley’s definition of the good child (a heavily Romantic ideal). By removing Tom from his ordinary world and starting him on a fantastic journey, Kingsley restarts the evolutionary process, reverting the child to his original, marine life form. As Tom moves through his journey, his evolutionary progress is determined by his own decisions and behavior—that is, he is granted some amount of agency. By creating a child character who is required to conform to certain Romantic attributes, but who also is given agency over his own development throughout his

\textsuperscript{20} Straley, p. 597, emphasis mine.
\textsuperscript{21} Murphy, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{22} Murphy argues that \textit{The Water-Babies} is actually not intended for child readers, since it “is not really literature \textit{for} children, but literature \textit{about} children. The child reader is excluded from what is ostensibly her literature, as the text explores the nature of the evolutionary child” (p. 14). However, as Nodelman argues, one purpose of a children’s literature text is often to teach child readers about how to become better children (\textit{The Hidden Adult: Defining Children’s Literature} [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2008], p. 63). \textit{Water-Babies}’s definitional work in no way excludes an audience of children.
journey, Kingsley lays the groundwork for the fantastic journey that becomes fully developed in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.

In some ways, Tom’s journey in *Water-Babies* is very like my definition of a fantastic journey. The first requirement is met, in that Tom’s adult guardian, as well as those adults who chase him to his death, do not know that Tom has left on his great adventure under the sea. Tom is, in fact, having an out-of-body experience: “the keeper, and the groom, and Sir John made a great mistake, and were very unhappy … without any reason, when they found a black thing in the water, and said it was Tom’s body, and that he had been drowned.”

As the narrator makes clear, Tom is not really dead. Although the adults hold his corpse on the shore, Tom is actually alive under the water. As the narrator quickly explains: “They were utterly mistaken. Tom was quite alive; and cleaner, and merrier than he ever had been. The fairies had washed him, you see, in the swift river, so thoroughly, that not only his dirt, but his whole husk and shell had been washed quite off him, and the pretty little real Tom was washed out of the inside of it, and swam away, as a caddis does when its case of stones and silk is bored through … But good Sir John did not understand all this, not being a fellow of the Linnaean Society; and he took it into his head that Tom was drowned.”

The mechanism of Tom’s journey is explicitly laid out, but it is this very mechanism that prevents the adventure from becoming a fantastic journey. Tom has gone beyond adult reach, which is one requirement of the fantastic journey. The adults can have contact only with the “black thing,” the “husk and shell” that is “Tom’s body.” They are not able to interact with “the pretty little real Tom,” the essential child. But because Tom is supposed to be dead, rather than merely unconscious, there is no way he can complete the journey by returning home with adults.

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23 Kingsley, p. 63.
24 Kingsley, pp. 63-4.
oblivious to his absence. The experience a child gains in a fantastic journey will fail in causing him to progress or grow only if the journey is completely separate from his ordinary world. Adults, who are an integral part of the child’s ordinary world, must remain in ignorance of the fantastic journey. If the journey becomes a part of adult knowledge, then it can no longer be separate from the child’s ordinary world. Because the adult world is aware of Tom’s absence, the experiences that he undergoes on his journey become a part of his history and of his growth. They are not sealed off as a part of childhood inaccessible to adults.

The motivation for Tom’s fantastic journey is not to preserve his childhood, but to help him grow up into a Christian man and productive citizen. At the very end of the book we are told, “So Tom … is now a great man of science, and can plan railroads, and steam-engines, and electric telegraphs, and rifled guns, and so forth; and know everything about everything … And all this from what he learnt when he was a water-baby, underneath the sea.” Tom’s adventure explicitly leads to his productive adulthood. Before he can grow up, Tom must learn to be a good child, that is, as much like the model middle-class child as possible. One difficulty with writing a literary fairy tale, a primarily middle-class genre, about a working-class child is that the differences between the middle-class child readers and the protagonist must be made clear, so that the readers understand why it is better that they should be themselves, and why the working-class child character should become more like them.

Kingsley does not develop the full trope of the fantastic journey because he is writing about a hero whose childhood he does not want to preserve. There is little that is desirable about Tom, who is clearly supposed to stand as a representative of all abused working-class children afflicted with horrible childhoods. Tom cannot be preserved through a fantastic journey because he lacks the virtues that, in Kingsley’s view, make an essential child. Tom’s failure to fulfill

Kingsley definition of the ideal child becomes clear when we compare Tom to another child in the book. Ellie, beloved daughter of a local country squire, is also a representative child, who stands for everything that a privileged childhood protects.

The differences between Tom and Ellie are very clear when we consider their deaths and respective afterlives. When Tom dies, he must go through a number of adventures with lower life forms—such as salmon and crabs—before he is fit to join the company of the other water-babies in the fairies’ care because he is a “Little bo[y] who [is] only fit to play with sea-beasts.” When Ellie dies, on the other hand, she is immediately fit to live with the fairies and also to go “home on Sundays … To a very beautiful place,” which can only be reached by “dear, sweet, loving, wise, good, self-sacrificing people.” Ellie, although she must sometimes perform difficult tasks to further refine her character, is good enough as she is and has no need to become worthy of the book’s equivalent of heaven, referred to as “home on Sundays.” This overall fitness or unfitness to keep company with fairies is made up of a number of different qualities that emerge when we compare two passages from early in the book—the one that introduces Tom and the one that introduces Ellie (via a description of her bedroom).

Crucially, Tom and Ellie have very different kinds of adult guardians as a result of their different social classes, and these guardians make all the difference in whether children’s native innocence is spoiled or preserved. Tom “lived in a great town in the North country, where there were plenty of chimneys to sweep, and plenty of money for Tom to earn and his master to spend.” Tom is an urban child and a chimney sweep’s boy, and as such is roundly abused. This treatment has so warped his view of manhood that he anticipates becoming just like his master, Mr. Grimes, “a master sweep, and sit in the public-house with a quart of beer and a long pipe,

26 Kingsley, p. 177.
27 Kingsley, p. 176.
28 Kingsley, p. 1.
and play cards for silver money, and wear velveteens and ankle-jacks … just like a man. And he
would have apprentices … How he would bully them, and knock them about, just as his master
did to him; and make them carry home the soot sacks, while he rode before them on his donkey
… Yes, there were good times coming.”

Tom, imitating his guardian, aspires to a future of vice and violence. Ellie, on the other hand, is the daughter of good Sir John, who, when he learns that Tom has drowned, “did something as like crying as ever he did in his life, and blamed himself
more bitterly than he need have done.” This is more pity than Tom gets from his own guardian,
Grimes, who “did not cry, for Sir John gave him ten pounds, and he drank it all in a week.” Sir
John feels a protective instinct toward all children, even those that are not his responsibility,
while whatever conscience Grimes has is smothered with money and alcohol. The adult
guardians make all the difference in the children’s lives. While Ellie’s protected life allows her
natural goodness to flourish, Tom’s goodness is corrupted by his abusive treatment. Instead of
being innocent and good, Tom looks forward to the chance to abuse others as he has been abused
and is already “bowling stones at the horses’ legs as they trotted by.”

Tom and Ellie’s class difference is also evident in their education. Tom “could not read
 nor write, and did not care to do either … He had never been taught to say his prayers. He never
had heard of God, or of Christ, except in words which you never have heard.” Tom is both
illiterate and immoral. Ellie, on the other hand, has in her room religious pictures of Christ, one
“a man in long garments, with little children and their mothers round him, who was laying his
hand upon the children’s heads,” and the other, “of a man nailed to a cross.” For Kingsley, the

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29 Kingsley, pp. 2-3.
30 Kingsley, p. 64
31 Kingsley, p. 65.
32 Kingsley, p. 2.
33 Kingsley, p. 1.
34 Kingsley, p. 19.
ideal child is surrounded by an environment that protects and enhances her innocence through religious instruction.

The most telling difference between Tom and Ellie, which is both a class and a spiritual distinction, is in their level of cleanliness. Tom does not wash himself because he cannot: “he never washed himself, for there was no water up the court where he lived.” But Ellie’s very room speaks of her cleanliness and purity: “The room was all dressed in white,—white window-curts, white bed-curts, white furniture, and white walls … a washing-stand, with ewers and basins, and soap and brushes, and towels, and a large bath full of clean water—what a heap of things all for washing!” The insistent repetition of the word “white” emphasizes the innocence and purity of Ellie’s surroundings as well as of Ellie herself, and the redundancy of the “heap of things all for washing” tell us that even though Ellie is not a water-baby, constant washing is inherent to her life. In Water-Babies, water is always a powerful symbol of cleansing and purity. Ellie is provided with a constant supply of water in her protected and wealthy home. But Tom is so unfamiliar with washing that the bathing accoutrement confuse him because he has been told by Mr. Grimes that only dirty people wash regularly: “I’d be ashamed to want washing every week or so, like any smutty collier lad.” As Tom examines Ellie and her room, his thoughts follow a progression that ultimately convicts him of his own filth.

“She must be a very dirty lady,” thought Tom, “by my master’s rule, to want as much scrubbing as all that. But she must be very cunning to put the dirt out of the way so well afterwards, for I don’t see a speck about the room, not even on the

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35 Kingsley, p. 1.
36 Kingsley, pp. 18-20.
37 Kingsley, p. 11.
38 Kingsley is infamous for his obsession with washing, particularly in cold water. Carpenter suggests that Kingsley used cold water as a purgative for sexual guilt (pp. 30-31). In Water-Babies Tom’s immersion (and baptism) in the cold water of the stream that drowns him is the catalyst of his initial metamorphosis. Kingsley takes a natural phenomenon (cold water) and imbues it with spiritual power, in a move that is characteristic of his attempt to wed science and faith.
very towels.” And then, looking toward the bed, he saw that dirty lady, and held his breath with astonishment. Under the snow-white coverlet, upon the snow-white pillow, lay the most beautiful little girl that Tom had ever seen. Her cheeks were almost as white as the pillow, and her hair was like threads of gold … She might have been as old as Tom … She cannot be dirty. She never could have been dirty, thought Tom to himself. And then he thought, “And are all people like that when they are washed?” And he looked at his own wrist, and tried to rub the soot off, and wondered whether it ever would come off. “Certainly I should look much prettier then, if I grew at all like her.” And looking round, he suddenly saw, standing close to him, a little ugly, black ragged figure, with bleared eyes and grinning white teeth. He turned on it angrily. What did such a little black ape want in that sweet young lady’s room? And behold, it was himself, reflected … And Tom, for the first time in his life, found out that he was dirty; and burst into tears with shame and anger.39

Tom’s blackness stands in stark contrast to Ellie’s whiteness.40 His literal dirt is evidence of the abusive upbringing that has damaged his child body and his child self. Before Tom’s moral regeneration can begin, he must be stripped of what innocence he has—that is, class innocence. When he sees Ellie’s mound of washing things, he blithely assumes that she must be very dirty, that he may even be cleaner than she is. But once he sees her, her essential cleanliness impresses itself upon him, just as his own essential filth convicts him when he sees his reflection. Although

39 Kingsley, pp. 20-1.
40 There are also strong racial overtones in Tom’s blackness. Kingsley believed that although all human races belonged to the same species, the races had diverged in their evolutionary journey, and some had degenerated rather than progressed. He believed the races “could be categorized in a hierarchy in which the Englishman occupied the highest rank while the aborigine held the lowest station, in many ways indistinguishable from an ape” (Hale, p. 577). Tom’s Englishness guarantees that his blackness can be washed off.
the physical dirt (or lack thereof) is a symbol for an inward purity, it is a symbol deeply rooted in class. Ellie can be clean because she can afford the accoutrement of washing. Tom must be dirty because he does not even have access to water. Tom’s acknowledgement of his own Darwinian degeneration—he is not a boy but an ape—is necessary before his moral regeneration can commence. It is this shame and anger, accompanied by fear, that drives him across the moor to his death.

Kingsley does make it clear that Tom is a fallen child—he should have had the characteristics that Ellie possesses. Although he has been tainted by pain and misery—“when he had to climb the dark flues, rubbing his poor knees and elbows raw; and when the soot got into his eyes, which it did every day in the week; and when his master beat him, which he did every day in the week; and when he had not enough to eat, which happened every day in the week likewise”—glimpses of childhood are visible among the ruins. Kingsley, p. 2. He is still able to be merry and play with other children: “He cried half his time, and laughed the other half … when he was tossing half pennies with the other boys, or playing leap-frog over the posts.” He is still able to be merry and play with other children: “He cried half his time, and laughed the other half … when he was tossing half pennies with the other boys, or playing leap-frog over the posts.”

Although even these pursuits are tainted (tossing half pennies alludes to Tom’s desire to gamble as a man), they show that Tom is not without hope of redemption. Tom’s natural inclination to goodness is constantly in conflict with his degeneration: although he bears the misery of a beating “manfully with his back to it till it was over,” he does it not like some great hero, but “as his old donkey did to a hail-storm.” Even in his good moments, Tom threatens to grow up into an animal. Kingsley, p. 2.

Tom also exhibits hints of religious sensitivity and the morality that should be his birthright. For Kingsley, religious education, as with so much else in Water-Babies, is class based. Ellie has not drawn the pictures of Christ that hang in her room—they are placed there by

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41 Kingsley, p. 2.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
her careful guardians. However, Kingsley does seem to allow for a certain inherent religious sensitivity in all children. Although Tom does not recognize Christ in the pictures in Ellie’s room, those are, “the two pictures which took his fancy most.” Tom thinks of the one of Christ and the children that it “was a very pretty picture … to hang in a lady’s room,” and the picture of the crucifixion affects him tenderly: “‘Poor man,’ thought Tom … and Tom felt sad, and awed.”44 Although, unlike Ellie, Tom has never received religious instruction and does not understand the content of the pictures, he is still capable of recognizing something holy when he sees it and of being stirred to holy emotions at the sight.

Finally, Tom has an empathy with nature, which his master entirely lacks, and which is part of Tom’s Romantic birthright. The idealized connection between children and the natural world—an idea that had taken strong hold since Rousseau—is often used by Victorian authors to emphasize the pure, unsophisticated nature of children. Even Tom has not lost all his empathy with the natural world, although even this empathy is tainted since he throws stones at animals and will have to be corrected of this fault in his new life as a water-baby. As he and Grimes travel out to Sir John’s estate and enter the country, “they heard the skylark saying his matins high up in the air … Tom looked, and looked, for he never had been so far into the country before; and longed to get over a gate, and pick buttercups, and look for birds’ nests in the hedge; but Mr. Grimes was a man of business, and would not have heard of that.”45 Grimes has been corrupted by greed, and so his love of “business” has destroyed any affinity he may have once had with nature. But even though Tom is earlier referred to as “a good man of business,” the corruption has not proceeded so far as to render him insensible to the natural world.46 (Ellie, too, is a child of nature, with her room decorated with natural images: “The carpet was all over gay

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44 Kingsley, pp. 19-20.
45 Kingsley, p. 8.
46 Kingsley, p. 3.
lil flowers; and the walls were hung with pictures … of horses and dogs.” Tom’s pleasure in
the natural world and his other traces of essential childhood stand as evidence for what he could
be, and why he is worth the effort of redemption. Literacy and moral (although not always
religious) education, cleanliness, and a special relationship with nature: these characteristics,
outlined through their presence in Ellie and their lack in Tom, will continue to be hallmarks of
the good, “right,” child throughout the texts I am looking at in this dissertation, across a span of
fifty years.

In order to acquire the characteristics of the ideal child, Tom must undergo a series of
changes, some abrupt metamorphoses brought by supernatural aid instead of progress, and some
the result of growth over time. Because this is not a fantastic journey, metamorphosis does not
occur to prevent growth. Rather metamorphosis occurs in order to undo Tom’s degeneration and
to allow growth and progress. Tom must be undone from a working-class child whose essential
child nature has been corrupted, so that he can re-grow into the proper form, shaped by the
middle-class values of education and morality. (The narrator makes it clear that it is the
acquirement of morality that will shape Tom in the right way, not merely being well taken care
of: “Now you may fancy that Tom was quite good, when he had everything that he could want or
wish: but you would be very much mistaken. Being quite comfortable is a very good thing; but it
does not make people good. Indeed, it sometimes makes them naughty.”

The first change is Tom’s metamorphosis into a water-baby, when his old “husk” that has
reminded him of a “little black ape” is washed away, allowing the “little, pretty real Tom” to
emerge. In order for the real child to emerge, that child must be separated from its working-class
body. Although Tom wonders whether he would look like Ellie if he used her washing regimen,

47 Kingsley, pp. 18-19.
48 Kingsley, p. 166.
Kingsley never suggests that it is possible for Tom to achieve cleanliness through conventional means. His dirt is so deep that it has given his body the appearance of a black ape: it is a degenerated body that cannot be redeemed. Tom’s essential child self can be saved only through the abrupt change of metamorphosis—a death that is not a death. In fact, Kingsley explicitly compares Tom’s transformation to that of the caddis, which leaves its case behind. The industrialized, working-class body cannot hold a true child.

Tom’s next metamorphosis is actually a regression. Tom steals candy from one of the fairies, and as a result, he becomes externally repulsive: “when Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby came, he wanted to be cuddled like the rest; but she said very seriously, ‘I should like to cuddle you; but I cannot, you are so horny and prickly.’ And Tom looked at himself: and he was all over prickles, just like a sea-egg.” Tom has regressed not just to an animal form, but to a primitive sea urchin, a stage of evolution far below apes. The narrator explains that this change “was quite natural; for you must know and believe that people’s souls make their bodies just as a snail makes its shell … when Tom’s soul grew all prickly with naughty tempers, his body could not help growing prickly too, so that nobody would cuddle him, or play with him, or even like to look at him.” Unfortunately for Tom, he cannot lose his prickles as suddenly as he acquires them. Instead, he must learn “what you have been taught ever since you said your first prayers at your mother’s knees,” and only then does he gradually lose his prickles. It is a process of growth rather than of metamorphosis. Tom must revert to a very early rung on the evolutionary ladder to grow up the right way. In this case, metamorphosis enables growth rather than bypassing it.

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49 Kingsley, p. 172.
50 Ibid.
51 Kingsley, p. 174.
Ultimately, Tom’s journey as a water-baby adventure enables him to leave childhood behind entirely and become a man. The passage which describes Tom’s adulthood is perhaps the most puzzling in the entire book. It reads almost like an after-thought, and any reader who thinks too hard about Tom’s supposed drowning and tries to fit it with his reemergence into the world as a professional will be unable to discern a logical sequence. The closing passage begins with a declaration from Mother Carey, greatest of the fairies, and goes on to detail Tom’s adult life, the accomplishments and limits of his future:

“You may take him home with you now on Sundays, Ellie. He has won his spurs in the great battle, and become fit to go with you and be a man …”

So Tom went home with Ellie on Sundays, and sometimes on week-days too; and he is now a great man of science, and can plan railroads, and steam-engines, and electric telegraphs, and rifled guns, and so forth; and know everything about everything … And all this from what he learnt when he was a water-baby, underneath the sea.

“And of course Tom married Ellie?”

My dear child, what a silly notion! Don’t you know that no one ever marries in a fairy tale, under the rank of a prince or a princess?52

Mother Carey makes it clear that the reason for Tom’s education and moral transformation was to make him “fit to … be a man.” The result of Tom’s new morality is productivity. As an adult, he is praised for his knowledge and practical skill, and success is expressed in the language of worldly accomplishment instead of that of moral achievement. Tom has become “a great man of science,” who can “plan railroads, and steam-engines, and electric telegraphs, and rifled guns,” that is, the tools needed for connecting a great empire. Tom has gone from being a blot on the

52 Kingsley, p. 267, emphasis mine.
face of an industrial city, to being an imperial citizen who can produce the things needed to ensure Britain’s greatness because of the moral and mental growth he achieved during his journey. Tom before his water-baby adventure dreamed of becoming an abusive, vice-ridden man who contributed nothing to his society. Because he learns virtues such as self-control, self-sacrifice, and integrity during his undersea adventure, he can instead become a highly productive individual.

Despite all of his growth, Tom remains bound by his class, since the narrator cagily disallows the marriage of Ellie, the squire’s daughter, to Tom, the chimneysweep’s boy. Marriage, as the narrator explains, is a class affair. Only those of equal rank, a prince and a princess, can be married. Although Tom has rewritten his early years of abuse and received a new beginning to his life, the change has not made him Ellie’s equal. This is, after all, a fairytale for middle-class readers, and while it may inspire them to philanthropy and concern for the wellbeing of working-class children, it is not intended as a revolutionary call for the leveling of all social barriers. Furthermore, the narrator avoids sexualizing Tom, even though the chimneysweep’s boy has now grown up. Despite the story’s debt to traditional fairy tales, Kingsley resists the traditional romantic ending, preferring to leave us with a Tom who is capable but not virile, still Romantic enough to be sexless.

In Kingsley’s pre-fantastic journey, Tom undergoes a combination of metamorphosis and growth. He transforms into a water-baby through a death that is not a death, and he morphs into a sea-egg because of naughty behavior, but he can acquire morality only through accumulated lessons and the process of learning. However, although he seems to be progressing toward maturity, his transition into manhood seems almost like a metamorphosis—it is very abrupt, without temporal lead-up—a metamorphosis that catapults him out of childhood and into
adulthood. Thus, metamorphosis and magical journeying are not used in *Water-Babies* to preserve essential childhood. Rather, using metamorphosis to recreate essential childhood becomes the means of transforming the uneducated poor, who are a detriment to society, into contributing citizens.

*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

Carroll’s *Alice* is usually hailed as the first example of what we now think of as modern children’s literature: that is, literature that embodies Hunt’s “empathetic, rather than directive narrative relationship.” In particular, *Alice* is central to the development of a principal function of children’s literature as we know it—seeking to preserve the essential child and always returning the child home at the end of the adventure, preferably in a state that has not pushed that child closer to adulthood. Given the importance universally assigned to *Alice* by literary scholars, the amount and kind of existing criticism on the text is surprisingly unvaried. Thanks in large part to the rise of Freudianism in the first half of the twentieth century, and a collection of remarks made by influential members of the literary establishment who had themselves read *Alice* as children, criticism of *Alice* has been overwhelmingly psychoanalytic and/or biographical, and the life of Carroll, or Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, has received almost more attention than the text itself.

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53 For a popular twentieth-century descendant of *Alice*, consider Maurice Sendak’s acclaimed *Where the Wild Things Are*, which showcases a fantastic journey (New York: Harper and Row, 1963). Max becomes king of the wild things, but gives up this power in order to return home to his mother and her nurturing care, his mother nonthe-wiser about her son’s stint as a monarch.

54 Take, for example, Virginia Woolf, who famously suggested that Carroll was unable to grow up: “For some reason … his childhood was sharply severed. It lodged in him whole and entire. He could not disperse it. And therefore as he grew older this impediment in the center of his being, this hard block of pure childhood, starved the mature man of nourishment … since childhood remained in him entire, he could do what no one else has ever been able to do—he could return to that world” (“Lewis Carroll,” in *Aspects of Alice: Lewis Carroll’s Dreamchild as Seen through the Critics’ Looking-Glasses 1865-1971*, ed. Robert Phillips [New York: Vanguard Press, 1971], pp. 47-9).

55 Since 2008, the biographically oriented books published include Robin J. Wilson’s *Lewis Carroll in Numberland: His Fantastical Mathematical Logical Life: An Agony in Eight Fits* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008); Jenny Woolf’s *The Mystery of Lewis Carroll: Discovering the Whimsical, Thoughtful, and Sometimes Lonely Man who Created “Alice in Wonderland”* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2010); and Mark Davies’s *Alice in Waterland: *
Alice is often read as a facet of Carroll’s psyche, rather than as a text within a genre, and Carroll turns out to be as complex as his text. Jenny Woolf’s aptly named 2010 biography, The Mystery of Lewis Carroll, begins, “The more closely Lewis Carroll is studied, the more he seems to slide quietly away.” A large part of the puzzle lies in the portion of Carroll’s papers that disappeared after his death. All his papers were carefully scrutinized by his loyal family, and anything that they perceived might throw an unflattering light on their adored oldest brother was removed, either destroyed or buried in a private archive that has yet to come to light. These tantalizing gaps in information, coupled with the changes in our ideas about childhood and our sexual mores over the last century and a half, have offered too much temptation to many scholars, who have succumbed to the delights of imaginative speculation, accusing Carroll of everything from pedophilia to being Jack the Ripper.

Even scholars who have written about the text rather than its author tend to ignore its status as children’s literature. This trend held particularly true for early Alice criticism. Aspects of Alice: Lewis Carroll’s Dreamchild as Seen through the Critics’ Looking-Glasses, 1865-1971, surveys just over a century of Alice criticism. Of the five entries in the section “As Victorian and Children’s Literature,” only two are actual scholarly articles. This is compared to the eight entries under “Freudian Interpretations,” not to mention additional sections on Jung and biography. Happily, in more recent years, scholars have begun to address this deficiency.


56 For example, Catherine Robson argues that in Alice, Carroll achieves “the freedom of self-effacement: the relationship of the adult male and the little girl … captured without the necessity of bringing the man into the frame” (Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of Victorian Gentlemen [Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001], p. 144). For Robson, the text is interesting insofar as it casts light on the author’s mind and habits of thought, not as a seminal work of the children’s literature genre.

57 Jenny Woolf, p. 1. Woolf’s biography is a thoughtful look at what hard evidence exists about Carroll’s life, with minimal space give to speculation about the gaps. Woolf is also notable as the discoverer of the uncensored record of Carroll’s bank account. A chapter in the biography is devoted to this information, and she has also published a monograph, Lewis Carroll in his Own Account (London: Jabberwock Press, 2005).

Nodelman, who notes from a survey of *Alice* criticism he conducted in 2006 that “[critics] rarely take into account that the intended audience is meant to be childlike … surprisingly few [discussions of Carroll] discuss the *Alice* books specifically as literature for children or in relation to other texts of children’s literature,” makes *Alice* one of the six seminal texts he uses to define children’s literature as a genre.\(^{59}\) His discussion of *Alice*’s definition of childhood as a time of uncertainty, and Gubar’s above-mentioned argument about Carroll’s uneasiness with the adult/child power imbalance, have broadly informed my own reading.

*Alice*’s definitional moments—where the text indicates most clearly what a child should be—differ significantly from those in *Water-Babies*. *Alice* is peculiar as a children’s text of this period because it does not define children as clearly and consistently as Charles Kingsley does in *Water-Babies*, or indeed, as all of the other major children’s authors examined in this dissertation do. Instead, Carroll offers two apparently different versions of the child. The first is located in an introductory poem and an alternate-perspective closing sequence, bookending the narrative. The second is the character of Alice herself, who does not embody the definition given in the poem. In fact, the dissonance can be so jarring that it seems impossible for the definitions to co-exist.

Catherine Robson writes, “the sister’s saccharine celebration of Alice’s ‘simple and loving heart’ certainly rings false to those of us who have enjoyed our heroine’s various displays of curiosity, timorousness, tactlessness, snobbery, petulance, self-aggrandizement, and downright bad temper … in Wonderland’s frame, constricted by … the real presence of her elder sister or the imagined presence of her own adult self … Alice [is] limited.”\(^{60}\) Nodelman, on the other hand, argues that the pretense of simplicity, in *Alice* and other children’s literature texts, is necessary to allow the “open secret” of complicated childhood: “As long as everyone who knows that childhood

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\(^{59}\) Nodelman, p. 15.

experience is always uncertain and often complex ignores that knowledge and speaks instead of ‘simple joys,’ the uncertain, complex experiences most children actually have can continue in full sight.”

My own reading is closer to that of Gubar, who argues that Carroll “was both drawn to and dismissive of Romantic figurations of childhood innocence.” I argue that Carroll insists that both of his definitions of the child—the Romantic child in the prefatory poem and the character of Alice—are true simultaneously. Alice’s behavior in Wonderland does not negate the nostalgic image of the simple-hearted child because Alice’s adventure does not change her. Rather, by directing Alice’s movements toward growth and change into a constant cycle of uncertainty and fluidity that leads to creativity, Wonderland keeps Alice essentially unchanged. Because of this, she is allowed the agency and freedom to explore different kinds of emotions and behaviors and to experiment with knowledge. The energy of these endeavors then dissipates in the chaos of Wonderland rather than creating growth. Thus, Alice can explore different experiences and emotions, wield creativity, and have the freedom to make her own choices, without any danger that these experiences will lead to a maturity that will make her no longer the Alice her sister envisions, who has a “simple and loving heart.”

This explains the dissonance in the book noted by Elsie Leach, who says that while Alice is allowed to pursue her curiosity and have her adventure without punishment, “we are not left with the feeling that Alice’s experiences have been especially rewarding either.” Her experiences produce no permanent gain because they have happened in a space removed from the ordinary world.

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61 Nodelman, p. 41.
62 Gubar, p. 95.
64 Elsie Leach, “Alice in Wonderland in Perspective,” in Aspects of Alice, pp. 88-92, 90.
A close look at the prefatory poem gives a clear picture of the kind of power that Carroll finds it safe to allow the child. The first stanza introduces the child’s body and that body’s power:

All in the golden afternoon
Full leisurely we glide;
For both our oars, with little skill,
By little arms are plied,
While little hands make vain pretence
Our wanderings to guide.\(^6^5\)

This first stanza emphasizes the littleness and the incapacity of the child body. The word “little” is repeated three times, in “little skill,” “little arms,” and “little hands.” The first instance is a pun meaning both not very much skill and skill possessed by a little person. Thus, the first introduction to a child the book gives us is one that emphasizes the child’s small and relatively helpless body. Because, as Gubar points out, “the girls are too small to exert any real influence over the course of the boat,” guidance from a child is only a “vain pretence,” a false claim.\(^6^6\)

In the third stanza, a new activity is introduced, one in which children seem able to exert more power than they were over the direction of the boat in the first stanza. The children issue orders to the speaker and appear as collaborators:

Imperious Prima flashes forth
Her edict “to begin it”:
In gentler tones Secunda hopes
“There will be nonsense in it!”
While Tertia interrupts the tale

\(^6^5\) Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures*, p. 3.
\(^6^6\) Gubar, p. 97.
Not more than once a minute.\textsuperscript{67}

In the narrative told by the poem, the storyteller is at the mercy of these three girls, who command the creation of the story (“begin it”), dictate its contents (“there will be nonsense”), and shape its progress (“interrupts the tale”). Gubar argues that the contrast between the first and second stanzas illustrates Carroll’s unease with the power difference that must always exist between children and adults—that although he wants to give children credit for collaboration, he is forced to acknowledge that ultimately the “little hands” make only “vain pretence” at guidance, and he himself is always ultimately in control.\textsuperscript{68} But, although I think Gubar is right about Carroll’s uneasiness with the power difference, I want to suggest another interpretation: what defines children for Carroll, as the narrator of Alice, is the unevenness of their power.

While they are physically helpless, they are imaginatively powerful. While Gubar claims that the sisters’ “control over the story … proves … illusory,” and that Alice’s metamorphoses are Carroll’s way of exploring “lopsided engagements in which the stronger partner [the adult] dominates over the weaker one [the child],” I would argue that Carroll sees children’s powerlessness as the source of their freedom of imagination.\textsuperscript{69} If they were bigger, they would be required to accept responsibility, to be in charge of the oars and the boat and be truly directing its course: they would be forced into an order antithetical to the creative chaos of Wonderland that is characterized by nonsense and constant interruptions. This difference in kinds of power is an important dynamic in Alice, where Alice’s size constantly casts her into difficulties, but her imaginative and verbal powers are untrammelled.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid. Prima, Secunda, and Tertia are the Liddell sisters Lorina, Alice, and Edith, respectively, who accompanied Carroll on the famous journey along the Thames when he first began to create the story that would become Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.

\textsuperscript{68} Gubar, p. 117.

\textsuperscript{69} Gubar, pp. 97-8.
The final stanza of the introductory poem encapsulates traditional Romantic nostalgia for lost childhood:

Alice! A childish story take,
And, with a gentle hand,
Lay it where Childhood’s dreams are twined
In Memory’s mystic band.
Like pilgrim’s wither’d wreath of flowers
Pluck’d in a far-off land.\(^{70}\)

This stanza places childhood in the past, and Alice, whether Alice Liddell or the “dream-child” Alice of the text, out of childhood.\(^ {71}\) And in fact, the story itself is dead and dried, meant to be preserved in “Memory’s mystic band.” Childhood has become mystical and dreamlike, akin to a far-off land. As I will discuss later, childhood power involves being in motion, without a fixed identity. A published text, which is no longer dynamic like an oral tale where things may change any second, can only be an adult representation of childhood power. I disagree with Gubar, who concludes that in this final stanza “Reciprocity stands revealed … as a sham,” and that the creative contributions described in the third stanza are negated.\(^ {72}\) Instead, I argue that children can be voluntary, creative agents, but only for a text that is dynamic, actively being created. This is why within the story proper, the character in the text who inhabits the memory-space and performs the nostalgic looking back on childhood is not Alice but her older sister. Only an adult who has left childhood is capable of looking back on it as a fixed and lost time (or text). At the end of the book, when the narrator reveals Wonderland as Alice’s dream, the sister also enters a dream state:

\(^{70}\) Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures*, p. 4.
\(^{71}\) Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures*, p. 3.
\(^{72}\) Gubar, p. 97.
she dreamed about little Alice herself: once again the tiny hands were clasped upon her knee … she could hear the very tones of her voice and see that queer little toss of her head … and still as she listened, or seemed to listen, the whole place around her became alive with the strange creatures of her little sister’s dream … she sat on, with closed eyes, and half believed herself in Wonderland, though she knew she had but to open them again, and all would change to dull reality … Lastly, she pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood; and how she would gather about her other little children … and how she would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life and the happy summer days.  

The difference between the sister and Alice is that the sister is able to discern a distinction between the dream and the reality while the dream is in progress, whereas Alice accepts everything in Wonderland as real while she is there. The sister, because of her adult perspective, can see both worlds at once but cannot enter Wonderland; indeed, she only perceives Wonderland through an act of self-deception. Alice, on the other hand, can only see one world at a time but is able to enter the fantastic space and interact with it. It is the child’s limited perspective that allows the creative wielding of power in Wonderland. Because the bulk of the story is told from that limited child perspective, the nostalgic view that is presented in the final stanza of the introductory poem and Alice’s sister’s dream musing does not intrude elsewhere. Rather, the majority of the book is a celebration of Alice’s imaginative power.

Alice’s Journey and the Danger of Knowledge in Wonderland

Alice sets a precedent for child characters when she travels down the rabbit hole for the sake of curiosity. This is crucially different from Tom in The Water-Babies, who enters the stream that drowns him/transforms him into a water-baby because he is driven by the overpowering desire to be clean. Where Tom’s desire to be clean is a result of his failed childhood—a longing to return to his original state of purity—Alice’s curiosity is part of her essential childishness and sets her apart from the adult world. At the beginning of the narrative, we see her

beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, “and what is the use of a book” thought Alice, “without pictures or conversations?”

So she was considering, in her own mind (as well as she could, for the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid), whether the pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies, when suddenly a White Rabbit with pink eyes ran close by her.

There was nothing so very remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it so very much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself “Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late” (when she thought it over afterwards it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but, when the Rabbit actually took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to
take out of it, and burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.

In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.\textsuperscript{74}

Although her background could not be more opposite to Tom’s in \textit{Water-Babies}, it turns out that Alice, like Tom, is having her essential childishness threatened by her ordinary world. The narrator points out the inappropriateness of the ordinary world for children by telling us that Alice is bored by two things, of “sitting by her [adult] sister” and of “having nothing to do.” Adults are not companions well matched to children’s personalities and interests—adult company bores children. Children are active and need something to do—they are out of place in a world that expects them to sit quiet and still, without any “pictures or conversations” to keep them interested. The passage even seems to go so far as to suggest that Alice is oppressed by the ordinary world. Her natural curiosity and energy are being suppressed. Since “the hot day made her feel very sleepy and stupid,” she is unable to decide whether the active and creative “pleasure of making a daisy-chain would be worth the trouble of getting up and picking the daisies.” Even the pleasures of the ordinary world are stifled by its oppressiveness.

Alice’s essential childishness is suppressed to the point that, when the possibility of Wonderland appears, Alice is at first actually unable to recognize it as fantastic, because of her dulled senses. She is not at all intrigued by the fact that the Rabbit is talking, even though she later realizes “she ought to have wondered at this.”\textsuperscript{75} It takes an action even more remarkable, 

\textsuperscript{74} Carroll, \textit{Alice’s Adventures}, pp. 7-8.

\textsuperscript{75} Alice’s reflection that “she ought to have wondered” at the rabbit’s talking comes from some later temporality. One possible time for this realization is as soon as Alice is jolted out of her stupor and recognizes the white rabbit as a remarkable animal. Once her imagination is awakened, she realizes how wonderful the rabbit is. An alternate possibility might be that the reflection comes from some further time after Alice has grown up enough to be able to distinguish between ordinary occurrences and fantastic ones. A child’s understanding of the world, as I mentioned in my introduction, might conflate scientific and imaginary knowledge. Therefore, Alice might see the talking rabbit as
noted by the narrator in italicized text, to jolt her out of her daze, and that is the Rabbit taking a
watch out of its waistcoat pocket. The first effect of Wonderland, then, is to restore Alice to a
sense of wonder and energy, reviving what had been pressed out of her by boredom and
restriction. After this kick start, Alice never loses either wonder or energy throughout her
protracted adventures since both are nourished by her surroundings. This initial surge of energy
comes from the blurring of the divide between animal and human. What jolts Alice out of her
daze, the creative spark necessary to bring her child senses to life, is something from the ordinary
world—that is, her civilized world of middle-class England—combined with the natural world. It
is the mix of the two worlds that is remarkable and powerful, not one or the other in isolation. It
is not the Rabbit’s speech—the assumption by a dumb animal of what had long been considered
a primary marker of humanity—that appears to Alice so remarkable. It is the dumb beast’s
assumption of the trappings of a gentleman, and the turning of an animal from the clothing and
time of nature to the clothing and time of middle-class society.

In these details, Carroll departs sharply from Kingsley. Tom must leave society and
return to nature in order to restore his childhood. For Kingsley, the child’s innocence is rooted in
the natural world. Alice, on the other hand, takes society with her, and it is the bending of social
norms as well as natural ones that allows Alice to exercise her curiosity and energy. The
opposition of nature, as the true home of the innocent child, and civilized society, as the arena
that allows children to exert their creative power, is a tension that will trouble later authors,
notably Nesbit, who says that children belong in the country, yet often sets her stories of
adventure in the city. While Gubar claims that Alice’s education and enmeshment in the world of
the Victorian drawing room make her a clearly unRomantic child, I would argue that Carroll

nothing out of the ordinary, and her interest in his pocket watch is a sign that she needs to strengthen her imaginary
powers, since she finds it remarkable and not already a part of her understanding of the world’s possibilities.
does not see early education as incompatible with childhood innocence, as long as that knowledge does not lead to orderly worldliness.\textsuperscript{76} Despite connections to the civilized world, Alice’s journey has nothing to do with sense or clear thinking; Carroll repeatedly emphasizes that a child’s creative power has little to do with adult rationalism. Alice’s inability to think is remarked on three times: once, when she is contemplating daisy chains, again when she fails to be surprised by the White Rabbit’s speech, and finally when she charges into the rabbit hole “never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.” The invitation to Wonderland does not restore or breed good sense. It breeds curiosity and energy.

Alice’s journey down the rabbit hole lays the foundation for the understanding of children’s power that will shape the rest of the narrative. The first important thing to note is that Wonderland protects the safety of the child’s body. Although Alice falls for a very long way, there is never any sign that she is in danger or even that she herself is frightened. Fear, for Alice, has almost no place in Wonderland (although the creatures of Wonderland are often possessed by fear). Wonderland is a place where Alice is safe. Even in an everlastingly long fall, she is sure to come down “upon a heap of sticks and dry leaves … not a bit hurt.”\textsuperscript{77} The more usual critical stance has been to suggest that Wonderland is, in fact, a deeply dangerous place, where menace lurks beneath the surface. Carpenter explains Carroll’s nonsense as “[t]he state of Nothingness or Not Being, which at the very least is death and at its worst is something more frightening,” and says that it “lies just around every corner in … Wonderland.”\textsuperscript{78} While I do not deny that danger and even death hover around the edges of Wonderland, what I want to emphasize is that in this fantastic space, Alice is never truly at risk. The narrator is watching out for her. The right kind of

\textsuperscript{76} Gubar, pp. 110-1.
\textsuperscript{77} Carroll, \textit{Alice’s Adventures}, p. 9. Gubar argues that this moment is part of Carroll’s rejection of the didactic tradition of children’s literature that injures children as punishment for misbehavior (p. 114).
protected childhood, exemplified in Wonderland, has the power to fend off death. Even during the one moment in which Alice’s death is hypothesized by the narrator, her demise is pictured as happening back in her ordinary world where, beyond the narrator’s protection, she could be killed by a fall.  

Alice’s fall is largely concerned with knowledge, not unlike another very famous fall. But while Adam and Eve in Eden fall from grace because they eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Alice brings her knowledge to her fall. Neither is it, exactly, a reverse fall, where Alice loses her knowledge in order to regain a primary innocence. Instead, the fall exposes the jumbled nature of her knowledge, which she prizes mostly for show. The fall itself is partly responsible for the jumbling—Wonderland is about nonsense, not good sense—but also expressed is the idea that child knowledge, which is not linear or rational, comes into its full power in a setting other than the ordinary world.  

Alice’s jumbled knowledge also offers a critique on the Victorian early educational system, which emphasized rote memorization over critical understanding. Alice memorizes words in order to be impressive, just as school children would memorize mandated lines of poetry without understanding them in order to pass examinations. Such education, the narrator suggests, puffs up children with vanity without teaching them knowledge or creativity.

The rabbit hole itself bears a strong resemblance to a schoolroom, and this vertical schoolroom prepares Alice for Wonderland, just as ordinary horizontal schoolrooms prepare children for the ordinary world. The sides of the rabbit hole are “filled with cupboards and book-

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80 This is different from Tom in *Water-Babies*, who falls out of moral chaos into an orderly system of morality. Tom does experience a reverse fall, unlearning his corrupt knowledge and replacing it with the true knowledge of the fairies.
shelves: here and there she saw maps and pictures hung upon pegs."

Perhaps prompted by her scholastic surroundings, Alice begins to review bits of her knowledge as she falls: “I must be getting somewhere near the centre of the earth. Let me see: that would be four thousand miles down, I think … but then I wonder what Latitude or Longitude I’ve got to?”

This knowledge is of no practical good to Alice. Rather, her knowledge is all about performance. The narrator remarks, “Alice had learnt several things of this sort in her lessons in the school-room, and though this was not a very good opportunity for showing off her knowledge, as there was no one to listen to her, still it was good practice to say it over … Alice had not the slightest idea what Latitude was, or Longitude either, but she thought they were nice grand words to say.”

The narrator is poking fun at Alice’s vanity and the shoddy nature of the way she has been educated, but Alice is also practicing what will be most important in Wonderland: verbal performance, not facts. Facts are almost useless in Wonderland, and, as Nodelman points out, are in this setting antithetical to childhood: “the state of being in uncertainty, of not knowing a world that keeps changing and not understanding a self that keeps changing, is the opposite of what adulthood is—that it is the essence of what it means to be a child.”

The systems Alice masters in Wonderland are nonsensical, and the way she interacts with Wonderland creatures is through verbal performances from her and from them.

As Alice falls, she worries about her apparent failures in knowledge. If she falls right through the earth, she is not sure what country she will emerge in, and hopes she will see it written up somewhere so that she will not have to ask and risk the scorn of the native inhabitants:

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82 Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures*, p. 8.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
85 Nodelman, p. 40.
86 This is part of what makes Frank Beddor’s recent YA novel *The Looking Glass Wars*, only tangentially related to *Alice* (New York: Speak, 2007). In his effort to create a coherent Wonderland, Beddor replaces linguistic encounters with violent ones, taking away the power Carroll put in the hands of a child and restoring it to adults.
“And what an ignorant little girl she’ll think me for asking!” Alice’s concerns about ignorance are somewhat justified, since a number of the creatures are quite rude to her on account of things she does not know. But as Alice finally figures out, they are just as ignorant as she is, and the one who holds true power in Wonderland is the one who creates and gets other to acquiesce to that creation. As Gubar points out, children are perfectly capable of deviating from set scripts and writing their own. This is quite unlike Tom in Water-Babies, whose failing is that he has never been co-opted into the system of knowledge acquisition and must be taught, by Ellie and the fairies. Alice, already integrated into the system, must learn to turn the system to creation, as she does in moments of recitation: Carroll turns recitation from a form of submission—in which the child acquiesces to a larger body of knowledge and puts his or her body at the service of that knowledge at the command of adults—into a form of creativity when Alice recites new poems instead of the old, tired ones, converting Isaac Watts’s “How doth the little busy bee” into “How doth the little crocodile.”

Alice’s fall down the rabbit hole also begins Caroll’s destruction of linguistic and social order; he wipes away the ordinary organization of power to allow the child room to create. As she falls, Alice subsides into a kind of trance, where she gets confused about the order of the food chain between cats and bats:

“But do cats eat bats, I wonder?” And here Alice began to get rather sleepy, and went on saying to herself, in a dreamy sort of way, “Do cats eat bats? Do cats eat bats? and sometimes “Do bats eat cats? for, you see, as she couldn’t answer either question, it didn’t much matter which way she put it. She felt that she was dozing off, and had just begun to dream that she was walking hand in hand with Dinah,

87 Carroll, Alice’s Adventures, p. 9.
88 Gubar, p. 7.
89 Carroll, Alice’s Adventures, p. 17 and p. 17n8.
and was saying to her, very earnestly, “Now, Dinah, tell me the truth: did you ever eat a bat?” when suddenly, thump! … the fall was over.⁹⁰

Those readers who know the end of the story will realize that Alice was entering a dream within a dream, bringing into question the whole nature of reality and perception, a question Carroll explores more explicitly in *Through the Looking-Glass*. There, Alice is told that “you’re only a sort of thing in [the Red King’s] dream … If that there King was to wake … you’d go out—bang!—just like a candle!”⁹¹ Although Alice at first indignantly denies that she is a figment of anybody’s dream and asserts her own reality, when she ultimately wakes from her own dream and remarks, “Now, Kitty, let’s consider who it was that dreamed it all … it must have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course—but then I was part of his dream, too!” and the narrator concludes by putting the burden of choice on the reader, “Which do you think it was?”⁹² Readers are asked to question not only the relationship between Alice and the Red King, but the relationship between Alice and themselves. If this question is left unanswered, then it becomes a way of perpetuating the dream indefinitely, leaving open forever the imaginative possibilities of childhood.

Answering the question of whose dream it is, or answering any question too definitely, is dangerous in Wonderland. Wonderland depends upon fluidity of language and perception: once those are set, Wonderland must come to an end. This limitation is prefigured in Alice’s dream about Dinah. She has been drifting through the linguistic uncertainty of whether cats eat bats or bats eat cats. The order of the question does not matter because, as the narrator points out, Alice does not know the answer, and no adult authority is available to consult. Thus, the knowledge about cats and bats does not exist in Wonderland and Alice can create that knowledge any way

⁹⁰ Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures*, p. 9, emphasis mine.
she likes. But as she enters the dream conversation with Dinah, this uncertain fluidity threatens to come to an end. She poses the question to Dinah, “[D]id you ever eat a bat?” and since Dinah is sure to know the answer, the order of the words will be set. 93 Thus, Alice must come out of her dream before Dinah answers if Wonderland is to exist at all.

The adventure in Wonderland ends when Alice fixes the identity of the court as “nothing but a pack of cards,” finally halting the uncertainty of words and identity that make Wonderland possible. 94 Throughout the story, the pack has been operating both as personalities and as cards. For example, when the Queen of Hearts comes upon the gardeners painting the roses, they fall down on their faces so that their identities cannot be determined: “as they were lying on their faces, and the pattern on their backs was the same as the rest of the pack, [the Queen] could not tell whether they were gardeners, or soldiers, or courtiers, or three of her own children.” 95 Alice takes advantage of the gardeners’ status as cards to save their heads by lifting them into a flowerpot, something she would not have been able to do had they not been made of cardboard. But it is their status as people that necessitates their being saved. However, at the end of the trial of the Knave of Hearts, when the Queen commands that Alice’s head should be cut off, Alice stops acknowledging the dual identity of the pack. “You’re nothing but a pack of cards!” she cries, and as they leap at her, she wakes up, the dream over and Wonderland gone. In the moment when Alice decides to fix the identity of the Wonderland inhabitants, they lose their life. As Nodelman says, “Alice’s one moment of certain knowledge about the Wonderland creatures is the assertion that ends her stay in this utopian land … The point at which [she accepts] the certainty of the assertion—adopt[s] the knowledge commonly accepted by most adults as true—

is the point at which [her] fantasy worl[d] of desire must and do[es] end.” The creative power that animates Wonderland and that empowers Alice depends on nothing being fixed, and this is the reason for the ceaseless metamorphoses that Alice undergoes throughout her adventures.

Alice’s Metamorphoses

Unlike Tom in The Water-Babies, Alice’s metamorphoses do not add up to an evolutionary pattern of development: in Alice, Carroll neither embraces nor denies Darwinian evolutionary theory but instead uses Darwinian imagery to help create the chaos of Wonderland. Unlike Kingsley’s well-known admiration of Darwin, Carroll’s personal views on evolution remain unknown. Although, as critics from William Empson to Ruth Murphy have pointed out, Carroll’s book abounds with Darwinian imagery, he is emphatically not interested in portraying Alice as a model of recapitulation. Rather, Carroll takes advantage of the natural chaos of Darwinian evolution (what Murphy describes as “nature as a violent, chaotic struggle for life in the face [of] extinction”) to shake Alice free of the inescapable laws of progressive growth that apply to her in her ordinary world and instead send her through a series of non-progressive metamorphoses. Alice’s changes do not adapt her for better survival in her environment; instead, they force her into new and creative relationships with the creatures around her. One instance of this occurs when she has grown to giant size and her long, snaky neck frightens a mother pigeon: rather than taking advantage of her new size to feed herself, Alice must prove that she is not a serpent out to steal eggs. While Carroll echoes Kingsley in the journey and the Darwinian imagery, he departs sharply in that he uses Darwin to produce creative chaos rather than creative order.

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96 Nodelman, p. 40.
97 Murphy, p. 14.
98 Empson, p. 346; and Murphy pp. 14-15.
99 Carroll, Alice’s Adventures, pp. 42-3.
Alice’s metamorphoses highlight a pattern showing the rise of her power during her stay in Wonderland. She undergoes seven major bodily metamorphoses over the course of the text, and each one elaborates the relationship between chaos, nonsense, and power. As Alice progresses from one change to the next, she loses her ordinary world identity and gives herself up to the creative chaos of Wonderland. This allows Alice to become extremely powerful. However, as soon as she achieves this power, she begins to reject Wonderland’s fluidity and fix her own identity and that of Wonderland, ultimately bringing about the end of her fantastic journey.

The first metamorphosis occurs after Alice falls down the rabbit hole and discovers the little door into the beautiful garden and the golden key on the glass table. Longing to get into the garden, whose doorway is much too small for her, Alice thinks, “Oh, how I wish I could shut up like a telescope! I think I could, if I only knew how to begin.” The narrator adds, “so many out-of-the-way things had happened lately, that Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible.” Immediately after this wish, Alice goes back to the table where she found the key, and “this time she found a little bottle on it (which certainly was not here before,’ said Alice.” The bottle labeled “DRINK ME,” will help Alice to do what she was just wishing—shut up like a telescope. Given the juxtaposition in the text, it seems as though Alice is in some way responsible for her own metamorphosis. After only one adventure—that of falling down the rabbit hole—she has already learned to think outside the rules of knowledge she has memorized. By acknowledging that her ideas of the impossible were too restrictive and wishing for a way to shrink, she causes a way to appear.

100 Carroll, Alice’s Adventures, p. 10.
101 Ibid.
Carroll uses the case of the bottle marked “DRINK ME” to interject his most famous slam against the didactic children’s literature of the first part of the nineteenth century, criticism that is particularly significant in the context of Wonderland, which encourages Alice to dismember her learning.\textsuperscript{102} The narrator remarks, “It was all very well to say “Drink me,” but the wise little Alice was not going to do that in a hurry. ‘No, I’ll look first,’ she said, ‘and see whether it’s marked ‘poison’ or not;’ for she had read several nice little stories about children who had got burnt, and eaten up by wild beasts, and other unpleasant things, all because they would not remember the simple rules their friends had taught them: such as … if you drink much from a bottle marked ‘poison,’ it is almost certain to disagree with you, sooner or later.”\textsuperscript{103} The danger of this earlier didactic literature is two-fold. First, these stories about children who are mutilated and killed are certainly not “nice.” Alice, operating on the premise of the fantastic journey that children are to be preserved and protected, is antithetical to such stories. If children must be altered, the alteration should come through the abrupt changes of metamorphosis, which can occur without damaging the essential child nature, rather than development, or the progression of action and consequence (savage punishments of children who break rules). It is significant that the sarcastic diatribe comes just as Alice is about to begin her first bodily transformation. Alice’s transformation occurs because of her curiosity, a trait that was often punished in earlier children’s literature since it was almost always opposed to obedience. As Elsie Leach points out, however, Alice is not punished for pursuing her adventure: “Her curiosity leads her into the initial adventure and most of the later ones of the book, yet she is not punished for it, nor does she regret what she has done.”\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{102} Nodelman, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{103} Carroll, Alice’s Adventures, pp. 10-1.
\textsuperscript{104} Elsie Leach, p. 90.
Overly didactic, unimaginative stories, such as the ones Alice remembers, make children stupid. The use of italics, the reference to Alice as “wise,” and the description of the rules that keep children from doing such obviously dangerous things as drinking poison as “simple,” work together to create the impression that children’s average intelligence level must be very low. First, because they have to have such obvious facts reiterated to them, second, because children have actually forgotten these rules and come to grievous harm as a result, and third, because a child who does manage to remember the straightforward rules is lauded as “wise.” Of course, the rule not to drink from a bottle marked poison prevents Alice from imagining other possibilities—the bottle might contain poison and not be labeled, or some other dramatic consequence might (and does) result. Fortunately, the rules of Wonderland protect children, so when Alice tastes the bottle and “finding it very nice … soon finished it off,” she is not plunged into agonies or death. Instead, she gets her wish—curiosity and action are rewarded.

Alice at once realizes that she is “shutting up like a telescope.” She does have some trepidation associated with her change: “she waited for a few minutes to see if she was going to shrink any further: she felt a little nervous about this; ‘for it might end, you know … in my going out altogether, like a candle. I wonder what I should be like then?’ And she tried to fancy what the flame of a candle looks like after the candle is blown out, for she could not remember ever having seen such a thing.” Carpenter points to this as a sign of the danger of annihilation lurking behind Wonderland, but it is important to note that the thought of “going out altogether” comes from Alice herself, rather than the narrator or the inhabitants of Wonderland. Since we have just been treated to a sample of the improving literature with which Alice’s mind has been

105 Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures*, p. 11.
filled, which seems centered on the destruction of children, it is not surprising that the worry of her own extinguishment should suggest itself.  

This first metamorphosis does not solve Alice’s problem. The key to the garden is on the glass table, which now towers far above her head. At first we might blame Alice for her lack of foresight. If she had only put the key in her pocket, or snatched it when she felt herself beginning to shrink, she would now be able to get into the garden, but a closer look at the text suggests otherwise. During her earlier exploration of the hall, Alice finds the golden key and the little door and opens the latter with the former. When she finishes gazing through the tiny passageway and goes back to the table where she will find the bottle, the narrator says simply, “There seemed to be no use in waiting by the little door, so she went back to the table.” There is no mention of her shutting or relocking the door. In fact, as far as the reader knows, at the time Alice drinks from the bottle, the door is still open with the key in the lock. It is only after she has shrunk to the appropriate size that the door seems to shut and relock itself, the key reappearing on the glass table far over Alice’s head. It is Wonderland’s own inherent lack of logical sequencing that prevents Alice from entering the garden.

Alice’s first adventure as a giant further confirms that chaos and fluidity are key to the child’s power by revealing that even in her ordinary world, Alice’s identity is not always fixed. The narrator says, “[Alice] generally gave herself very good advice … and sometimes she scolded herself … and once she remembered trying to box her own ears for having cheated herself in a game of croquet she was playing against herself, for this curious child was very fond

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107 Gubar notes that “Alice has thoroughly absorbed the cruel logic of such stories” (p. 114). For her discussion of Carroll’s “object[ion] to the tendency of children’s author to pass themselves off as the kindly ‘friends’ of young people, even as they dream up terrible tortures for child characters in an effort to frighten child readers into submission,” see pp. 113-5.

of pretending to be two people.” The nature of the child allows her the imaginative flexibility of thinking of herself outside of herself. Fluidity of identity is key.

During the next metamorphosis, Alice attempts to take control of the process, demonstrating that while she is beginning the learn the rules (or non-rules), she has not yet fully embraced Wonderland’s chaos. Finding a little cake under the table, inscribed “EAT ME,” Alice tries to reason out a sequence of events that will follow her eating the cake: “if it makes me grow larger, I can reach the key; and if it makes me grow smaller, I can creep under the door: so either way I’ll get into the garden, and I don’t care which happens!” Alice is trying to co-opt Wonderland’s flexibility into giving her what she wants by postulating two positive possible outcomes. But Wonderland does not comply. Alice does grow larger after eating the cake, but she grows so much larger that procuring the key is essentially worthless: “Poor Alice! It was as much as she could do, lying down on the one side, to look through into the garden with one eye, but to get through was more hopeless than ever.” Alice’s attempt to reason all possible outcomes into getting her closer to the garden is foiled. Instead, the ultimate result of her growing bigger is to push her deeper into Wonderland. This harks back to the prefatory poem, where the narrator comments on “little hands” that “make vain pretence / Our wanderings to guide.” Alice is incapable of forcing a sequence of events that will take her into the garden. What her “vain pretence” at guiding can do, however, is push her deeper into the safe space of Wonderland, where it is entertaining and pleasurable to be out of control, just as it is on the river, in the “golden afternoon” where the boat is “leisurely glid[ing].” The child is allowed to be in charge (and to fail at doing so) when the space for this is safe and meant for enjoyment.

109 Carroll, Alice’s Adventures, p. 12.
110 Ibid.
111 Carroll, Alice’s Adventures, p. 15.
Alice’s inability to carry out her own plans is also tied to Wonderland’s Nonsense. Contemplating her faraway feet from her great height, Alice bids them “Good-bye,” and thinks “I must be kind to them … or perhaps they wo’n’t walk the way I want to go! Let me see, I’ll give them a new pair of boots every Christmas.” She goes on to imagine sending the boots by post, each boot with an individual address. This is a prime example of what Carpenter defines as real nonsense, that is, “the ruthless pursuit of a single idea on purely logical grounds, to an absurd and horrific conclusion.” Although the idea of Alice mailing a boot to “Alice’s Right Foot, Esq., Hearthrug, near the Fender” is not horrific, it is certainly absurd, and is the logical conclusion of Alice’s having grown so much larger she cannot reach her own feet. In this case, however, Nonsense in Alice is not about the threat of annihilation as Carpenter argues, but about the futility of child planning. Alice’s plan to mail boots to her feet comes to nothing, as do nearly all her plans, but the invention of the plan is entertaining for all involved parties (Alice notes, “how funny it’ll seem, sending presents to one’s own feet!”) Valuable nonsense can come from the vain pretence of little hands, as Alice herself notes: “Oh dear, what nonsense I’m talking!” The lesson of this second metamorphosis is well learned—by the Alice begins her third metamorphosis, she is beginning to accept the way Wonderland works. When she changes size again, the metamorphosis is fertilized by her letting go of her own identity and acknowledging that the fluid chaos of Wonderland applies to herself. She asks, “I wonder if I’ve changed in the night? … But if I’m not the same, the next question is ‘Who in the world am I?’ Ah, that’s the great puzzle.” Alice shrinks again as, in her attempt to discover her own

112 Carroll, Alice’s Adventures, pp. 14-5.
113 Carpenter, pp. 60-1.
114 Carroll, Alice’s Adventures, p. 15
115 Ibid.
116 Carroll, Alice’s Adventures, pp. 15-6.
identity, she contemplates being other children and recites a deal of jumbled knowledge in an attempt to test herself.

But even child nonsense can be carried too far, and Alice’s second shrinking episode illustrates children’s need for adult protection. As Carpenter points out, the ultimate end of nonsense can be “horrific,” for anything carried too far ends by being extinguished. Thus, “she dropped [the fan] … just in time to keep herself from shrinking away altogether … [she was] a good deal frightened at the sudden change, but very glad to find herself still in existence.”

Thus, the overseeing grown-up is still needed—the author nudges Alice to drop the fan in time and keep Wonderland safe for her. Formlessness is creative and pleasurable, an escape from the pressures of adult society, but formlessness taken too far becomes nothing. Children must be corralled to keep them from going out. Only within the safe space created by the fantastic journey can children run free, and even then they need adult supervision, just in case their incapacity to guide the boat lets it drift into danger.

Alice’s metamorphoses continue to work to erase her original, fixed identity. Her next opportunity for growth comes because she is impersonating someone else—Maryann, the White Rabbit’s servant. She finds another bottle marked “DRINK ME” on the Rabbit’s dressing table, and promptly does so, not with any definite plan (she has given up on those for the moment), but simply because “I know *something* interesting is sure to happen … so I’ll just see what this bottle does.” Alice drinks out of pure curiosity, the same impulse that led her to follow the Rabbit down the hole in the first place. She is truly participating in the spirit of Wonderland.

Although the goal of the metamorphoses is to keep Alice from becoming fixed, her growth spurt in the White Rabbit’s house results in temporary stasis, revealing the danger of

117 Carpenter, p. 56; and Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures*, p. 18.
118 Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures*, p. 28.
immobility. Alice grows so large that she fills up the room and has to put one foot up the chimney and one arm out the window. She thinks,

   It was much pleasanter at home … when one wasn’t always growing larger and smaller … I almost wish I hadn’t gone down that rabbit-hole—and yet—and yet—it’s rather curious, you know, this sort of life! I do wonder what can have happened to me! When I used to read fairy tales, I fancied that kind of thing never happened, and now here I am in the middle of one! There ought to be a book written about me, that there ought! And when I grow up, I’ll write one—but I’m grown up now … at least there’s no room to grow up any more here … But then … shall I never get any older than I am now? That’ll be a comfort, one way—never to be an old woman—but then—always to have lessons to learn! Oh, I shouldn’t like that! … Oh, you foolish Alice … How can you learn lessons in here? Why, there’s hardly any room for you, and no room at all for any lesson-books!\(^{119}\)

Although Alice finds herself uncomfortable, she nevertheless feels the allure of her new life, and she applies “curious” as a desirable modifier. But the most significant part of this passage is that it is about growth. Alice perceives this enlargement of her body as preventing her from getting older. Her new “curious” life means that she will never “be an old woman,” which is a “comfort.”\(^{120}\) Aging is explicitly labeled as a negative, something a child consciously wishes to avoid. Although Alice at first thinks that being a child forever will mean perpetual lessons, she soon reasons that her new size will prevent lessons as well. At this moment, Alice has reached a stasis (literally—she cannot move at all, except to kick a little) that she imagines prevents her


\(^{120}\) Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures*, p. 29.
both from aging physically and from aging mentally through education. However, stasis is never the goal of Wonderland—the ideal child is not a motionless child. In her discussion of Looking Glass, Gubar interprets the negative representation of stasis as Carroll’s affirmation of Alice’s growth: “Carroll strongly implies that Alice is right to resist the pressure to remain childlike by introducing the readers to a number of characters who are absurd and unattractive precisely because they are cases of arrested development,” characters such as the Tweedles or Humpty Dumpty in Through the Looking Glass. However, Wonderland’s method of preserving Alice does not involve sending her through the same sequence over and over again, the way the Tweedles repeatedly fight the same battle. In fact, in the scene where the giant Alice is trapped in the White Rabbit’s house, stasis is clearly identified as harmful. In addition to being dreadfully cramped and uncomfortable, some Wonderland creatures, led by the White Rabbit, attack, throwing stones at her. The child who cannot move is in danger of pain and injury. Since hurting the child is antithetical to Wonderland, the attack transforms into her means of escape, as some of the thrown stones turn into little cakes. Alice eats one, shrinks, and makes her escape from the house.

Alice reaches the peak of her Wonderland power in her next set of metamorphoses. Up to this point she has been mostly unable to control her changes in size; now she is given complete control over her metamorphoses. For the first time, she actively tries to find a way to instigate one of her sudden changes. After escaping from a puppy she is much too small to play with, she says to herself, “I’d nearly forgotten that I’ve got to grow up again! Let me see—how is it to be managed? I suppose I ought to eat or drink something or other; but the great question is ‘What?’ … Alice looked all around her at the flowers and the blades of grass, but she could not see

121 Gubar, p. 121.
anything that looked like the right thing to eat or drink under the circumstances.”

Alice knows the most common trigger for her changes, and she actively looks for it, but does not have ready access to it until she meets the Caterpillar.

When Alice encounters the Caterpillar, she is in prime condition to receive the secret of metamorphosis. He asks, “Who are you?” and Alice replies, “I—I hardly know, Sir, just at present—at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.” When the Caterpillar demands that she explain herself, Alice retorts, “I ca’n’t explain myself, I’m afraid, Sir … because I’m not myself, you see.”

Alice’s fluidity of identity is complete. She does not know who she is but acknowledges that she has changed several times and is, in fact, actively seeking to change again. She has let go of rational explanations and given herself up to the nonsense rules of Wonderland. It is significant that Alice is holding this conversation—the conversation where she completely accepts her own changing form—with a Caterpillar, the most seminal example of metamorphosis. In fact, she even brings this up after the Caterpillar disagrees that it is confusing to be many sizes in a day: “Well, perhaps you haven’t found it so yet … but when you have to turn into a chrysalis—you will some day, you know—and then after that into a butterfly, I should think you’ll feel it a little queer.”

Alice is talking to the one creature who should completely understand her metamorphoses, and, in fact, the Caterpillar does not to find her tale of changing sizes at all extraordinary. It is also the Caterpillar who, for the first time since Alice has entered Wonderland, offers her the choice of power. He asks, “What size do you want to be?” Alice falters a little at this, as she replies, “I’m not particular as to size … only one doesn’t like
changing so often, you know,’ to which the Caterpillar replies, “I don’t know.”\textsuperscript{126} And in fact, Alice’s dislike of changing so often will lead to her expulsion from Neverland.

Once Alice has the power to change her size at will, she begins to resist Wonderland’s nonsense again. Her first self-imposed metamorphosis is another disaster as she mushrooms to her largest size yet, getting tangled in tree tops and frightening a poor mother pigeon with her long, serpentine neck. But she soon gets the hang of manipulating her size, “growing sometimes taller, and sometimes shorter.”\textsuperscript{127} Once she has mastered her new power, the first thing she does is return to her “usual height,” which does feel “quite strange at first; but she got used to it in a few minutes.”\textsuperscript{128} Alice uses her power to try to stop Wonderland’s disruptions of her progress, a strong sign that she will not be able to stay for much longer. If, as Nodelman argues, “what Alice wants most fervently is to stop being a child [a being in a constant state of uncertainty] … this text is … about the thwarting of her desire,” then the moment when Alice possesses the mushroom pieces is the moment when she begins to get the better of the text, although she is not lost to Wonderland yet.\textsuperscript{129} In order to participate in her next two adventures, she will willfully change her size in order to match that of the creatures she meets.

But even though she changes size to accommodate her encounters with the Duchess and Mad Hatter/March Hare, Alice tries to impose order in a way that she does not when she is not in control of her metamorphoses. At the Duchess’s she takes away the baby, rather like a proto-social worker: “If I don’t take this child away with me … they’re sure to kill it in a day or two. Wouldn’t it be murder to leave it behind?”\textsuperscript{130} Furthermore, despite her own constant changing, Alice does not accept the baby’s metamorphosis from human(ish) child to pig: “If you’re going

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{127} Carroll, \textit{Alice’s Adventures}, p. 43.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{129} Nodelman, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{130} Carroll, \textit{Alice’s Adventures}, p. 49.
to turn into a pig, my dear … I’ll have nothing more to do with you.” At the March Hare’s tea party, Alice dashes cold water on the circular eternity of the tea table, after she gets a “bright idea”: “But what happens when you come to the beginning again?” The March Hare answers, “Suppose we change the subject.” There is no answer to Alice’s question, at least no rational one. But given the way that things never work in proper sequence in Wonderland, it is likely that, left to itself, the problem of the tea table would be resolved in one nonsensical away or another. But Alice is unable to let the nonsense alone.

Once Alice gains full control of her growth and is able to decide what her size will be in relation to the inhabitants of Wonderland, she is able to co-opt the idea of nonsense and rob it of its power. When she answers the Queen of Hearts pertly, the Queen orders, “Off with her head!” to which Alice responds, “‘Nonsense!’ … very loudly and decidedly,” and silences the Queen. Several layers of meaning are at work here. Carpenter’s definition of an absurd idea followed to its ultimate conclusion which must be annihilation is certainly present. To behead Alice would be to extinguish her. The idea of beheading a child is absurd, what I will call capital “N” Nonsense, especially in Wonderland which is created to protect a child. The timid King points this out, murmuring, “Consider, my dear: she is only a child!” The Queen has no response to this, since apparently even she must bow to the ultimate law of Wonderland—that Alice is not to be hurt. Alice’s pronouncement also falls under the second meaning of “nonsense,” which is its colloquial meaning. That is, when someone hears an idea that they do not like and wish to dismiss, they label it “nonsense.” Thus, Alice both identifies the queen’s order as Nonsense, and dismisses it as nonsense. As it turns out, she is right on both counts, since, as the Gryphon

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131 Ibid.
132 Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures*, p. 58.
133 Ibid.
134 Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures*, p. 64.
135 Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures*, p. 64.
reveals, “It’s all [the Queen’s] fancy that: they never executes nobody, you know.” For all of Wonderland’s bizarre incongruities, this is the first time that something in Wonderland has been not real. Throughout the book, Alice and her readers have been forced to deal with such absurd situations as a baby turning into a pig, a tea party where it is always four o’clock, and a cakes that make you change size. Although Alice sometimes gives up trying to cope with Wonderland’s Nonsense, as when she lets the transformed baby run away, she is never able to deny its presence or make it disappear. But when the queen’s orders for beheadings are unmasked as naked pretending, it is a sign that the world is buckling beneath Alice’s determination to be in charge and keep her identity fixed. Instead of Alice giving way to Wonderland, Wonderland gives way to her.

At the end, because of her continued resistance to Wonderland, Alice cannot help returning to her original, fixed identity. Without eating or drinking anything, “Alice felt a very curious sensation, which puzzled her a good deal until she made out what it was: she was beginning to grow larger again, and she thought at first she would get up and leave the court; but on second thoughts she decided to remain where she was as long as there was room for her.” There will not be room in Wonderland much longer. When the Dormouse complains of being crowded by her, Alice confesses, “I ca’n’t help it;” the Dormouse tells her, “You’ve no right to grow here,” and Alice again crushes him with the colloquial use of nonsense: “Don’t talk nonsense.” Despite the warning of her growth, Alice continues to demand sequence and impose her power on Wonderland and its creatures, until there will no longer be “room for her.” Her adventure concludes with one final blow to Nonsense from nonsense:

“No, no!” said the Queen. “Sentence first—verdict afterwards.”

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138 Ibid.
“Stuff and nonsense!” said Alice loudly. “The idea of having the sentence first!”

“Hold your tongue!” said the Queen, turning purple.

“I wo’n’t!” said Alice.

“Off with her head!” the Queen shouted at the top of her voice. Nobody moved.

“Who cares for you?” said Alice (she had grown to her full size by this time). “You’re nothing put a pack of cards!”

Once Alice denies the dual identity of the pack of cards, she must leave. Ultimately, Wonderland cannot keep Alice, or any other child, from growing up. Sooner or later, she is bound to figure out how to manipulate the metamorphosis and then insist upon resuming her own sequential development toward adulthood.

When Alice wakes up, she loses all of the authority she wielded in the Wonderland courtroom. Her older sister orders her, “run in to your tea,” and Alice immediately obeys, slipping effortlessly back into the routine of her ordinary world without a trace of the self-assertion she was allowed to practice in Wonderland. Leaving Wonderland erases any maturity she gained as a result of her experience there. She is, however, left with the creative skill of storytelling. In contrast to the narrative’s beginning, when she falls asleep from sheer boredom because her sister’s book has no “pictures or conversations” to entertain her, she can now tell her own “curious” story. The curiousness of Wonderland is what drew Alice on through her adventures—now that trait has become her own. Alice’s enhanced creative ability is not a threat to her child identity. Rather, it is a skill that will help her carry some part of her child

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140 Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures*, p. 98.
141 Ibid.
self into adulthood. Her sister imagines that “[Alice] would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood … she would gather about her other little children, and make their eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland.”\(^{142}\)

Kingsley and Carroll establish a journey that depends on changes to the child’s physical form to both encourage and repress mental, emotional, and moral change. Where Kingsley develops a recapitulative journey to restart his protagonist’s childhood and ensure the right kind of moral and spiritual development for adulthood, Carroll uses the fantastic journey to empower the child by granting her imaginative agency, while simultaneously attempting to preserve her essential child self. In the next chapter, I examine an author who puts the fantastic journey to a new use. Although, like Carroll, MacDonald relies upon an out of body experience to refine his protagonist’s essential child self, he does so not to retard Diamond’s progress in his ordinary world but to circumvent the long evolution of the soul, and give the child the spiritual power he needs to effect transformation in the real world.

\(^{142}\) Carroll, p. 99.
Chapter 2: George MacDonald Bypasses the Evolution of the Soul

In my first chapter, I locate the beginning of the trope of the fantastic journey with Kingsley and Carroll. These two authors created a new kind of story where a child from everyday Victorian England travels to a fantasy space; this journey allows the child to embody and prolong the author’s ideal of childhood. Kingsley built on a long tradition of didactic moral tales for children and narrates the journey of a child who must recover proper childhood in order to reach the right kind of adulthood, achieving this recovery and growth in a magical space apparently free of adult influence. Treading in the same track as Kingsley but breaking more thoroughly with tradition, Carroll begins with a child who is already the right kind of child in the right kind of childhood. Alice’s fantastic journey is not about restoration but preservation—her journey gives her the agency she needs to thrive and the protection she requires to remain the same, a child safe from adulthood. Carroll adopts Kingsley’s journey and makes it fantastic, but he strips it of its moral imperative and the accompanying growth.

MacDonald, the focus of this chapter, follows Carroll and rewrites the fantastic journey with a spiritual purpose. MacDonald, more explicitly than either of his predecessors, sees the child as a source of innocence, purity, and goodness—in short, the child is the reflection of God. The purpose of the fantastic journey in *At the Back of the North Wind*, the children’s novel which is my focus for this chapter, is to enable the child’s spiritual powers and then to halt the child’s change when he is at his most childlike—his most spiritually powerful. MacDonald’s journey is not an attempt to create changelessness through non-progressive motion. Instead, MacDonald’s goal is for his protagonist to embody the essence of childlikeness, to come to the fullness of his being, or to achieve what Aristotle calls “entelechy.” As Roderick McGillis explains, “Entelechy is, for MacDonald, reality. It is only that we have yet to fulfill that form towards which we are
For MacDonald, even the most childlike of children must undergo a process of deepening into themselves. If the process can be described as growth, it is an inward, not an outward or upward, direction. The purpose of the fantastic journey in MacDonald is not to change the child into something different, but to make him more himself, and to do so in a way that protects him from the sin and suffering of adult life that is a part of the entelechic journeys of MacDonald’s adult heroes in other works.

This spiritual understanding of children is made possible by MacDonald’s theology, which privileges children in a Romantic but distinctly Christian way. Like Kingsley, MacDonald uses the journey to explore a theological idea, but instead of the divinely directed evolution of the material world, MacDonald is interested in the evolution of the soul, and he uses the fantastic journey in *At the Back of the North Wind* to explore his own understanding of the nature of God and God’s relationship to the child. In order to contextualize MacDonald’s theological stance that led to his engagement with the trope of the fantastic journey, I would like very briefly to examine two other nineteenth-century thinkers, both of whom knew MacDonald and who confronted the same challenges to Christian faith. Ruskin and F. D. Maurice are only two examples of the intellectual and spiritual exploration of this time, and they are certainly not the only questioning intellectuals with whom MacDonald was in contact. But their two examples highlight an important direction of spiritual thinking that MacDonald participated in, and illustrate how MacDonald’s response to the quandaries of hell and materialism fits into the landscape of evolving nineteenth-century belief.

Ruskin was raised in a zealously Evangelical Anglican home, and as a young man he devoutly proclaimed and defended an Evangelical stance. However, as he grew older, his doubts

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about the historical truth of the Bible were fostered by scientific advancements. Wrestling with his doubt, he wrote to Henry Acland, “If only the Geologists would let me alone, I could do very well, but those dreadful Hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses.”\(^2\) The facts of the material life shook his faith in the spiritual one. He also experienced difficulties believing aspects of Evangelical doctrine, especially that of damnation. In 1858, he famously experienced a moment of “unconversion” in a chapel at Turin:

I was still in the bonds of my old Evangelical faith; and, in 1858, it was with me, Protestantism or nothing: the crisis of the whole turn of my thoughts being one Sunday morning, at Turin, when, from before Paul Veronese's Queen of Sheba, and under a quite overwhelmed sense of his God-given power, I went away to a Waldensian chapel, where a little squeaking idiot was preaching to an audience of seventeen old women and three louts, that they were the only children of God in Turin; and that all the people in Turin outside the chapel, and all the people in the world out of sight of Monte Viso, would be damned. I came out of the chapel, in sum of twenty years of thought, a conclusively un-converted man.\(^3\)

Although Ruskin did not go so far as atheism for another decade, after Turin he turned definitely away from the church and organized Christianity, pointing the doctrine of damnation as the cause. He found himself unable to believe that God would condemn any soul to an eternity of torment, particularly when the art in which Ruskin sensed so much “God-given power” was outside the tiny flock of the designated saved. When faced with the necessity of believing in


damnation or giving up the idea of life after death, he ultimately relinquished his own hope of eternity rather than insist on the necessity of hell.

Ruskin did return to the Christian faith later in his life, but it was not the Evangelical Anglicanism of his youth. Rather, he arrived at something that was much more like a Broad Church understanding of Christianity. While continuing to deny the historical accuracy of the Bible, he clung to the person of Jesus Christ as the embodiment of God’s love: “Christianity is the belief in, and love of, God thus manifested [in the Incarnation]. Anything less than this, the mere acceptance of the sayings of Christ, or assertion of any less than divine power in His Being, may be, for aught I know, enough for virtue, peace, and safety; but they do not make people Christians.”

F. D. Maurice, an influential nineteenth-century theologian, also rejected the popular doctrine of hell. But unlike Ruskin, he did not reject the church. Maurice believed in the essential goodness of humanity, and rather than putting an Evangelical emphasis on the salvation of the soul from eternal damnation, he taught that “true self-realization and human dignity depended on an acknowledging of a special relationship between man and God which already existed in some sense because God became man in Christ … in a sense all men were sons of God as [Christ] was, so all men were brothers in Christ.” Maurice’s emphasis is not on the life to come but on this world, which he viewed as the Kingdom of God: “If the new Jerusalem was to come about in the present world it must be through the complete realization of the universal fellowship among men already provided for in the fact of their universal brotherhood in the incarnate Christ. This process of realization … would involve more and more co-operation between man and man of an

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increasingly fraternal kind.”  

Maurice, a founding father of Christian Socialism, believed that the church’s job was not to expound dogma but to intervene in a real way in human suffering on earth. Since the kingdom of God existed on earth, then so too did eternal life, which Maurice understood as “knowing God … the quality of life which began the moment Christ was acknowledged within as friend and brother.”  

This quality of fraternal unity with God and man that begins on earth continues after death. Hell is the opposite of this—separation from Christ, but never eternal and never divinely inflicted torment. The potential for brotherhood with Christ remains open, and all may eventually enter in.

The question of hell troubled MacDonald just as much as it did Ruskin and Maurice. Like them, he could not see how a supposedly loving God could willfully damn human souls to an eternity of torment. But unlike Ruskin, whose doubts led him to turn his back on Christianity for a time, MacDonald remained convinced throughout his life that humanity’s hope for wholeness was in the person of Jesus Christ. Like both Maurice and the later Ruskin, MacDonald made Christ the sole center of his faith. He regarded the parts of Scripture outside the Gospels as inferior to the revelation of the Incarnation. But unlike Maurice, who saw the church as the instrument by which the kingdom of God would spread throughout the earth and the fraternal unity of humanity in Christ be completed, MacDonald turned inward. His focus was not on the work of the church but on the transformation of individual men and women: “he did not hold exactly the same socialist vision as Maurice, but advocated the priority of individual Christian responsibility in bringing hope and renewal to the needy over trying to effect change through legislation or organized societies.”

MacDonald’s turn inward may also have been a result of the

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6 Vance, p. 56.
7 Vance, p. 57.
spiritual confusion widely caused by the new science—rather than becoming convinced of the primacy of the material life to the exclusion of the spiritual one, as was Ruskin, MacDonald looked for evidence of God inward, in the spirit.9

MacDonald’s inward focus shaped his understanding of salvation and humanity’s relationship to God. Instead of accepting a doctrine of hell that declared damnation for the unsaved, MacDonald understood God to be so immanent that no soul could be entirely outside relationship with him. Thus, all souls are on a journey to God—their different stages on the journey only mean that it will take them more or less time to reach divine union, and even the devil will at last be saved. MacDonald’s understanding of salvation and redemption is clearly exemplified in his novel *Lilith*. The title character is a terrible witch who represents the chief servant of Satan (referred to as the Shadow). Despite her evil nature, she is at last persuaded to give up her own power and take her place in the house of the dead, where she sleeps for eons and dreams healing dreams that bring her soul toward God. However, so great has been the evil committed by Lilith and the Shadow, and so much have they distorted their souls from their true forms, that they must sleep longer than everyone else, as the first man, Adam, who has charge of the house of the dead, tells Lilith, “You and he will be the last to wake in the morning of the universe.”10 The farther a soul has gone from God, the longer it takes to get back again. The souls sleep for varying lengths of time, depending on their initial state of goodness, but for all of the characters there is an element of time required for the purification of the soul—there is no sudden metamorphosis.

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9 Jocelyne Slepyan argues that in MacDonald’s realist novel *Thomas Wingfold, Curate*, MacDonald directly answers materialist objections raised by Ruskin in an earlier correspondence between the two men, by depicting characters who find spiritual answers and security in their own hearts and spirits rather than in any outward evidence (“‘With All Sorts of Doubts I Am Familiar’: George MacDonald’s Literary Response to John Ruskin’s Struggles with Epistemology,” in *Rethinking George MacDonald: Contexts and Contemporaries*, ed. Christopher MacLachlan, John Patrick Pazdziora, and Ginger Stelle [Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2013], pp. 36-51).

In his sermon *The Child in the Midst*, MacDonald explains his belief in the process of the salvation of souls in almost Darwinian terms: “The God who is ever uttering himself in the changeful profusions of nature; who takes millions of years to form a soul that shall understand him and be blessed.” This is MacDonald’s own evolutionary theory, that a human soul could evolve from a low and selfish thing to a high and perfect one. As far as we know, MacDonald never took a public stance for or against Darwin. As a man educated in the sciences, he would certainly have been aware of the new evolutionary theory, but unlike Kingsley, he never directly engages it in his writing for children. Despite the absence of a formal position, MacDonald does sometimes use Darwinian imagery in his writing, and he seems to find it useful in thinking about soul development. Toward the end of *Lilith*, as Adam looks toward the end of time, he says, “Hark to the golden cock! Silent and motionless for millions of years has he stood on the clock of the universe; now at last he is flapping his wings! now will he begin to crow! and at intervals will men hear him until the dawn of the day eternal.” The phrase “millions of years,” also used in *The Child in the Midst*, is one clearly connected with evolutionary theory, as well as the popular geological writing of Charles Lyell. MacDonald evidently had no problem with imagining the universe as millions of years old, although he insisted, as did Kingsley, on that universe as a divinely directed one. As Manlove remarks, “If we recall that this was the time when Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859) was causing so much consternation, we will see how MacDonald’s story may be an attempt, like Kingsley’s, to refute the materialistic implications of Darwin’s theory—namely, that the universe is merely the physical setting for the working out of

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the natural laws of selection.”13 Where Ruskin found his faith buckling beneath the weight of the material evidence of the earth’s great age, MacDonald saw no reason why external laws should determine spiritual truths. Instead, like Carroll, he turned Darwin’s narrative to his own ends, transforming the Darwinian process of evolution into an analogy explaining the inevitability of each soul’s progress to God.

MacDonald believed that a soul’s distance from God determined the length of the journey necessary to return—thus, in MacDonald’s fictional universe, at least some children are exempt from the evolution of the soul. Children can draw close to God without a long process of development because they are already highly spiritual. MacDonald’s fantastic journey that grows a child into herself rather than out of herself into adulthood is rooted in his understanding of the close connection between the child and God. As William Gray explains, “MacDonald’s veneration of the child is not merely the expression of some generalized Romantic privileging of childhood; rather it is a specific theological point which he argues in his sermon “The Child in the Midst.””14 First published in MacDonald’s Unspoken Sermons in 1867, one year before At the Back of the North Wind began to be serialized, “The Child in the Midst” presents an unusual argument about the relationship between God and the child, but an argument that is central to MacDonald’s understanding of what it means for a soul to come to God. MacDonald begins with a scriptural text from the Gospel of Mark, which describes Christ showing a child to his disciples and saying, “Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me; and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me.”15 MacDonald’s primary point is that only those who are like children can enter the kingdom of heaven. If we must

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15 Mark 9:37 (KJV).
become like children to enter heaven, it follows that Jesus himself was like a child, and by extension, God. Those who follow the injunction in the opening Scripture, to “receive one of such children in my name,” thus “receive Jesus; to receive Jesus is to receive God; therefore to receive the child is to receive God himself,” and “God is represented in Jesus, for that God is like Jesus; Jesus is represented in the child, for that Jesus is like the child. Therefore God is represented in the child, for that he is like the child. God is child-like. In the true vision of this fact lies the receiving of God in the child.”

MacDonald ventures beyond the bounds of traditional orthodoxy here. It is one thing to assert that the qualities of the child—such as innocence and obedience—are divine. It is something else to assert that the qualities of God—such as justice and wisdom—are like the child. But MacDonald insists on that line of argument, going so far as to say, “[Christ] was a child, whatever more he might be. God is man, and infinitely more. Our Lord became flesh, but did not become man. He took on him the form of man: he was man already. And he was, is, and ever shall be divinely childlike. He could never have been a child if he would ever have ceased to be a child.”

MacDonald not only insists on the humanity of Christ, but he insists that his human nature does not post-date his divine nature—a position that does not align with the traditional Christian creeds. But the assertion is necessary for MacDonald’s absolute declaration of the divinity of the child, and his understanding of how we, through becoming more childlike, actually become more Christ-like.

MacDonald’s Ideal Child

MacDonald’s insistence on the inborn spiritual potency of the child is the basis for the way that he describes and defines the child through Diamond, the working-class protagonist of

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At the Back of the North Wind, and he uses the fantastic journey to awaken Diamond’s spiritual potential and to ensure that he remains uncorrupted. At the beginning of the book, Diamond has no tendency toward evil, and he does not do wrong things out of his own inclination (or because anyone else tells him to), but he is suggestible and ignorant. As Colin Manlove puts it, “there both is and is not a story of spiritual growth in the book. Diamond is the perfect innocent from the outset, and yet his innocence is also seen as inadequate, needing refinement.”

Unlike Kingsley’s Tom, another working class child whose innate purity has been spoiled by his impoverished and corrupted surroundings, Diamond is protected by loving parents who, though poor, provide him with a good home. MacDonald does not deny the vulnerability of the child to corruption—Diamond’s friend, the child street sweeper Nanny, has had her innocence and capacity for faith tainted by her impoverished circumstances. It is notable that when the fortunes of Diamond’s family fall, and they are forced to live in a place that is dirty and full of corruptive influences, Diamond has already passed through his fantastic journey and has learned to replace ignorant wavering with faith—he lives up to his name and becomes an incorruptible diamond.

MacDonald’s definition of the ideal child lies close to Kingsley’s, although MacDonald’s ideal is more complex than the child presented in The Water Babies. MacDonald’s child is also markedly different from Carroll’s. Where Carroll depicts the child in her innocence as being free from moral responsibilities, MacDonald suggests that Diamond, in all his native innocence, is called to serve a higher morality and to reform the suffering around him. Diamond does bear a marked similarity to the character of Ellie, the good little daughter of the squire in The Water Babies. Ellie is not required to begin her journey in the company of lower sea creatures, as is Tom. Nor does she need to learn basic lessons of morality. Ellie is already good and innocent—so much so that she is allowed to go “home on Sundays,” the book’s equivalent of paradise,

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18 Manlove, p. 66.
immediately. However, she is still required to achieve a higher morality and to teach others to do the same. But unlike Diamond, who becomes ever more spiritual through supernatural aid, Ellie has to settle down to daily work—she is commanded to become Tom’s teacher, a role she at first resists. But this task is necessary for her spiritual growth, since those who go home on Sundays “must go first where they do not like, and do what they do not like, and help somebody they do not like.”19 For Diamond, the work of reform in a London slum comes out of an instinctive desire to right wrongs, but Ellie has to overcome her initial reluctance—another symptom of how Kingsley’s journey fails to become fantastic and remains fundamentally about growth.

Diamond and Ellie’s respective goodness gives them both the privilege of entering a paradisiacal fantastic space, and these spaces strongly resemble each other, although Diamond’s fantastic journey to the country at the back of the north wind transforms him in a way that Ellie’s residence in her paradise does not. Both authors are very coy in their descriptions of these wonderful countries. Kingsley refers to his as “home on Sundays,” and says of it, “But what was the beautiful place like, and where was it? Ah! That is just what she could not say. And it is strange, but true, that no one can say; and that those who have been oftenest in it, or even nearest to it, can say least about it, and make people understand least what it is like.”20 Similarly, the narrator of North Wind explains why he cannot give much detail about the country at the back of the north wind: “why should not Diamond tell about the country at the back of the north wind, as well as about his adventures in getting there? Because, when he came back, he had forgotten a great deal, and what he did remember was very hard to tell.”21 Since MacDonald had, by this time, written his adult fantasy, Phantastes, which takes place in a very detailed fairyland that,

20 Kingsley, p. 176.
like the country at the back of the north wind, is a place of spiritual refinement, it is clear that MacDonald was not imaginatively troubled by the attempt to describe fantastic, mythical landscapes. Rather, he is completing the fantastic journey that Kingsley gestured toward—the country at the back of the north wind remains a mystery because it is a space of metamorphosis. The fantastic journey takes Diamond out of his ordinary world, where gaining knowledge and experience would necessarily give him worldly wisdom, and instead places him in a space of mystery. When Diamond leaves the country at the back of the north wind, he has somehow gained an otherworldly wisdom that enables him to live in a spiritually enlightened state and ease the suffering of people around him.

The text makes clear that Diamond’s metamorphosis in the country at the back of the north wind is possible because of his child nature. In a thinly disguised reference to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the narrator says, “The Italian, then, informs us that he had to enter that country through a fire so hot that he would have thrown himself into boiling glass to cool himself. This was not Diamond's experience, but then [Dante] … was an elderly man, and Diamond was a little boy, and so their experience must be a little different.”

Although Diamond also experiences a burning sensation as he passes into the country, it is a simple, purifying pain, nothing like the graphic punishments detailed in *Purgatorio*, and with no hint of sin about it. Diamond does not have to be cleansed of evil, but only of the little fears and weaknesses that are inherent in his childish ignorance—tiny flaws that are mysteriously replaced with wisdom and virtue in the country at the back of the north wind. The similarities between MacDonald’s and Kingsley’s accounts suggest that they are working in a new genre—one that eliminates the detail and pain of the adult journey through supernatural realms and replaces it with a gentle vagueness that veils the transformation of the child.

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22 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, pp. 107-8.
MacDonald’s insistence on spiritual potency as the most important part of his definition of the child allows the possibility of an important class distinction between Diamond and Ellie. While Kingsley locates corruption in the body of the working class child and redemption in the body of the upper class child, MacDonald does not portray Diamond’s working class status as in any way detracting from his value. Diamond’s low social position may even be an asset, since it puts him in proximity to the suffering he is supposed to reform. Despite their low state, Diamond’s parents are virtuous, and are not driven by their poverty to neglect or abuse of any kind. Their working class condition in no way detracts from their value, as it seems to do for Tom, whose essential childhood Kingsley uses as a tool to turn a working class boy into a productive citizen. In fact, in MacDonald, the class pendulum seems almost to swing the other way, and it is the upper classes who come in for censure. In the first chapter, for example, Diamond, not understanding why North Wind would want a window to watch him, suggests that she make a window into the biblically named Mr. Dyves’s bed instead. North Wind responds, “Nobody makes a window into an ash-pit.” Later in the book, Mr. Coleman, Diamond’s father’s employer, has his last ship sunk by North Wind because he is becoming crooked in his business methods and must be saved from the sin his wealth is tempting him into. Similarly, Mr. Evans, the fiancé of Miss Coleman, is saved by being shipwrecked and losing his fortune. The narrator explains, “Before [Evans] got home again, he had even begun to understand that no man can make haste to be rich without going against the will of God, in which case it is the one frightful thing to be successful.” MacDonald makes no assumption that wealth equals goodness, and in fact goes out of his way to suggest the contrary—that wealth often destroys goodness.

23 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 13.
24 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 228.
But neither does MacDonald suggest that poverty automatically ensures a pure soul. There are poor children in Diamond’s world whose natural purity has been corrupted by their surroundings. The most prominent example of this is Nanny, a young child forced to work as a street sweeper. Her harsh life and lack of love have threatened her childhood, as the narrator makes clear when he says, “She called [Diamond] a kid, but she was not really a month older than he was; only she had had to work for her bread, and that so soon makes people older.” Not every trace of Nanny’s essential childhood has been destroyed—she loves her abusive old granny, and she looks out for a crippled boy. However, what has been destroyed is Nanny’s sensitivity to the supernatural and her ability to perceive spiritual truth, a loss which for MacDonald is as serious as Tom’s bowling stones at horses’ legs was serious for Kingsley. When Diamond tries to explain the existence of North Wind to Nanny, she “wasn't such a flat as to believe all that bosh.” Later in the book, when Nanny is given a chance to embark on a spiritual adventure similar to Diamond’s, she is unable to complete it successfully. In a dream, she is taken to the moon, and asked to serve the moon lady, a figure bearing a strong resemblance to North Wind. However, Nanny disobediently interferes with the lady’s bees, causing the deaths of three of them, and is banished. When she wakes up, although she is heartbroken, she refuses to allow any reality to the dream:

“You wouldn't do it again—would you—if she were to take you back?” said Diamond.

“No. I don't think anything would ever make me do it again. But where's the good? I shall never have the chance.”

“I don't know that,” said Diamond.

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25 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, p. 51.
26 Ibid.
“You silly baby! It was only a dream,” said Nanny.

“I know that, Nanny, dear. But how can you tell you mayn't dream it again?”

“That's not a bit likely.”

“I don't know that,” said Diamond.

“You're always saying that,” said Nanny. “I don't like it.”27

Even though Nanny has learned her lesson and might be offered a second chance, she will not be able to take it because she cannot or will not believe in spiritual realities. Another sign of Nanny’s lost childhood is that she is not transformed by her dream journey to the moon, as Diamond is by his journey to the country at the back of the north wind. Whereas Diamond simply absorbs the wisdom he needs, Nanny must learn it through a painful process of error and consequence—a form of maturation. In order to learn, she must grow. It is too late for Nanny to regain her spiritual sensitivity, even when she is adopted by Diamond’s parents and completely removed from the harmful environment that tainted her. In fact, both Nanny and her companion Jim (who has also been rescued by Diamond) feel contempt for Diamond and take advantage of him. As the narrator notes, “They appeared to regard him as a mere toy, except when they found he could minister to the increase of their privileges or indulgences, when they made no scruple of using him—generally with success.”28

Both Kingsley and MacDonald see one purpose of children as delivering great good to their ordinary worlds, but unlike Kingsley, MacDonald does not think that children must grow up in order to be able to deliver this good, as when Tom grows up to become an engineer. Before his adulthood, Tom is only able to do good in the supernatural realm—such as when he travels to

27 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, p. 284.
28 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, pp. 317-8.
the outermost lands (the book’s version of hell) to rescue his old master, Mr. Grimes. In contrast, after Diamond has been refined by his journey to the back of the north wind, he returns to his ordinary world as a child and becomes a ministering angel to the slum in which he lives. The best example of this is the chapter “The Drunken Cabman,” where Diamond ministers to the miserable family who lives next door. It is a stereotypical scene from many Victorian temperance tracts: the father, having squandered his wages on liquor, comes home, hits his wife, and ignores his screaming baby. However, from that point on, MacDonald’s own peculiar theology takes over as the narrator puts the emphasis on the children and emphasizes them as powerful spiritual agents, not victims. Diamond begins by assuming that it is his job to help the cabman: “Diamond thought it time that somebody did something, and as himself was the only somebody at hand, he must go and see whether he could not do something.”

Instead of being corrupted, like Tom, by his proximity to suffering and bad behavior, Diamond instead views it as his job to influence his surroundings: “The little boy was just as much one of God's messengers as if he had been an angel with a flaming sword, going out to fight the devil.” Diamond is explicitly identified as doing God’s work by being a messenger or carrying God’s words—literally, as becomes evident later in the scene. Diamond’s divine status is again explicitly confirmed toward the end of the scene by the cabman: “I do somehow believe that wur a angel just gone. Did you see him, wife? He warn't wery big, and he hadn't got none o' them wingses, you know. It wur one o' them baby-angels you sees on the gravestones, you know.”

Once he enters the drunken cabman’s room, Diamond’s first move is to comfort the crying baby, an action that seems to have two motives. The first is that Diamond “knew he could

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29 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 165.
30 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 166.
31 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 170.
do something to make the baby happy.”\textsuperscript{32} The baby and Diamond are fellow children, and throughout the book Diamond is shown to be “knowing in babies.”\textsuperscript{33} In fact, Diamond does not interact with either the cabman or his wife, but only the baby, whose misery he soon successfully alleviates. The narrator applauds this choice of action by offering a hypothetical alternate course: “I have known people who would have begun to fight the devil in a very different and a very stupid way. They would have begun by scolding the idiotic cabman; and next they would make his wife angry by saying it must be her fault as well as his, and by leaving ill-bred though well-meant shabby little books for them to read, which they were sure to hate the sight of.”\textsuperscript{34} Here MacDonald cannot resist a little swipe at stereotyped Evangelical morality, pulling class into the argument by referring to “ill-bred … shabby … books,” which were probably paid for, if not actually delivered, by middle-class Victorians. Instead, effective temperance work is performed by a working class child who is probably not literate enough to read the “ill-bred … books.” Such adult efforts are dismissed as “stupid,” in favor of the beneficial effect of the presence of a spiritually pure child.

The second motive for Diamond’s focus on the baby is that, once comforted, the baby becomes a powerful ally. Diamond’s singing to the baby is the delivery of God’s message. His songs have been learned in the country at the back of the north wind and are clearly identified in the book as a kind of divine utterance, and they directly minister to the people in the room: “the baby was more than content with Diamond’s songs, and Diamond himself was so contented with what the songs were all about, that he did not care a bit about the songs themselves, if only baby liked them. But they did the cabman good as well as the baby and Diamond, for they put him to

\textsuperscript{32} MacDonald, \textit{At the Back of the North Wind}, p. 166.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} MacDonald, \textit{At the Back of the North Wind}, p. 167.
sleep, and the sleep was busy all the time it lasted, smoothing the wrinkles out of his temper.”

By attending to the baby, Diamond calms the angry cabman and gives him the physical rest that he needs.

Diamond’s sermon functions in much the same way. It is delivered to the baby instead of to the parents, so that the drunken cabman is put in the position of listening in rather than being preached at. It is also full of sympathy for the cabman, who is depicted as being the victim of dishonest public houses that adulterate the beer to make it more addictive. Diamond explains, “Daddy says when a man takes a drink, there's a thirsty devil creeps into his inside, because he knows he will always get enough there … But your daddy will drink the nasty stuff, poor man! I wish he wouldn't, for it makes mammy cross with him, and no wonder! and then when mammy's cross, he's crosser, and there's nobody in the house to take care of them but baby; and you do take care of them, baby—don't you, baby? I know you do. Babies always take care of their fathers and mothers—don't they, baby? That's what they come for—isn't it, baby?”

This moment when Diamond explicitly states the book’s point that children are meant to be ministering angels on earth is the most important in the whole scene. Instead of expecting the parents to take care of the baby, Diamond expects the baby to take care of the parents, and identifies the baby’s entire purpose in coming to earth as such. And, in fact, in this scene, the baby has done exactly that through his partnership with Diamond. The drunken cabman has received calming sleep and a sermon he can stomach through the mere presence of the two children who are interacting with each other.

This partnership between the children makes it possible for Diamond to initiate reform without having to deal with corruption and suffering in any way that might taint him. Diamond

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35 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 168.
37 Gray calls this inversion “an extreme version of Wordsworth’s line ‘The Child is father of the Man’” (p. 38).
does not touch the cabman but the baby, who is pure and innocent. He does not speak to the cabman, but only to the baby. His knowledge of the evil effects of drink comes not from personal experience but through the protective medium of “Daddy.” In fact, although MacDonald appears to be sending his pure child prophet into the dirty world, he in fact has him interact with that world only in ways that leave him untainted, even by association. The suffering persons that Diamond aids directly are children—namely the cabman’s baby and the street sweeper Nanny—vice-ridden adults are transformed by Diamond’s mere presence and do not require direct interaction. If Diamond does offer direct aid to an adult, it is an adult who has already been reformed spiritually and will offer no danger of corrupting Diamond. Diamond thus alleviates sin without being matured by it.

MacDonald goes a step further in his attempt to establish Diamond’s divine status and creates a direct link between Diamond and Christ. In one of the book’s poems that attempt to describe spiritual matters, Diamond reads a poem about Little Boy Blue, who must kill a snake: “The snake he neither would go nor come / So he hit him hard with the stick of his drum. / The snake fell down as if he were dead, / And Little Boy Blue set his foot on his head.” This overtly Christological image, which refers to the Messianic prophecy in Genesis that a descendent of Eve will crush the serpent’s head, is the strongest of several symbolic connections made between Diamond and Christ in the book. Diamond recognizes that he himself is like Little Boy Blue. Trying to explain to his mother that the poem holds truth and not just foolishness, he himself makes the connection between the snake in the poem and the snake in Genesis: “I suppose it was a young one of the same serpent that tempted Adam and Eve. Father was telling us about it last...

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38 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*. pp. 185-6.
39 Genesis 3:15 reads, “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (KJV).
Sunday, you remember.” He asserts, “That killing of the snake looks true. It's what I've got to do so often … When baby cries and won't be happy, and when father and you talk about your troubles, I mean.” Christ’s defeat of sin and death is explicitly compared to Diamond’s efforts to alleviate his community’s suffering and clinches Diamond’s identity as a divine figure by virtue of his childhood.

Another important part of MacDonald’s definition of the child in *At the Back of the North Wind* is the link between the child and nature. This connection is explored in Kingsley and Carroll, and, as I will show in my next chapter, Edith Nesbit. MacDonald plays with the traditional link between the child and nature in a way that is markedly different from these other authors, but that is important for understanding Nesbit, in particular. Kingsley sees nature as a redemptive force; Carroll portrays nature, shaped by the norms of civilized living, as a child’s proper imaginative habitat; and Nesbit depicts nature as the only place where a child can live out its true child nature without punishment. But for MacDonald, the retreat to nature signifies that the child’s earthly work is done. Diamond’s child nature is naturally suited to the country because the country is very close to being paradise. Diamond’s affinity with the country is made clear in a conversation with Nanny. Nanny objects,

“There ain't nothing in [the country] but the sun and moon, Diamond.”

“There's trees and flowers,” said Diamond.

“Well, they ain't no count,” returned Nanny.

“Ain't they? They're so beautiful, they make you happy to look at them.”

“That's because you're such a silly.”

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40 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 188.
41 Ibid.
Diamond smiled with a far-away look, as if he were gazing through clouds of green leaves and the vision contented him.42

Nanny, whose essential child self is irrecoverable, does not completely like the country and is terrified of such natural wonders as dragonflies and thunderstorms. In contrast, Diamond finds his natural perch in a tree, becoming a part of the landscape himself with little to disturb his spiritual reveries.

However, the retreat to the country is also the signal for the end of Diamond’s mission and his slow decline into death. Critical opinion about the cause of Diamond’s early death is mixed. All critics agree that for MacDonald, death is a portal to a very real higher plane of existence, and the most common view is that Diamond dies because he is, like any true Victorian good-child, too good to live. But McGillis argues that “[t]hrough Diamond MacDonald wishes to fit together two worlds: that behind North Wind and that of London. Diamond, for all his preternatural goodness remains a real child. He does not die because he is too good for the world; rather he dies because of his frailty, his susceptibility to illness.”43 In McGillis’s view, Diamond’s death seems to be a kind of failure—the breakdown of his physical body, not a necessity of his spiritual life. But my own reading falls much closer to that of Marilyn Pemberton, who argues that “each individual is at a different stage on the road to fulfillment,” an idea that is crucial to MacDonald’s understanding of humanity’s relationship to God.44 In this reading, Diamond’s death is a part of the pattern of his life, coming at the appropriate moment in his spiritual journey. I would argue that Diamond does not die simply because he is good, but

42 MacDonald, p. 308.
because his earthly work is done—having fulfilled his purpose, he is ready for the ultimate
spiritual transformation. Although he relates his story to the narrator and works as a page boy for
Mr. and Mrs. Raymond, his real work—reforming the world through love, which he learned how
to do in the country at the back of the north wind—is done. Everybody around him in the country
is so happy that there is no one left to reform. This is why that despite a very healthful
environment—plentiful food, clean air, time for play—Diamond wastes away. With his work
over, he cannot remain in idleness, lest he be corrupted through physical growth and lose the
high spiritual plane that he has attained. Instead, once he has lost practical opportunities to put
his spirituality to use, Diamond becomes increasingly spiritual, until his body can no longer hold
him. He achieves death and returns to God.\footnote{Diamond’s fate is foreshadowed by the drunken cabman who calls him, “one o’ them baby-angels you sees on the gravestones.” Angels and death are inseparable in this context.} For MacDonald, the country both is and is not the
optimal habitat for the child. On the one hand, the country suits a true child nature perfectly. On
the other hand, the child can only do its proper work of reform in the city, in the midst of danger
and corruption. This double dynamic will be reflected in Nesbit’s Psammead trilogy, where the
children are happiest in the country, but better able to be creative and have adventures in the city.

Finally, the sex and gender of children play a complicated role in this novel. On the one
hand, MacDonald seems to insist on the difference between the sexes at a fundamental level.
After Diamond’s baby sister is born, he sings her songs, just as he did to his baby brother, but
“she was a new baby and must have new songs; and besides, she was a sister-baby and not a
brother-baby, and of course would not like the same kind of songs.”\footnote{MacDonald, \textit{At the Back of the North Wind}, p. 287.} Diamond, the most
spiritually wise character in the book (aside from North Wind), perceives a fundamental
difference between girl and boy babies that makes a difference in the kind of nonsensical
spiritual nourishment they prefer. This idea is emphasized in a dream that Diamond has about a
group of little boys who are apparently unborn children, waiting for the right time to go to their families on earth. There is a similar group of girl baby angels, but the two groups are never allowed to mix. When Diamond asks about girls, the chief boy-angel replies, “I think I know what you mean. I've never seen any of them, of course; but I suppose that's the sort you mean. I'm told … that when we fall asleep, a troop of angels very like ourselves, only quite different, goes round to all the stars we have discovered, and discovers them after us … these other angels take them out one by one, and pass each round as we do, and breathe over it, and rub it with their white hands, which are softer than ours, because they don't do any pick-and-spaye work, and smile at it, and put it in again: and that is what keeps them from growing dark.”

Girls, in this narrative, have different work than boys, and are described as being both the same as and different from them. However, although MacDonald insists on gender difference even in children, gender seems to make relatively little difference to the actual characters in the story, other than in the external work that each does. Diamond may drive a cab while Nanny does housework, but even though Diamond’s dream indicates that girls are the spiritually sensitive ones, “softer,” it is Diamond and not Nanny who achieves spiritual enlightenment. The narrator confesses that, even though Diamond insists that the songs he sings to his sister are different than those for his brother, the narrator himself cannot tell the difference: “Where the difference in his songs lay, however, I do not pretend to be able to point out.”

According to the narrator, the difference between the genders is indefinable. Those with keen spiritual senses can detect it, but it is nothing that can be put into words.

Maria Nikolajeva goes so far as to argue that Diamond is actually androgynous, that his gender makes no real difference in the story: “If we, by way of mental exercise … change the

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47 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, pp. 222-3, emphasis mine.
48 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, pp. 313-4.
protagonist’s gender in *At the Back of the North Wind*, we will clearly see that no other major changes would be required. Perhaps some subtle erotic hint would be lost; yet the magnitude of … North Wind as the image of death surpasses her possible erotic attraction (unlike, one might add, the figure of Lilith). The story would, in other words, be viable with a female protagonist. In fact, Diamond is very much an androgynous figure, described as possessing many feminine traits.”

I agree with Nikolajeva’s assessment, and, in fact, if we compare Diamond’s experiences with the mystical female figure of North Wind to those of Princess Irene with the mystical female figure of her great-great-great grandmother in another of MacDonald’s fairytales, we find that the behaviors of both children and the kinds of actions required from them are very similar. For example, Diamond, in a scene I will discuss in more detail below, is abandoned on an upper level of a dark cathedral—he must trust that North Wind is waiting for him at the end of the dark path and walk forward in faith. Similarly, Irene must follow a magical ball of thread to get back to her Grandmother, trusting that she will get there in the end, even though the thread leads her through dangerous and frightening places. In each case, the opposite genders of the child protagonists make no difference in their relationship to the mystical female figure. This is not to say that gender does not matter in MacDonald’s books—North Wind’s beauty and maternity are inescapably female. Were she to change gender, it would impact the story in profound ways. But for the kind of ideal child identity that MacDonald is defining in *At the Back of the North Wind*, gender does not matter.

Diamond’s lack of a traditional, defined gender allows him to exhibit both traditional feminine and masculine traits. When Mr. Raymond, an author who moves Diamond’s family to

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the country, first meets Diamond, he asks the child what he can do, and Diamond’s responses illustrate his ambiguous gender. He can “Drive a cab,” a traditionally male activity, but he can also, “Nurse a baby … Clean father’s boots, and make him a bit of toast for his tea.” While boot cleaners may sometimes be masculine, nurses and home cooks are decidedly feminine. What all of these activities have in common is service to another person. Diamond’s activities are defined not by a traditional gender role, but by his spiritual calling to care for the world around him. Being “God’s baby,” as the cabbies name him, is a genderless calling.

MacDonald’s vision of child spirituality transcends labels of gender to a universal calling of self-sacrifice and service rendered in love. Although not all spiritual beings are genderless (I will discuss North Wind’s overt femininity in detail later), MacDonald’s essential child is not limited by traditional gender roles. Instead, the child is free to take up any task or role that alleviates suffering and shares love.

**Diamond’s Journeys**

Because Diamond’s child identity is deeply spiritual, each of his fantastic journeys focuses on enabling a different aspect of his spiritual agency or knowledge. After each journey with North Wind, Diamond becomes more Christ-like. The journeys can be divided into three categories. Those before Diamond’s travels to the country at the back of the north wind are brief, and each fosters in Diamond one or two specific traits such as obedience or courage. The journey to the country at the back of the north wind is longer and is the site of Diamond’s major metamorphosis, when he is fully empowered to bring spiritual hope to his ordinary world.

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51 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 174.
52 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 173.
Diamond’s last journeys are concerned with preparing him for his death, when he will be freed from his earthly body to live forever in the country at the back of the north wind.

Rather than experiencing a single, extended fantastic journey, as does Alice, Diamond has several of varying lengths, each of which contributes something different to his transformation. In total, he has eight encounters with North Wind that are narrated in the book—one failed journey, three successful journeys inside London, one journey to the country at the back of the north wind, two conversations with North Wind in the country, and the briefest of all, a final moment where Diamond merely sees North Wind but does not speak to her. Although some of these instances are merely conversations and not actual journeys, I include them because they are still dreamlike, out-of-body experiences.

Diamond’s first encounter with North Wind addresses his ignorance. Although Diamond is at first frightened when North Wind blows herself into his garret bedroom, once North Wind forces him to look at her, he immediately befriends and trusts her because she appears as a beautiful lady. When she asks him to accompany her out, reassuring his qualms about his mother not wanting him to go out without his clothes or shoes, he agrees. However, it becomes evident that Diamond’s judgment, despite his natural innocence, is unformed. He is ready to follow North Wind because she is beautiful, but North Wind explains to him that beauty and goodness do not always go together; nor do ugliness and evil. After a somewhat complicated explanation about appearances, North Wind asks Diamond whether he understands, and the young boy answers, “Quite well.”53 Instead of having to learn lessons about deceptive beauty in the school of mistakes and misjudgments as did the child protagonists of earlier moral tales, or even Kingsley’s Tom, Diamond absorbs the knowledge from a supernatural entity.

53 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, p. 19.
Diamond does have to learn some lessons through the traditional routes of action and consequence—however, each lesson is one that will enable his ultimate fantastic journey to the country at the back of the north wind. North Wind asks Diamond to accompany her on a trip, and he agrees. But he turns away from the obvious route out of his barn-loft room because it is full of North Wind’s hair and very dark. Instead he chooses a ladder which leads to a locked door, and when he remembers the way is shut, he dawdles and pets his father’s horse. By the time he makes it outside, North Wind is gone, and he has lost his chance of a journey with her. When Diamond meets North Wind the next time and complains that she left him all alone, she tells him, “Yes, but that was your fault … I had work to do; and, besides, a gentleman should never keep a lady waiting.” In this sentence, North Wind underscores Diamond’s fault—he was not prompt in obedience, which resulted in a lost opportunity to perform spiritual work, and in rudeness. North Wind’s words also address the issue of class status—Diamond is expected to be a gentleman, so true rank has nothing to do with birth or worldly standing. On his second visit with North Wind, Diamond proves that he has learned his lesson and amends his earlier fault: “springing out of bed, dressed himself as fast as ever he could. Then he crept out into the yard, through the door in the wall, and away.” Never again does Diamond do something else, even something as harmless as petting his beloved horse, instead of following North Wind. Now that he has learned to follow, his fantastic journeys, and their accompanying supernaturally imparted lessons, can begin.

Diamond’s first lesson has to do with trust. As he runs with North Wind, he suddenly realizes that she has turned into a wolf, and he lets go of her hand and loses her.

54 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, p. 34.
55 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, p. 36.
But once the first surge of his fear dies away, he recalls the lesson on appearance and goodness given to him during their first conversation, so he follows North Wind and finds her returning. She warns Diamond never to let go of her again because he may become lost for good. However, it becomes evident that this lesson only means letting go because of fear, not never letting go at all. During the second half of his second encounter, when North Wind is blowing the streets of London clean, Diamond spots a little ragged girl buffeted by the wind. Although he desires to help her, he at first hesitates because he is not certain that he can get home again if he leaves North Wind. But she promises that “it will be all right in the end.” Diamond chooses to leave her, and because he is acting in compassion on a spiritual mission of comfort, he makes it home by morning unharmed.

The lesson of trust is completed in the third encounter. North Wind takes Diamond to shelter in a cathedral while she continues out to sea to sink a ship. As they walk along a narrow gallery near the roof, Diamond grows afraid of the great height. But he is even more frightened when North Wind lets go of him:

“*Oh! oh! oh!*” he screamed the next moment, bent double with terror … in a moment more he would from very terror have fallen into the church, but suddenly there came a gentle breath of cool wind upon his face, and it kept blowing upon him in little puffs, and at every puff Diamond felt his faintness going away, and his fear with it. Courage was reviving in his little heart … a minute more Diamond was marching along the narrow ledge as fearless for the time as North Wind herself. He walked on and on … till at last all at once he found himself in the arms of North Wind … “Why did you leave me, dear North Wind?”

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56 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 46.
“Because I wanted you to walk alone … I couldn't hold a little coward to my heart. It would make me so cold!”

“But I wasn't brave of myself,” said Diamond, whom my older readers will have already discovered to be a true child in this, that he was given to metaphysics. “It was the wind that blew in my face that made me brave. Wasn't it now, North Wind?”

“Yes: I know that. You had to be taught what courage was. And you couldn't know what it was without feeling it: therefore it was given you.”

This episode highlights Diamond’s shortcomings. Despite his natural innocence and sheltered home, he is not a perfect child, and we see him learn in this scene. However, this learning does not occur through actual maturing or coming to grips with the sordid facts of life. This change in no way compromises Diamond’s innocence. Instead, it happens in a mystical, removed fashion. The setting of the dark, deserted cathedral is as removed as possible from the ordinary world without going to the country at the back of the north wind. Diamond’s only teacher is the mystical North Wind herself. Furthermore, Diamond learns by having courage given to him, not by actually having to brave hardship and suffering and thus mature through pain. Although he experiences a dramatic burst of fear and screams, this fear is almost immediately allayed by North Wind blowing in his face and giving him courage. He only continues into the darkness after courage has been given to him. Even though he faces truly dangerous situations later in the book, such as when he is set upon by London fishwives who try to rip his clothing off his body, he never experiences fear. He has had courage given to him, and is never in danger of feeling fear again.

57 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, pp. 79-81.
The fourth encounter with North Wind is the most significant because Diamond at last travels to the country at the back of the north wind. As he goes, it becomes apparent that the lessons he learned on previous journeys were necessary to prepare him for this one: obedience, courage, and trust are all needed before Diamond can reach his desired destination. We first hear of the country at the back of the north wind from the narrator, who begins the book by saying, “I have been asked to tell you about the back of the north wind. An old Greek writer mentions a people who lived there, and were so comfortable that they could not bear it any longer, and drowned themselves. My story is not the same as his. I do not think Herodotus had got the right account of the place. I am going to tell you how it fared with a boy who went there.”58 This opening line provides a nuanced introduction to the country at the back of the north wind. First, it clarifies that the back of the north wind is primarily a place (although it is later also described as North Wind’s back). Second, it introduces the concept negatively and mysteriously—we are told nothing about the place, except that it is not where people drown themselves. And third, it ranks the story in comparison to Herodotus: that is, the narrator implies that what he will have to tell will be more “right” than what was told by a famous classical historian.

We next hear of the country at the back of the north wind from a clergyman whom Diamond encounters in Mr. Coleman’s garden. Diamond is pitying a tree that has been blown down in the previous night’s storm, and the clergyman tells him that “if this tree had been [in the country at the back of the north wind] now, it would not have been blown down, for there is no wind there.”59 Diamond responds that if the tree had been safely up in the “Hyperborean regions” where the clergyman located the country, they would not have had to grieve for it, but “we

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58 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 7.
59 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 88.
shouldn't have had to be glad for it, either." This brief conversation reveals one of the major themes of the book—good people (or trees) must come away from the bliss of paradise in order to do good work on the earth. The service and suffering of good beings, such as children, brings about redemption.

The actual journey to the country at the back of the north wind proves to be more complicated than any of Diamond’s fantastic journeys thus far. Previously, North Wind has always been able to scoop him up in her arms or nest him in her hair and fly him to their destination. But in traveling due north, she loses her usual strength: “It is easy enough for me [to get there]. I have only to consent to be nobody, and there I am. I draw into myself and there I am on the doorstep. But you can easily see … that to drag you, you heavy thing, along with me, would take centuries.” The closer North Wind gets to her own source, the weaker she becomes. This is a curious play on North Wind’s dual identity as the personality North Wind and the natural force of the north wind. If one stands on the northernmost tip of the globe, there cannot be any north wind, but the scene also refers to MacDonald’s use of wind as a symbol for conflict—the right kind of adversity that refines people’s characters and brings out their virtues. North Wind is often responsible for using her own particular nature to create this kind of conflict, such as when she blows up a storm to sink Mr. Evans’s ship and save him from corruption and greed. But when North Wind is at home, she is at peace, allowed to rest from her work of purifying the world. To accommodate her lack of strength, she hides Diamond in the hold of a vessel that is sailing North. When they have sailed as far north as the boat is able to go, Diamond must walk, until they arrive at the northernmost point on the globe. There North Wind sits on her doorstep, looking so frozen than Diamond thinks she is dead. North Wind tells him

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60 Ibid.
61 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 97.
that in order to reach the country at her back, he will have to walk through her, as though she
herself is a door. Diamond protests,

“But that will hurt you.”

“Not in the least. It will hurt you, though.”

“I don't mind that, if you tell me to do it.”

“Do it,” said North Wind.

Diamond walked towards her instantly.62

Diamond has learned courage and swift obedience, as well as how to go forward on his own,
without North Wind holding his hand. Once commanded, he walks through North Wind without
hesitation, leaving her behind and enduring a pain that causes him to faint. When he wakes, he is
in the country at the back of the north wind, which, it becomes apparent, is a kind of paradise
that is a little short of heaven.

Diamond himself does not give a very coherent description of the country. He offers only
several disjointed lines of recollection in answer to the narrator’s direct questions, and a few
important features of the country emerge. The first is that this place is not actually heaven but
rather a form of purgatory. It is not a place of purification through suffering in the traditional
Roman Catholic sense, but rather a place of waiting: “Nothing went wrong at the back of the
north wind. Neither was anything quite right, [Diamond] thought. Only everything was going to
be right some day.”63 Also, the people there are “waiting to be gladder some day.”64 Next, the
major theme of the book that good things must serve and suffer on earth in order to bring
redemption is brought up again. Diamond says that there is no wind in the country at the back of

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62 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, pp. 105-6.
63 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, p. 110.
64 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, p. 111.
the north wind, and the narrator speculates, “I fancy he missed it. At all events we could not do without wind. It all depends on how big our lungs are whether the wind is too strong for us or not.” When we consider the things that wind, namely North Wind, does in the book, it becomes apparent that wind is a metaphor for forces of good at work in the world. However, as North Wind exemplifies, these forces are strong and sometimes terrible, and we must have “big lungs” in order to be swept up with them. Diamond misses the wind because he is in purgatory. That is, he is being made perfect for the work that he still has to do, and is not currently caught up in that work.

Another thing that Diamond learns in the country at the back of the north wind is that externals matter very little. The people there are so tuned to each other’s spirits that they need only look at each other to communicate. Diamond also has a difficult time describing the physical characteristics of the country because “You never think about such things there.” Externals such as heat or cold or rain are completely unimportant in this country. What matter are the things of the spirit.

The final important point about this country is that once in it, you never really leave. When Diamond is asked whether he would like to go back to this country, he replies, “I don't think I have left it; I feel it here, somewhere.” This change is Diamond’s metamorphosis—the last barrier between his consciousness and his divine nature is removed. Filled with mysterious spiritual knowledge, he can now provide help and redemption to the suffering people around him. The metamorphosis that is occurring in Diamond is never mentioned. His time in the country is passively spent and vaguely described. The only definite description he gives is of the river, which Diamond describes as “if it did not sing tunes in people's ears, it sung tunes in their

65 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 110.
66 Ibid.
67 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 111.
heads.” 68 The river song is connected to the one piece of evidence that Diamond brings back from the mysterious country. The narrator explains, “in proof … I may mention that, in the troubles which followed, Diamond was often heard singing; and when asked what he was singing, would answer, ‘One of the tunes the river at the back of the north wind sung.’” 69 It is one of these songs that Diamond to the drunken’s cabman’s baby. His mysterious metamorphosis, which somehow includes the river’s songs, prepares Diamond to minister the ordinary world.

After North Wind takes Diamond back home, he does not see her again until he is ready to prepare for his final transformation—death. Once his family’s earthly trials have been successfully passed, and they have moved from London to a comfortable place in the countryside, Diamond has his last two encounters with North Wind, in his tower bedroom that is “near the stars, and yet not far from the tops of the trees,” that is, the home of the wind. 70 Now that Diamond’s work of alleviating earthly misery is done, he must learn a final lesson about faith and doubt before he can die. As McGillis puts it, “Diamond, like Nicodemus, is a doubter; he needs to learn how to understand that living in doubts and uncertainties need not mean living without hope and faith.” 71 When North Wind at last reappears, Diamond begs her, “I am so happy that I'm afraid it's a dream. How am I to know that it's not a dream?” 72 He goes on to explain that his fear is not that he will lose the pleasure of her presence but that North Wind will lose her identity: “it's for you, North Wind; I can't bear to find it a dream, because then I should lose you. You would be nobody then, and I could not bear that. You ain't a dream, are you, dear

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68 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 109.
69 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, pp. 109-10.
70 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 313.
72 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 329.
North Wind? Do say *No*, else I shall cry, and come awake, and you'll be gone for ever.”  

It is not what North Wind gives him that Diamond loves, but North Wind herself. His mourning of her loss for her own sake is a sign of high spiritual maturity. He has gone past the utilitarian effects of his change under North Wind’s guidance—important as those were—and now is on a plane of pure love, where the great fear is that the object of the love might not turn out to be real.

North Wind’s first response is appropriately enigmatic and classically theological: “I'm either not a dream, or there's something better that's not a dream, Diamond.”  

This kind of thinking—that spiritual reality must be greater than anything that can be imagined by humanity—has existed in Christian thinking for centuries. Known as the ontological argument, it was formally presented in the tenth century by Anselm: God is the greatest thing that can be thought; if you can think of something greater than your current idea of God, then that greater idea is the true God. But North Wind’s words here are not about debating the existence of God. Instead they are a gentle reminder for MacDonald’s readers, for whom North Wind really is just a figment of imagination. North Wind may be a work of fiction, but, MacDonald reassures his audience, there is something better that is not a dream, and that is Christ.

North Wind’s second answer is more concrete and ties into MacDonald’s personal theology about the supremacy of love: “I think … that if I were only a dream, you would not have been able to love me so … You might have loved me in a dream, dreamily, and forgotten me when you woke, I daresay, but not loved me like a real being as you love me.” For MacDonald, love is a sign of realness. Once Diamond is convinced of North Wind’s reality through his own love, he is ready to be led toward the final revelation. North Wind tells him,

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73 Ibid.
74 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, pp. 329-30.
76 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 333.
“People call me by dreadful names … Bad Fortune, sometimes Evil Chance, sometimes Ruin; and they have another name for me which they think the most dreadful of all.”

Although North Wind refuses to say the name, she does tell Diamond that he nearly knew the name when he passed through her to the country at her back. Readers, who remember that all the time Diamond was in that country he lay on the verge of death back home, know that the terrible name is death.

North Wind then tells Diamond that he has not been to the true country at her back. Instead, he has only seen its “picture.” Given Diamond’s sense of the incompleteness of the country that he visited—that things were not right, but that the people there were waiting for things to be made right, then the real country must be the fulfillment of that expectant one. North Wind tells Diamond, “You shall see it one day—perhaps before very long.” Since Diamond has worked to bring about the fulfillment of the country at the back of the north wind, he can now go to that fulfillment. But even this explanation from North Wind is not perfect knowledge. When Diamond says that he “can’t feel quite sure yet,” North Wind responds, “You must wait a while for that. Meantime you may be hopeful, and content not to be quite sure.” Diamond must learn to be content with the uncertainty of his knowledge about his own death.

In Diamond’s last recorded conversation with North Wind, he loses his connection with the ordinary world. North Wind takes him to visit his old home above the stable, but Diamond does not like what he sees: “I find I don't care about it.” When North Wind asks whether he has had enough of his old home, he answers, “Yes, more than enough. It isn't a home at all now.”

Although the overt text here is about how a place loses its appeal when the people one loves have

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77 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, pp. 333-4.
78 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, p. 335.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, p. 342.
82 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, p. 343.
left it, the subtext, which is emphasized by the fact that these are Diamond’s last words with North Wind, is that the ordinary world is no longer Diamond’s home. It is time for him to go the country at the back of the north wind.

The last recorded interaction between Diamond and North Wind announces Diamond’s death as imminent. Diamond wakes and sees North Wind sitting in his room, watching him. But she is not the warmly gracious lady he loves most. Instead, “she was against the door into the big room, sitting just as I saw her sit on her own doorstep, as white as snow, and her eyes as blue as the heart of an iceberg. She looked at me, but never moved or spoke.” North Wind assumes her “doorstep” aspect in preparation for taking on her “most dreadful” name. This time, when Diamond passes through, the country he goes to will not be a temporary “picture.” But Diamond remains unafraid, as he tells the narrator.

Shortly after this, Diamond physically dies. The reader is not permitted to witness his death. Rather, we learn through the narrator’s perspective that Diamond has died, although the mistress of the house who delivers the news cannot bring herself to say the word. It is left to the narrator to utter North Wind’s “most dreadful” name, but it does not seem so dreadful to him: “A lovely figure, as white and almost as clear as alabaster, was lying on the bed. I saw at once how it was. They thought he was dead. I knew that he had gone to the back of the north wind.” The narrator, who is clearly identified as MacDonald himself, understands that death is not an ending but a journey. Diamond has departed on the ultimate journey, one from which he will not return, and he leaves his body behind him. For MacDonald, death is the ultimate transformation. Once Diamond has completed his earthly work of redemption, he has no further need of his body and can be liberated from it, metamorphosed into an entirely spiritual being.

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83 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 345.
84 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 346.
Although Diamond’s journeys are eventually revealed as fantastic, he at first seems to be journeying literally in both time and body. Unlike Carroll, who tips off canny readers at the very beginning that Alice is dreaming, by remarking that she is growing sleepy, and then pulls the curtain away from her sleeping body in a big reveal at the end of the story, MacDonald seems to give many indications that Diamond is actually leaving his bed. It is not until the journey to the country at the back of the north wind that we learn that Diamond has not been physically missing from his home, but instead lying in bed deathly ill—a moment similar to Carroll’s reveal, but which takes place halfway through the book instead of at the end. Indeed, there are some places in the book where it seems as if Diamond must have physically traveled.

Diamond actually does leave his bed after his first encounter with North Wind, when he delays in following her out of the stable and then loses her. The neighbors find him wandering on the lawn, and his mother, worried about him, “watched him very carefully—going into the loft several times a night—as often, in fact, as she woke. Every time she found him fast asleep.”

Diamond’s mother and the woman who finds Diamond wandering on the lawn assume he has been sleepwalking. Even Diamond believes this answer: “Crump said the poor child had walked out in his sleep, and Diamond thought she ought to know, and did not contradict her: for anything he knew, it might be so indeed.” At this point, Diamond is unconcerned by whether or not he has been sleepwalking and whether or not North Wind was merely a dream.

Another occasion on which it seems that Diamond must have really left his bed is when he gets down off North Wind’s back to help Nanny, the sweeper girl being blown through the streets by the storm. On the one hand, Diamond gets back to his own bed without his mother finding out, which means there are no adult witnesses to his journey. On the other hand, he

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85 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 31.
86 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 28.
interacts with Nanny in a corporeal way, and she later remembers him. Another curious moment is when Diamond is traveling north and North Wind, too weak to carry him, smuggles him in the hold of a ship. If Diamond is only a spirit, why does he need a ship to carry him? But while he needs transportation, he does not need food over the course of the several days’ journey, which suggests his body is somehow in abeyance. However, at the end of this journey, we are given the witness of Diamond’s mother, an adult, who testifies that Diamond lay ill in bed the length of his absence. This moment is one of astonishment and confusion to the reader, who up to this point has been led to believe—and been given evidence—that Diamond has been literally traveling with North Wind.

MacDonald gains two thematic advantages from this ambiguity. The first has to do with his own strong religious belief and his desire to create fantasy that was an allegorical representation of his spiritual realities. By throwing the reader and Diamond into doubt about whether North Wind is real or a dream, MacDonald is able to make the reader and Diamond’s experience with the story reflective of the nature of faith. Faith requires a belief in the reality of what is unseen. When our and Diamond’s perception of North Wind is forced to change—when we are forced to acknowledge that she may be a vision—MacDonald is then able, as I discussed in my reading of Diamond and North Wind’s final conversation, to assert the reality of the vision. A presence in the spiritual world is no less capable of loving or being loved than a presence in the material world. Thus, North Wind’s corporeal existence is immaterial. I strongly disagree with Manlove, who suggests that both faith and doubt are equal probabilities in the narrative: “we are left with the conflicting sensation that Diamond both travels and does not, both has what is literally a bosom friend and remains alone; for both readings are given equal validity … At the end of the story we are left with two realities, a mentally unbalanced child who
has died, and a child who has gone to the back of the north wind.”

We are not left with two equally valid readings, but rather two perspectives—that of people blind to spiritual realities and that of people with their eyes open to them. There is no question about which perspective MacDonald designates as the true one, and the narrator makes this certain with his closing line, uttered as he gazes down at Diamond’s dead body: “I knew that he had gone to the back of the north wind.”

MacDonald’s second thematic advantage, of more concern to me in this chapter, is connected to the purpose of the fantastic journey to preserve the essential child. The rapid transformation that Diamond undergoes from ignorant to spiritually wise is distinctly different from the changes that happen to the protagonists of MacDonald’s fantasies for adults, *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, which are both also stories of achieving a higher spiritual plane. The hero of *Phantastes*, whose revealing subtitle is *A Faerie Romance for Men and Women*, is a fallen adult, whose cowardice and arrogance lead him into grave sins of selfishness. As he wanders through fairyland, he suffers deeply from shame because of this sin. He is purified by suffering and released from sin only when he can summon the courage to perform right actions in spite of the sacrifice they will cost him—ultimately, his expulsion from fairyland back to the ordinary world. When he returns home with his new spiritual maturity, he has been missing for twenty-one days, absent in body as well as in spirit. Whether or not MacDonald was consciously influenced by Darwin in his belief that God might take “millions of years to form a soul,” Diamond’s journey stands in stark contrast to this corporeal journey in *Phantastes* and the ages-long sleep depicted in *Lilith*. Diamond requires no long evolutionary process. Nor does he need to consciously endure pain in order to gain spiritual maturity. He can achieve such things through simple

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87 Manlove, p. 64.  
89 MacDonald, *Phantastes*, p. 320.
contact with the divine—a short delirium of illness followed by an awakening to spiritual wisdom.

As I discussed earlier, one of the most visible and significant forms that Diamond’s new wisdom takes is nonsense, which plays a hugely important role in *At the Back of the North Wind*. Nonsense becomes a way for Diamond to speak divine truth in an intuitive way without undergoing any formal training or using complex language that would age him. MacDonald believed that the sound of words, perhaps even more than their sense, was capable of conveying a spiritual meaning. William Raeper explains: “It is as though MacDonald had taken Wordsworth’s edict of ‘spontaneous overflow’ too literally and uncritically deluged the reader with wanton doggerel … [but] even here there is a theological device at play. The babbling is deliberate, a babbling from the source of life, from the source of language itself and this locates truth as close to the childlike and holy.”

Therefore, one of the main things that Diamond learns in the country at the back of the north wind is how to create holy nonsense—words that sound nonsensical to people’s ears but that do their spirits good, or “mystically and intuitively … change hearts.”

Diamond comes back from the country at the back of the north wind with a half remembered repertoire of songs: “Diamond was often heard singing; and when asked what he was singing, would answer, ‘One of the tunes the river at the back of the north wind sung.’” These songs become a repeated theme throughout the plot, and in each instance they bring spiritual enrichment of some kind. MacDonald’s use of the songs stands in contrast to Carroll’s use of nonsense poetry, which tears apart the established order to keep Alice young. Although both Alice and Diamond achieve creative power through the making up of nonsense, Alice’s

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91 Ibid.
power is directed into perpetuating Wonderland and preserving her own childhood, while Diamond’s songs give him spiritual insight that helps him minister to his community.  

Diamond’s understanding of holy nonsense is a part of his new spiritual insight that he gains through metamorphosis in the country at the back of the north wind. While Diamond is convalescing after his fantastic journey, his mother takes him to the beach, and North Wind leads him to a book half buried in the sand. Diamond’s mother has just been explaining to him that his father has lost his job and they may starve. Diamond, with his childlike simplicity that is also wisdom, asks in confusion whether there is not food in their picnic basket, thus fulfilling Christ’s injunction in the Gospels to “Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat.” Diamond is able to exist in the present without worrying about the future. Concerning himself with tomorrow would indicate an awareness of the passage of time that would threaten his child status by making him aware of his own potential for progress. Instead, Diamond lives in faith, as though his future does not exist, a faith he gains in the country at the back of the north wind: “The fact was he had lived so long without any food at all at the back of the north wind, that he knew quite well that food was not essential to existence; that in fact, under certain circumstances, people could live without it well enough.” It is after this display of holy wisdom that he sees the pages of the book fluttering in the breeze. His mother fetches the book, which she at first believes to be full of nursery rhymes. Diamond asks her to read to him and she agrees, but she stops almost as soon as she begins reading, declaring, “But this is such nonsense! … I will try to find a better one.” However, the wind, like the breath of the Holy Spirit exuding sacred words, keeps

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92 For a full discussion of the relationship between MacDonald and Carroll’s nonsense verse, see Melody Green, “Death and Nonsense in the Poetry of George MacDonald’s At the Back of the North Wind and Lewis Carroll’s Alice Books,” North Wind, a Journal of George MacDonald Criticism 30 (2011): 38-49.
93 Matthew 6:25 (KJV).
94 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, p. 129.
95 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, p. 130.
blowing the pages back to the same verses, so at last the mother gives in and reads the poem she found so nonsensical, never suspecting that Diamond “might understand it, although she could not.” The verses describe swallows, lambs, and flowers as they joyfully exist in nature. The doggerel runs on for several pages in a similar vein, concluding,

for the wind that blows

is the life of the river

flowing for ever

that washes the grasses

still as it passes

and feeds the daisies

the little white praises

and buttercups bonny

so golden and sunny

with butter and honey

that whiten the sheep

awake or asleep

that nibble and bite

and grow whiter than white

and merry and quiet

on the sweet diet

fed by the river

and tossed for ever

by the wind that tosses

\[96\] Ibid.
the swallow that crosses
over the shallows
dipping his wings
to gather the water
and bake the cake
that the wind shall make
as hard as a bone
as dry as a stone
it's all in the wind
that blows from behind
and all in the river
that flows for ever
and all in the grasses
and the white daisies
and the merry sheep
awake or asleep
and the happy swallows
skimming the shallows
and it's all in the wind
that blows from behind

MacDonald’s skill is a little behind his ambition, and by the end of several pages of this, the reader may be feeling as exasperated as Diamond’s mother, who abruptly stops reading and

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97 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*. pp. 135-6. The poem has no punctuation, so the words flow unbroken like a brook’s babbling.
exclaims, “It's such nonsense! … I believe it would go on for ever.” However, Diamond recognizes the poem as being very similar to the tune sung by the river at the back of the north wind and declares that the river did go on forever, frightening his mother who thinks he is delirious. The river is an allusion to the river in Revelation, the “pure river of water of life … proceeding out of the throne of God,” that grants eternal life to the saints in heaven. Water is also symbolic of the Holy Spirit. Unlike Carroll, whose nonsense is usually a clever parody or mathematical riddle, lampooning and querying the things of the ordinary world, the point of MacDonald’s nonsense is to evoke a particular emotional feel, in this case one of quiet, contented wellbeing that goes on forever—a feeling of heaven.

Music acts as a sacred source of inspiration and truth for North Wind as well as for Diamond. When Diamond asks her how she can bear to sink the ship, knowing how much misery it will cause, she responds, “I will tell you how I am able to bear it, Diamond: I am always hearing, through every noise, through all the noise I am making myself even, the sound of a far-off song. I do not exactly know where it is, or what it means; and I don't hear much of it, only the odour of its music, as it were, flitting across the great billows of the ocean outside this air in which I make such a storm; but what I do hear is quite enough to make me able to bear the cry from the drowning ship … Somehow, I can't say how, it tells me that all is right; that it is coming to swallow up all cries.” North Wind, herself only a servant of the divine power, is guided by a song she does not know, but whose sound comforts her. The song represents the final coming of God’s goodness and justice to the world, when all the wrong things will be made right. However, because we cannot know when or how this will happen, we can only hear it as nonsense or music to be understood with the spirit rather than with the mind.

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98 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, p. 136.
99 Revelation 22:1 (KJV).
100 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, p. 75-6.
Resisting Growth in the Illustrations

Although Diamond’s fantastic journeys allow him to develop spiritually without any potentially harmful worldly experience, they cannot stop him from growing in the ordinary world; a deep desire to prevent this physical growth is apparent in the text’s illustrations. At the Back of the North Wind faces more complicated problems of growth than those presented in the previous texts I have discussed. Diamond spends far more time in the ordinary world over the course of the narrative than do Tom or Alice, and, as Pemberton notes, “For MacDonald … there is no turning back time: time may go fast or it may go slowly and it may even seem to stop, but it does move ever onwards.” Since, for MacDonald, time doesn’t stop even in the country at the back of the north wind (Diamond’s out-of-body experience there lasts for seven days), Diamond undergoes a pattern of growth and retardation throughout the text to keep him from moving dangerously close to adulthood. On the one hand, his fantastic journeys preserve his essential childhood while on the other, the relentless progression of time in the ordinary world forces Diamond to become more like a man, both in body and activities. The illustrations Arthur Hughes created for MacDonald’s original text make this pattern actually visible. By repeatedly showing Diamond as small, frail, and weak; by illustrating moments when Diamond is being cared for by some older person; and by disguising the size of Diamond’s body even when the text indicates that time is passing and he should be growing, the illustrations work to keep Diamond young.

MacDonald and the Pre-Raphaelite disciple Hughes had already been collaborating for several years by the time they produced At the Back of the North Wind. Although Hughes aspired to the Royal Academy and saw his illustrations for children’s stories merely as a way to support

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101 Pemberton, p. 47.
his serious art, his critics generally agreed that his best work was not in his paintings, which were generally viewed as insipid or marred by poor draftsmanship, but in his illustrations, which were hailed as delightful and original. Today, his illustrations for MacDonald’s stories, especially *At the Back of the North Wind*, remain his best known work. That he understood the story’s stakes in terms of childhood is eminently clear from his engravings, and this perhaps accounts for the often expressed belief that the illustrations were largely responsible for the book’s success. As Carolyn Hares-Stryker puts it, “MacDonald could throw shadows of the sacred, but Hughes could make that mysticism visible. Their marriage of truth (allegory) and vision (art) was magical.”

At the beginning of the story, Diamond is quite a young boy, and his youth is emphasized by the illustrations. The first illustration shows him standing on the hayloft stairs, looking down at Diamond-the-horse. Diamond-the-boy’s small figure looks to be hardly taller than the horse’s neck, emphasizing the boy’s smallness. The content of the next illustration emphasizes Diamond’s essential child character. He is depicted in a moment of play, crouched beneath a broken chair that he has covered with a blanket to make a cave. His mother hovers in the background, her maternal presence indicating that Diamond is guarded and cared for. The third illustration for chapter one shows Diamond leaning against the stable wall as he listens to North Wind. He kneels on his little bed, clad in his sexless nightdress—again his small size and tender years are emphasized. The final illustration for the chapter shows Diamond confronted

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103 Hares-Stryker, p. 94.
104 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 8.
105 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 11.
106 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 12.
107 Hughes takes advantage of the fact that boys and girls were dressed the same in the early years of childhood. Robson points out that no gendered dress distinction was made between boys and girls until the age of six or seven:
by the swirling mass of North Wind’s hair, with her pale face peeping out of it (Fig. 1). Small, young, sexless, and scared—Diamond’s appearance in this illustration emphasizes his childish vulnerability. The illustrations for chapter two continue the trend established in chapter one, with illustrations of Diamond being dwarfed by his father’s horse (fig. 2), Diamond vulnerable and alone in his nightdress in the dark, and Diamond being comforted by adult women. Chapter three holds another illustration of Diamond at play, as he drives the broken chairs he imagines are horses. There are also two pictures of Diamond looking very small as North Wind holds his hand.

But the first illustration for chapter four not only emphasizes Diamond’s youth but actually presents him as younger than he really is. As the text explains, North Wind makes a nest for Diamond in her hair, and the illustration focuses upon this image (Fig. 3). Only the top half of North Wind’s body is visible, and that, with the exception of her face and one bare arm, is covered by her streaming hair. In the midst of the mass of hair behind her, Diamond curls in a fetal position, as if he has returned to the womb. His entire body is barely as large as North Wind’s head. This image of Diamond as infant is one that will appear again at the story’s close, as Diamond prepares for death.

The rest of the illustrations in chapter four show that Diamond is small and frail even when compared to another child. Nanny, the young street sweeper whom Diamond befriends, gets her own picture. Her youth and smallness are emphasized as she bends double against the wind, shorter than the broom she drags. The wind blows through the tatters in her clothing

“large numbers of Victorian photographs of scowling boys in short frocks exist to remind us that brothers and sisters used to be [dressed the same]” (Men in Wonderland, p. 4).

106 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, p. 16.
107 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, pp. 21, 24, 26, and 27.
108 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, p. 32.
109 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, pp. 37 and 39.
110 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, p. 42.
111 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, p. 45.
revealing glimpses of her sexless body. However, although Nanny’s smallness and youth are emphasized here, the last illustration in the chapter shows that she is still larger and older than Diamond.\textsuperscript{114} The two children crouch in a barrel, and Nanny, clearly the larger despite her malnourishment and the fact that she is not significantly older than Diamond, puts her arm comfortingly around his shoulders (Fig. 4). Although Diamond left North Wind’s back in order to help Nanny, in the illustrations, it is she who takes care of him, mothering him like North Wind and his own mother.

Chapter six particularly emphasizes Diamond’s bodily smallness, with three illustrations that show Diamond next to North Wind as a giantess. In the first, she pulls him through a hole in the roof of the stable; in the second, he clings to her foot; and in the third, she cradles him in one arm against her enormous breast, again forcing the reader/viewer to understand that North Wind is a mother and Diamond is her infant.\textsuperscript{115}

As Diamond increases in spiritual maturity, his image in the illustrations remains immature. In the country at the back of the north wind, we are Diamond walking barefoot and in his nightdress across a Romantically sublime landscape, with a towering mountain in the background.\textsuperscript{116} His nightdress, as always, emphasizes his youth and asexuality. Immediately after Diamond’s return from the country at the back of the north wind, he is convalescing and is still depicted as small, vulnerable, and under the care of older females.\textsuperscript{117} Furthermore, in comparison to his mother’s new baby, his size remains ludicrously small (or the baby’s ridiculously big) (Fig. 5).\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{114} MacDonald, \textit{At the Back of the North Wind}, p. 50.  
\textsuperscript{115} MacDonald, \textit{At the Back of the North Wind}, pp. 67, 69, and 72.  
\textsuperscript{116} MacDonald, \textit{At the Back of the North Wind}, p. 113.  
\textsuperscript{117} MacDonald, \textit{At the Back of the North Wind}, pp. 120 and 126.  
\textsuperscript{118} MacDonald, \textit{At the Back of the North Wind}, p. 147.
However, after Diamond recovers and returns to London, the illustrations can no longer repress his growth. In the text, this is the portion of the story where Diamond must assume professional and financial responsibility for his family, driving the cab when his father becomes ill. Diamond is depicted in a number of professional poses, from lifting the harness to place it over the horse’s neck, to offering his mother a purse full of money, to sitting in the driver’s seat of the cab.\textsuperscript{119} Although each of these illustrations makes an attempt to maintain Diamond’s status as vulnerable child—in the first, he is still dwarfed by the horse; in the second, his mother embraces him instead of taking the money; and in the third, he being pulled from his seat by a ruffian even as an adult man comes to his aid—the cumulative effect is to emphasize that Diamond is entering the world of adulthood. It is now a man, not a nurturing woman, who comes to his aid. No longer dependent on his parents for finances, Diamond takes care of his parents and handles the money himself. The illustrations at last acknowledge Diamond’s increasing maturity by showing him as taller. At the beginning of the book, his mother is shown bending at an almost ninety degree angle in order to bring her face on a level with Diamond’s, but now Diamond’s face is nearly at the height of her breast when he hands over the money he has made from his first day as a cabby. These developmental pictures peak after the family has adopted Nanny, and she takes over the care of the baby. Nanny holds the baby, while Diamond leans on top of the cradle, almost straddling it with his long legs (Fig. 6).\textsuperscript{120} When this is compared to the illustration of a few chapters before, where Diamond holds the baby who is a third as big as he is, the difference is extraordinary, particularly given that only a few months, perhaps a year, seem to have passed in the story. A viewer looking at the illustration without knowing the surrounding text could almost assume that Diamond and Nanny were the parents of the child.

\textsuperscript{119} MacDonald, \textit{At the Back of the North Wind}, pp. 204, 210, and 227.  
\textsuperscript{120} MacDonald, \textit{At the Back of the North Wind}, p. 286.
After this peak, however, Diamond’s images begin to regress. In the next chapter, he is depicted once in his familiar nightdress.\textsuperscript{121} After that, he is not depicted at all for several chapters, until the family arrives at their final home in the country. The next time we see Diamond, he sits with his little siblings in his lap.\textsuperscript{122} Although the relation of his size to theirs is obscured by the posture, he has lost the stance of power that he assumes when he bends over the cradle in the earlier illustration. The next illustration of Diamond shows him lying on his back in a tree.\textsuperscript{123} Again, his body is obscured, his true size difficult to make out.

But in two of the final illustrations of Diamond with North Wind, his regression becomes very clear. Both of these pictures are set in the midst of the penultimate conversation between Diamond and North Wind, where she hints at her “most dreadful” name and prepares Diamond for his final journey into death. Diamond’s pictorial regression into young childhood reveals his spiritual condition—his spirit is that of a child and therefore is ready for union with the divine. In both of these pictures he wears his nightdress, and in both, he shares a traditional pose with North Wind that figures himself as the little child and North Wind as the mother. In the earlier illustration of North Wind and Diamond, North Wind holds Diamond on her lap, pressing his head against her breast (Fig. 7).\textsuperscript{124} Diamond is almost entirely swathed in his nightdress, and he looks very small. Even the lines of his face look young—softer and pudgier, like a chubby baby. In the latter illustration, North Wind holds Diamond’s hand while she bends over to kiss the top of his head (Fig. 8).\textsuperscript{125} Her breasts are nearly bare, and Diamond’s face, upturned toward them, looks almost as though he is about to nurse.

\textsuperscript{121} MacDonald, \textit{At the Back of the North Wind}, p. 292.
\textsuperscript{122} MacDonald, \textit{At the Back of the North Wind}, p. 318.
\textsuperscript{123} MacDonald, \textit{At the Back of the North Wind}, p. 324.
\textsuperscript{124} MacDonald, \textit{At the Back of the North Wind}, p. 330.
\textsuperscript{125} MacDonald, \textit{At the Back of the North Wind}, p. 332.
But this second illustration takes an additional step in figuring Diamond as divine. He and North Wind are floating in the air. Diamond’s legs are slightly bent at the knees with his toes pointed, his arms are stretched out to the sides, his face is turned upward, and his eyes are wide with some unspeakable emotion. His pose is that of crucifixion. This illustration not only depicts Diamond’s essential child identity, which makes him like Christ, according to MacDonald’s theology, but it compares Diamond’s approaching death to Christ’s—both die innocent. In this interpretation, North Wind becomes a ministering angel, holding one of Diamond’s outstretched arms and bending protectively over him, ready to guide him through this final journey.126

However, Hughes’s final illustration of Diamond and North Wind emphasizes the eroticism that is also prevalent in North Wind’s images, and complicates their relationship. Many critics have noted the erotic element of the images of North Wind. She often appears semi-nude, sensuously wrapped in her flowing hair, and posed so as to invite the gaze to wander over the curves of her body. In the book’s final image of her, Diamond leans out the window of his tower bedroom, looking down at North Wind, who stretches full length on a cloud of her hair, both arms stretched over her head, in a pose of languorous seduction (Fig. 9).127 Given the symbolic association of balconies with lovers, the pose does seem to place Diamond and North Wind in a romantic or sexual relation to each other. Yet, in this picture, Hughes seems to actively resist the erotic implications of the pose. Where in the previous illustration, North Wind’s breasts were almost entirely exposed, here she is prudishly swathed in her hair. Although the general outlines

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126 Diamond’s Christ-like death is prefigured in another series of illustrations from the incident in the cathedral. In one, Diamond is descending the stairs, one foot pointed below him, his arms out to either side with his hands held by the hovering North Wind (MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 79). Instead of his head up with eyes turned toward heaven, his neck is bent with eyes looking down, another common pose for Christ on the cross. In the next illustration, the interior of the cathedral is depicted, complete with a shadowy crucifix (p. 80). Christ hangs with his head bent, like Diamond on the previous page. In the chapter’s final illustration, Diamond is stretched full length along the floor asleep (p. 83). However, his long nightdress and the hair swathing his head make it look as though he has been wrapped for burial, just as Christ was. An elaborate tomb with a carved corpse of a saint or church official is situated behind Diamond and emphasizes his burial pose.

127 MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, p. 338.
of her woman’s body are visible, her breasts are completely obscured and she looks almost more like a wisp of cloud than a sexy silhouette. Diamond, too, is substantially clothed—the nightdress which was diaphanous in the previous illustration is completely opaque. He is visible only from the waist up, denying any hint of sexuality about his figure. When Hughes’s images of North Wind are viewed as a body, this final glimpse is one of the least dynamic and exciting.

Critics have been greatly interested by this erotic aspect of North Wind. Kate Flint argues North Wind’s “physical plenitude … suggests an overwhelming womanly presence which reaches far beyond the realm of the maternal, offering an as yet dimly understood sensual world developing in the imagination of the young boy.”¹²⁸ Maurice McInnis goes further, suggesting that Diamond and North Wind have an all but overt sexual relationship. North Wind opens the possibility of child sexuality because “her violent changes and unpredictability parallel childish behavior, even that of a child’s sudden awakening sexuality.”¹²⁹ He describes Diamond’s childish clinging to North Wind in an illustration close to the end of the book as being “for maternal or other comfort,” and he interprets Diamond’s walking through North Wind to reach the country at her back as “a sexually encoded act.”¹³⁰ Hares-Stryker argues that although North Wind may be deeply erotic, hers is not the dangerous eroticism of the Pre-Raphaelite femme fatales. Because Hughes often draws her looking lovingly into Diamond’s eyes rather than alluringly out at the viewer and attempting to snare him with her gaze, she instead “becomes the perfect aesthetic symbol—supernaturally beautiful, maternal, powerful—a new and alluring divinity for an age of shaken faith.”¹³¹ Amy Sonheim, although mainly concerned with refuting a

¹³⁰ Ibid.
¹³¹ Hares-Stryker, pp. 96 and 97
charge of pedophilia leveled against MacDonald by Morris Fraser and James Kincaid, declares that MacDonald was attempting to portray a child both innocent and sexual, and that Hughes reframes this eroticism in the courtly love iconography of the Pre-Raphaelites.132

Among the critics then, there is agreement over North Wind’s eroticism, but a divergence of opinion over the direction and purpose of her sexuality. I agree with Hares-Stryker and Sonheim that North Wind’s sexuality is not threatening—either to Diamond or to the viewer. Her beauty does not draw Diamond to destruction, but instead helps him to trust her, so that he accepts her guidance on his journey to deeper spiritual being. However, I strongly disagree with McInnis’s claims about the sexual nature of Diamond and North Wind’s relationship. McInnis, in characterizing North Wind as being childlike because she is unpredictable and changeable, an argument he then uses to claim she represents a child’s emerging sexuality, ignores statements that North Wind herself makes about her own consistency: “the me you don’t know must be the same as the me you do know, —else there would be two mes.”133 North Wind insists that even though her actions may appear contradictory (protecting a little boy and sinking a ship at the same time), she is consistent with herself. Additionally, McInnis ignores North Wind’s different characters (although they all add up to only one North Wind). She is a beautiful, sexy woman, but she is also the wind, and a doorway, and death. Diamond’s walking through her to reach the country at her back has much more to do with these three latter identities than the first. The scene can be read as sexually encoded, but that is neither the strongest nor the most relevant interpretation.

I also depart from Sonheim’s argument that MacDonald is attempting to portray a child both innocent and sexual. As I explained in the earlier section on gender, I find Diamond to be

133 MacDonald, At the Back of the North Wind, p. 71.
essentially genderless—his masculinity is inconsequential to his identity. Beyond this, I would argue that he is also asexual, a quality established through his relationship with Nanny. There is a moment in the illustrations where Diamond seems to have taken on an adult masculine identity—the previously described image where he bends over the baby’s cradle, along with Nanny, putting the two of them into a parental pose. At first, the narrative seems to make it likely that the eventual outcome of the story might be a romantic/sexual relationship between Diamond and Nanny. After all, Diamond comes to Nanny’s assistance several times while she is living and working on the street, actually saving her life when he finds her ill and gets her to a hospital. Narrative tradition dictates that a romantic interest should develop between the two, just as it also dictated that outcome for Tom and Ellie in *The Water-Babies*. But where Kingsley thwarted that outcome by having the narrator declare that marriage is only for those of high and equal class, MacDonald denies it by having Nanny, now described by the grown-up adjective of “handsome,” find Diamond devoid of sexual interest and transfer her attention to a boy named Jim: “they always like better to go away together when their work is over. They never heed [Diamond].”\(^\text{134}\) Diamond, who also shows no signs of harboring romantic attachment to Nanny, is lacking in sex appeal. Although he does, as Sonheim points out, have what might be called “sensual” experiences on his adventures with North Wind, sensual does not necessarily mean sexual. In fact, pointing Diamond toward a sexual future would be out of line with the overarching goals of the book. As I said at the beginning of this chapter, although MacDonald valued social relationships and the sanctity of righteous community, he placed his most crucial spiritual emphasis on the individual soul’s journey to God. Diamond, as the purest possible expression of a human soul, is ultimately pointed entirely toward the divine, and not laterally

\(^\text{134}\) MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, pp. 315-6.
toward a material (corporeal) relationship, even with such a spiritual being as the erotic North Wind.

Instead, I would argue that North Wind’s erotic allure is part of the expression of her fullness of being. She exists in entelechy, MacDonald’s supreme reality. North Wind is not a flat allegory intended merely as a symbol. Instead, she is a complex and, to borrow Flint’s phrase, “overwhelming womanly presence,” who includes, among her characteristics, maternity and eroticism. But just because she is erotic, it does not mean that her relationship with Diamond is sexual. Rather, what MacDonald and Hughes have done is sculpt a personality where maternity and sexuality are not mutually exclusive or in a perverse relationship with each other. North Wind is a woman in her fullness—a fullness that is a source of a great and terrible power for life, death, and transformation. She has achieved entelechy.

Entelechy—the state of fully realized essence—is also MacDonald’s goal for Diamond and the fantastic journey. Like Carroll, MacDonald desired to make the child a truer child, but the implications of Diamond’s metamorphoses go far beyond Alice’s. Alice’s changes could not last. She learns creativity and the power of naming, but is incapable of refraining from using that power to fix narrow identities and propel herself out of childhood. In the end, Alice’s metamorphoses produce as little result as the creatures’ caucus race. But Diamond’s metamorphoses alter him forever. In refining himself and transforming so that he can embody his full essence, Diamond gains a power that allows him to redeem the world around him, before he leaves it forever.

In my next chapter, I will discuss another author who is concerned with restoring a broken world. But unlike MacDonald, who finds redemption in the journey of an individual child
soul toward the divine, Nesbit looks to a society of children, whose relationships with each other allow them to circumvent time and bring wholeness to the fractured security of home.
Figures

Fig. 1 Arthur Hughes, “Her Face Looked out of the Midst.” *At the Back of the North Wind*, by MacDonald, digital image by Deirdre Johnson, Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia, Internet Archive, archive.org.

Fig. 2 Arthur Hughes, “Good Night, Diamond.” *At the Back of the North Wind*.

Fig. 3 Arthur Hughes, “The Woven Nest.” *At the Back of the North Wind*.

Fig. 4 Arthur Hughes, “They Put Their Arms Round Each Other.” *At the Back of the North Wind*. 
Fig. 5 Arthur Hughes, “Nursing the Baby.” At the Back of the North Wind.

Fig. 6 Arthur Hughes, “Nanny Was a Great Help.” At the Back of the North Wind.

Fig. 7 Arthur Hughes, “As if He Were Her Own Baby.” At the Back of the North Wind.

Fig. 8 Arthur Hughes, “He Tried to See up into Her Face.” At the Back of the North Wind.
Fig. 9 Arthur Hughes, “Her Hair and Her Garments Went Floating Away behind Her.” *At the Back of the North Wind.*
Chapter 3: E. Nesbit and the Golden Hours of Childhood

Thus far I have examined three authors, their varied definitions of the child, and how each of those definitions is interwoven into the book’s fantastic journey. Charles Kingsley sought to restore a profaned child, Carroll to preserve a desirable child, and MacDonald to refine a holy child. In this chapter, however, I examine an author who is less concerned with the body of the child than with the time of childhood. Nesbit’s switch from the body of the child to time is emphasized by her version of the fantastic journey, where children venture outside of the ordinary flow of time, rather than outside of their bodies, as do Alice and Diamond. In this chapter, I will argue that Nesbit uses the fantastic journey to metamorphose time—preserving and restoring threatened childhood and offering adults the hope of recovering a childlike self. However, this fantastic journey remains limited to the middle class. Children tainted from the beginning by poverty, abuse, or vice must leave childhood behind—their lives can be redeemed only by growing into adulthood.

Nesbit’s critical history has been as colorful and contradictory as her extraordinary life, which provides a fascinating backdrop for the study of her deceptively simple children’s novels. Once one of the most prolific and best loved children’s writers of the fin-de-siècle and Edwardian eras, Nesbit (1858-1924) has faded into obscurity for American audiences, especially when compared to her predecessor Carroll and her contemporary Barrie. Yet Nesbit produced more writing for children than either of those men: over sixty books, including novels, short stories, and poetry, over the course of a bustling writing career that lasted from 1885 to the posthumous publication of her last work in 1925.¹

Much of the critical conversation surrounding Nesbit has been concerned with positioning her. One point of debate is just how original and/or influential she really was, with authors like Madeleine L’Engle, C. S. Lewis, and Edward Eager hailing her as one of the authors they read as children who most influenced their later work, and some critics, like Carpenter, dismissing her as an “enthusiastic hack … if one inspects [her] books closely, doubts begin to emerge as to the real nature of her talent” and accusing her of being merely a popular Kenneth Grahame imitator. Nesbit’s position on women’s rights has been another paradoxical issue. While she herself embraced a Bohemian existence, dressing contrary to fashion, adopting boyish mannerisms, and conducting a string of affairs, she refused to become a suffragette and acceded to most of her husband Hubert Bland’s views on politics and religion, leaving critics to wonder what she really thought. Another question that particularly interests critics is the sincerity of Nesbit’s socialism. Along with her husband, she was a founding member of the Fabians, but Carpenter, never a Nesbit fan, points out that her behavior at those meetings was hardly serious: “She reveled in the atmosphere created by the Fabians without having much intellectual grasp of their doctrines … She liked to interrupt Fabian discussions by asking for a glass of water, or [pretending to faint].” Other, less biased critics, have admitted that there is something unconvincing about Nesbit’s socialist statements when her protagonists are drawn almost exclusively from the middle class: “Her interest in children of all social classes did not quite square with her frank admission that she wrote for middle-class children and usually about them.

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4 Carpenter, p. 128.
But Nesbit’s vivid writing has convinced some critics of her sincerity. Suzanne Rahn favorably compares the utopian society Nesbit describes in *The Story of the Amulet* to H. G. Wells’s *A Modern Utopia* and William Morris’s *News from Nowhere*, suggesting that Nesbit strikes a happy balance between Wells’s futuristic technology and Morris’s insistence on the primacy of nature. And Monica Flagel suggests that if Nesbit’s socialism seems fatally middle class, it is because the Fabians themselves were utterly rooted in that economic structure, and that Nesbit’s books do much to help middle-class child readers imaginatively experience economic alienation.

Critics also disagree over the quality of Nesbit’s development of child characters. A number of scholars are celebratory. Anita Moss claims that “[t]he most significant way that Nesbit’s child characters liberate themselves from static myths of childhood is by seizing control of their own stories to become makers and creators.” Likewise, Naomi Wood states, “Nesbit continues to combine the everyday with the marvelous, humor with the fantastic, allowing very ordinary children the privilege of world-making through desire and language.” Wood argues that over the course of the Psammead trilogy, the children gain increasing linguistic ability, which becomes the ability “to create new realities” in *The Story of the Amulet*. Finally, Gubar uses Nesbit as an example of an author who portrays children deeply enmeshed in the cultural milieu who are able to take the stories and roles presented to them and subvert them to their own purpose. In particular, she celebrates the second book of the Psammead trilogy as presenting

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6 Rahn, pp. 201-3.
8 Moss, p. 245.
children empowered by their engagement with the wider culture: “Acknowledging the extent to which adults and their texts form and influence children, [Nesbit] nevertheless insists that such power does not preclude the possibility that children can tweak, transform, and renew the scripts they are given.”

All three of these critics staunchly confirm Nesbit as empowering children through their power over language, even if, as Gubar points out, that power is always compromised by adult control. Against this chorus of praise, Carpenter’s assessment of Nesbit’s child characters sounds strident and overly harsh. While he reluctantly admits the stories in the Psammead trilogy are “exceptionally well crafted” (lessening the compliment by adding that Nesbit “knew how to borrow … the degree of originality in them is comparatively small”), and its child characters “are resourceful, speculative, and equal to virtually any emergency,” they are also “entirely unmemorable … They exist merely as figures in the landscape of the plot, virtually undifferentiated except in sex, and without any character beyond the bare demands of the stories.”

Although Carpenter’s main focus is on Nesbit’s stories about the Bastable children, his assessment of them could be taken as a judgment on Nesbit’s children’s stories as a whole. Although he recognizes that children take the stories given to them and write them into their own adventures, he asks, “[A]re the children any wiser? Does the acting out of the literary fantasies truly lead the Bastables to discover truths about the real world and about themselves?”

Carpenter’s answer is obviously a resounding “No.”

In my own arguments over the course of the dissertation, I have usually found myself opposed to Carpenter’s assessments and in strong agreement with Gubar’s positions, but with Nesbit, I find that Carpenter’s cold questioning of whether the children have actually learned anything to be more in line with my own assessment of her use of the fantastic journey. Not that

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11 Gubar, p. 148.
12 Carpenter, p. 136.
13 Carpenter, p. 137.
I disagree with Gubar (and Moss and Wood) that Nesbit is, in the earlier books of the trilogy, experimenting with child agency via language and rewriting. But in the final book of the trilogy, where the fantastic journey at last comes into play, as well as in the later time travel novels *The House of Arden* and *Harding’s Luck*, I would argue that Nesbit pulls back from this strategy, not because, as Gubar claims, Nesbit is offering a “nuanced vision” of the “problematic” power relationships between adults and children, but because Nesbit is too wedded to her understanding of the child as Romantic and her desire to preserve the child as such, to proceed any further with the linguistic strategy of empowerment.¹⁴ Contrary to Wood’s assertion that the children are at their most powerful in the final book of the Psammead trilogy, I would argue that, in fact, the children learn very little over the course of their adventures, and when they do discover “truths about the real world,” they are immediately punished and contained by having the magical source of their adventures removed. In the final volume, as I discuss below, the stakes are too high to allow the children to continue to wield agency in the “real world.” Instead, they are contained within the non-progressive loops of a fantastic journey.

In order to establish Nesbit’s place in my narrative of the development of the trope of the fantastic journey, I first explain a shift that took place in the major concerns of children’s literature over the second half of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth: where earlier authors like Carroll and MacDonald were largely preoccupied with children’s bodies, rooting the definition of childhood in a particular kind physical existence, later authors, such as Grahame, Nesbit, and Barrie became more concerned with children’s time. Second, I argue that Nesbit’s understanding of herself as a child trapped inside of an adult body led to the tendency of her fiction to be concerned with managing children’s time so as to preserve and privilege their status as children, and ultimately led her to make use of the trope of time travel, this chapter’s

¹⁴ Gubar, p. 148.
“fantastic journey,” in order to achieve that end. Nesbit’s first experiment with this idea is the third book of the Psammead trilogy, *The Story of the Amulet* (serialized May 1905 to May 1906), which I examine in some detail in the context of the trilogy as a whole. Finally, I show that the idea of using time travel to preserve childhood is restricted by class, and that working-class children must use time travel to create and then outgrow, rather than to preserve, their childhoods, by examining Nesbit’s later children’s novel, *Harding’s Luck* (serialized January to November 1909).

**Child Bodies and Child Time**

Later nineteenth-century children’s literature’s fascination with child bodies is hardly surprising, given that a century of attention to the child body had already occurred. Eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century educational and medical practices were increasingly concerned with child minds and child bodies as such, distinct from those of adults. As Andrew O’Malley puts it, “[t]he child-as-other, as subject in need of reason, then, became the object of study, description, and categorization.”¹⁵ Evangelical novels for children from the same period, such as Mary Martha Sherwood’s *A History of the Fairchild Family* (1818), were often concerned with the regulation of children’s bodies as a way of regulating their minds and behaviors. In one incident in the book, a little girl named Bessie refuses to run when approaching rain threatens her good Sunday clothes, and then, when the rain begins, runs across a field instead of sticking to the path as she is advised to do. In consequence, her good clothes are ruined and she is unable to go on an outing. Disobediently not running and running the wrong way, followed by the punishment of staying home, lead Bessie to be miserable. Subsequent

kindness from an adult woman, however, helps Bessie to use her body in the right way to fix her clothes: “Poor Bessy's fingers had never plied so quickly and so carefully.”\textsuperscript{16} The good result of this reformed physical activity is that “Bessy became from day to day more manageable, and Lucy and Emily began to love her very much.”\textsuperscript{17} In Sherwood’s story, a child becomes loveable only when her body is disciplined.

The switch in emphasis from child bodies to child time can be traced in the social developments of the century, in the concern for the well being of the working-class child. At first the emphasis was on children’s bodies. Writing of the beginning of the 1833 Factory Act, Hugh Cunningham explains, “it was the damage to children’s physique which attracted attention to the work of children in cotton factories … Childhood was being seen as at least in part a time for play. Without it children would not develop the bodily strength necessary for a successful adulthood, and in the cotton factories they were not receiving it. But over and above this utilitarian attitude there was an admixture of the sentimentalism which … the romantic poets had legitimated. People began to be moved in curious ways by the sight of children at work … they began to be thought of as slaves.”\textsuperscript{18} The Factory Act, among other provisions, raised the minimum work age to nine and limited the work day of children ages nine to thirteen to nine hours. Nineteenth-century poets and novelists dramatized the conditions of working-class children, sentimentalizing them for middle-class audiences: William Blake’s chimney sweep poems and Charles Dickens’s \textit{Oliver Twist} are particularly famous examples. But as the nineteenth century progressed, the emphasis was increasingly not only on working-class children’s bodies, but on their time. The Factory Act mandated two hours of schooling per day for each employed child. By 1902, all British children would have available to them a free

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\textsuperscript{16} Sherwood, part 2, chap. 16.
\textsuperscript{17} Sherwood, part 2, chap. 17.
\textsuperscript{18} Hugh Cunningham, \textit{Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500} (London: Longman, 1995).
\end{flushright}
elementary education. Legislation compelled children to spend large portions of their time engaged in activities specially structured and appropriate for them. The troublesome and afflicted bodies of working-class children were controlled and maintained by controlling their time—placing them in school where they could be fed, medicated, trained, and educated into productive citizens of the empire.

This switch in focus from child bodies to child time occurs in the literature being written about and for children, as well as in the legislation. But where the legislation focuses on promoting healthy growth and development through controlled time, the literature celebrates the time of childhood as idyllic and Edenic, and also mourns it as irrecoverable. The 2009 critical anthology *Childhood in Edwardian Fiction: Worlds Enough and Time*, recognizes the importance of time to Edwardian children’s literature in its very title. The editors explain it as “*Time* in the sense that children experience it: expansively, slowly, in unlimited capacities. Unlike adulthood, childhood in the Edwardian ideal was not confined or defined by the industrialized, work-driven, time-constrained structures of grown-up ‘civilization,’ but instead was free to explore a multiplicity of worlds without pressure. For the Edwardians childhood became an escape, a solution, an ideal.”19 In this definition, childhood time is directly opposed to adult time. Childhood time is “unlimited” and “free.” Adult time is “constrained.” The two are conceptualized and experienced differently, which leads to the flip side of the Edwardian attitude toward childhood time—nostalgia and mourning. Perhaps the most famous metaphor illustrating this is in J.M. Barrie’s *Peter and Wendy* (1911). Barrie, who incarnates the time of childhood as the island of Neverland, laments through the voice of the narrator: “On these magic shores

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children at play are for ever beaching their coracles. We too have been there; we can still hear
the sound of the surf, though we shall land no more.”20 Childhood is longed for and lost.

Grahame is another Edwardian who contributed to the cult of childhood nostalgia in the
Edwardian era, and whose writing was deeply influential for Nesbit.21 His *The Golden Age*
(published in 1895), a fictionalized memoir of childhood, was wildly popular in its time and is
often considered the period’s seminal work on childhood. The narrator opens with a Prologue
reflecting back on his own childhood and begins, “Looking back to those days of old,”
establishing that his childhood is firmly in the past and can only be discussed as history. The
Prologue ends with a reiteration of the idea that childhood has receded into history and is
tragically out of reach: “Well! The Olympians [adults] are all past and gone. Somehow the sun
does not seem to shine so brightly as it used; the trackless meadows of old time have shrunk and
dwindled away to a few poor acres. A saddening doubt, a dull suspicion, creeps over me. Et in
Arcadia ego, —I certainly did once inhabit Arcady. Can it be I too have become an
Olympian?”22 Grahame’s longing for “Arcady” is not the longing for his own lost child body, or
even for a particular space, since the geographical location of his childhood remains (the sun and
meadows are recognizably the same ones). Rather, the longing is for a lost time, a loss
emphasized over and over again, even in these few lines: “Looking back,” “days of old,” “past
and gone,” “as it used,” “old time,” “did once.”

One effect of this switch from bodies to time in children’s literature was a change from
solitary to multiple protagonists in the fantastic journey. By creating a group of children that is
largely self-sufficient, Nesbit, as well as authors such as Grahame, is able to place her
protagonists within their own time. Although they do engage with the world around them, they

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21 Carpenter, p. 126.
are also independent from it, relying mostly on each other for companionship, entertainment, and support. Adults sometimes intrude, but on the whole, the children are able to live according to their own preferences, set their own schedules, and share a reality that is often separate from the ordinary world that surrounds them. They exist within a special kind of time—an idea I will discuss in detail later.

In a narrative starring a multiple protagonist, it is the personality of the group, rather than of any one individual character, that is most important. The siblings in the Psammead trilogy operate as a unit. Although each child has his or her own personality and role within the group, the adventures happen to the group as a whole. The focus of these books is never on “a child” or “the child,” as in Carroll and MacDonald. Instead, the concern is always, as the very last line of Nesbit’s trilogy says, for “The dear children! The dear, dear children.”

The lonely protagonist has no real conception of herself as a child among children. Alice, Diamond, and Tom all depend upon non-child personalities for the interaction so necessary to their adventures. Admittedly, these personalities are often fabulous or supernatural, but the children are not able to form groups with their own kind. If there are other children in the book, there is often some kind of barrier between them and the protagonist. For example, in At the Back of the North Wind, Nanny rejects Diamond because she thinks of him as silly. Tom and Ellie, in Water-Babies, are separated by class barriers. Ellie can be Tom’s teacher, but he can never quite achieve her rank. The loneliness of the protagonist in these earlier books is often crucial to the operation of the fantastic journey. Alice achieves her freedom from her old identity and accepts the flexibility of her Wonderland existence because no other children are present to help her fix herself. In their absence, she might be herself or she might be some other child of her

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23 Nesbit, Amulet, p. 352.
Diamond, who does have a supernatural companion for most of his journeys, must enter the country at the back of the north wind alone. Since it is symbolic of death, it is a trial that he must face by himself, and the episode highlights MacDonald’s emphasis on the individual journey of each soul toward God.

Where the solitary protagonist highlights the vulnerability of the child, as when Tom drowns because he has nobody to help him, the group highlights the independence of children and enables them to establish their own hierarchy, agenda, and roles. Children who travel in packs are largely self-sufficient. Although they still need parents to make childhood possible—to pay bills and provide pocket money, to cook meals, and to provide overarching emotional security—on a day-to-day basis children are able to conduct their own affairs and supply many of their own needs. For example, among the Psammead trilogy children, the eldest sister Anthea fills the role of mother and caretaker, looking out for the well-being of the others. After their father has departed for his assignment as a war correspondent in Manchuria, Anthea does her best to rally the low spirits of the others and rescue the summer holidays. When the children embark on their first magical adventure with the Amulet, their individual positions within the group emerge: “Robert … held fast, at Anthea’s suggestion, to the sleeve of Jane [the youngest], who was thus dragged safely through.” Anthea sees the need and suggests a solution, Robert, as a brother, performs a feat of protection, and Jane plays the youngest in need of extra care. The children even arrange their own democratic hierarchy of power complete with political maneuvering: “Rober[t] … had been voted Captain because the girls thought it would be good for him—and indeed he thought so himself—and of course Cyril couldn’t vote against him

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because it would have looked like a mean jealousy." The group of siblings is complete unto itself—these children already exist in an ideal relationship with each other. Because of their connection with each other, they have no need for metamorphosis on an individual level. Instead, time must be metamorphosed around their group, in order to preserve childhood’s integrity.

Nesbit and the Inner Child

Another key difference between Nesbit and the earlier authors I have discussed is that Nesbit believes that adults retain viable access to their childhoods through their childhood memories. Unlike her contemporary Grahame, Nesbit refuses to acknowledge that adulthood is inevitable, and she insists upon her own essential status as child. This position does bear a superficial similarity to MacDonald’s, which also claims that the most desirable state of being is a childlike one. But where for MacDonald the belief in the holiness of the child was an integral part of his personal theology, for Nesbit, the source of the authority came from her own memories of herself as a child, not from God. Although both MacDonald and Nesbit seek the restoration of a fallen adult existence, MacDonald sees the child as holy and restorative because the child is an image of Christ and manifests divine qualities. But for Nesbit, childhood justifies itself as the best time of life, with no need for an outside divine referent. The child is itself the ultimate good because of its innate innocence. Access to the memories of a child is the redemptive force, rather than actions performed by actual children. Nesbit’s child characters do not resemble Diamond in having a divine influence to right wrong. Rather, their very presence helps adults to remember their own childhoods and thereby recover their inner child.

Nesbit’s philosophy of the child receives its fullest expression in a short work titled The Wings and the Child, published in 1913: it is the explicit revelation of Nesbit’s understanding of

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child and adult identities worked out in her earlier stories. As the booklet makes clear, Nesbit believes that special knowledge is needed to treat children appropriately. Supposedly intended as a manual on the game of building miniature cities out of toys and household objects, *Wings* grew into a manifesto on the nature of children and of Nesbit’s own special knowledge that allowed her to become the expert. In her introduction, “To the Reader,” she explains, “When this book first came to my mind it came as a history and theory of the building of Magic Cities on tables … But as I kept the thought by me it grew and changed, as thoughts will do, until at last it took shape as an attempt to contribute something, however small and unworthy, to the science of building a magic city in the soul of a child, a city built of all things pure and fine and beautiful.”

As the book progresses, it becomes clear that Nesbit is not talking about purifying faults in the child. This is not Nesbit’s version of Kingsley’s evolutionary re-creation of the soul of a fallen child. Nesbit is instead talking about treating the child in such a way that its natural purity, spirituality, and creativity can flourish. Specialized knowledge is needed to ensure such treatment, knowledge which she is equipped to provide.

Nesbit is able to blur the line between child and adult identities by manipulating the definition of what it means to be an adult or a child. In the first chapter of *Wings*, “Of Understanding,” Nesbit explains why she is equipped to teach others to “build” children: “It is not with any pretension to special knowledge of my subject that I set out to write down what I know about children. I have no special means of knowing anything: I do, in fact, know nothing that cannot be known by any one who will go to the only fount of knowledge, experience. And by experience I do not mean scientific experience … the tabulated knowledge wrung from observation; I mean personal experience, that is to say, memory … observation is no key to the inner mysteries of a child’s soul. The only key to those mysteries is in knowledge, the knowledge

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of what you yourself felt when you were good and little and a child.” For Nesbit, the memory of the child self is the only source of true knowledge about children. Although she claims that anyone can have such knowledge through memories of childhood, it quickly becomes apparent that not everyone does:

The grown-ups are the people who once were children and who have forgotten what it felt like to be a child. And Time marks with the same outward brand those who have forgotten and those who do not forget. So … neither the children nor the grown-ups will ever believe that that which we have brought with us from the land of childhood is genuine. The grown-ups accuse us of invention, sometimes praise us for it, when all we have is memory … Such people feel to the end that they are children in a grown-up world … If these children, disguised by grown-up bodies, are ever recognized for what they are, it is when they happen to have the use of their pens—when they write for and about children.

In the passage, Nesbit offers two definitions of adulthood. The first is tied up with bodies: adults are those who are marked with Time’s “outward brand”—that is, their bodies have grown up. Unfortunately, in Nesbit’s view, there is nothing anyone can do to prevent this kind of growth. However, the second definition is internal rather than external: “The grown-ups are the people who once were children and who have forgotten what it felt like to be a child.” Being a grown-up is an internal perspective and a sense of self-identity. Grown-ups are people who no longer feel themselves to be children. Through growing, they have lost their sense of child time. The children “disguised by grown-up bodies,” on the other hand, are those “who have managed to

28 Nesbit, Wings, p. 3.
29 Nesbit, Wings, pp. 5-7.
slip past the Customs-house with their bundle of memories intact.”\textsuperscript{30} These adults have preserved child time internally—they have not aged in the way that is, according to Nesbit, more important. Nesbit’s own belief in herself as one of the “children … disguised by grown-up bodies” was so strong that it actually molded her personality. Her insistence that she was a child hidden inside an adult’s body was not only metaphorical but shaped her behavior and mannerisms, leading critics to describe her as “a child in adult clothes,”\textsuperscript{31} or as having a “manner as gay and careless as a child’s.”\textsuperscript{32} This belief of Nesbit’s in her own child identity is possible because she does not limit her definition of “child” only to a particular kind of body, but instead centers it around a particular kind of time.

The Characteristics of a Child: \textit{Five Children and It}

Because Nesbit insists on her own special knowledge of childhood, she assumes an authority to explain children to adults and to themselves not only in nonfiction texts such as \textit{Wings and the Child} but in her books for children.\textsuperscript{33} The Psammead trilogy lays out a basic definition of what a child should do and be, and the series as a whole presents a dynamic understanding of what the dangers to childhood are and what kind of agency children can be allowed to use to combat these dangers without endangering their childhoods through growth. Although my focus in this chapter is mostly on the third volume of the Psammead trilogy, much of Nesbit’s important definitional work is done in the first book, so I examine the trilogy’s first

\textsuperscript{30} Nesbit, \textit{Wings}, pp. 5-6.


\textsuperscript{33} Nesbit is not alone in this assumption of authority. Narrators in Edwardian texts often take up the burden of explaining children to their audiences and consider themselves specially qualified to do so. As an example, consider the narrator of \textit{Peter and Wendy}, of whom Jack Zipes says, “it is apparent that the narrator of the novel is sharing his story with adults and, given his intimate knowledge of children and their world—something he tends to lord over his readers—he has made it his mission to explain children to adults” (xxii).
volume, *Five Children and It*, before moving to an in depth discussion of the fantastic journey in the final volume.

The book opens with the children’s arrival at the country house where they will spend the summer, and the descriptions of their activity, as well as the narrator’s interpolations, reveal Nesbit’s Romantic association of the child with nature. Although their mother is taken up with practical affairs, such as paying the cabman, the children immediately devote themselves to exploring the house and grounds, an action which earns them the approbation of “wiser” from the narrator. The narrator then goes on to explain the relationship between children and London and children and the country:

London is like prison for children, especially if their relations are not rich … you don’t get taken to the theatres, and you can’t buy things out of the shops; and London has none of those nice things that children may play with without hurting the things or themselves—such as trees and sand and woods and waters—and nearly everything in London is the wrong sort of shape—all straight lines and flat streets, instead of being all sort of odd shapes, like things are in the country. Trees are all different, as you know, and I am sure some tiresome person must have told you that there are no two blades of grass exactly alike … The children had explored the gardens and the outhouses thoroughly before they were caught and cleaned for tea, and they saw quite well that they were certain to be happy at the White House … The best part of it all was that there were no rules about not going to places and not doing things. In London almost everything is labeled
“You musn’t touch,” and though the label is invisible it’s just as bad, because you know it’s there, or if you don’t you very soon get told.34

This passage establishes the optimal environment for the children, who are deemed “wiser” than their mother because they immediately rush toward what will be good for them—or, to think of it in a slightly different way, that which is naturally hospitable to them. The passage suggests an antipathy between children and London that arises from the fact that the city is not naturally hospitable to children. Being happy in London requires money, which is a grown-up commodity and filters down to children only by way of rich relations in the forms of pocket money and presents. Happiness in London is not natural. It is a commodity that must be bought in the forms of theater tickets and “things out of the shops.” London is devoid of natural playthings that do not cost money. There is the threat of hurt, to children and to property, associated with play: children and an artificial environment are incompatible. Because of this artificiality, the things in London are the wrong shapes, all flat and straight. The proper shapes for childhood, the narrator indicates, are the odd ones, shapes with the qualities of uniqueness and variety. Finally, London is too full of restrictions. Children need a certain freedom from rules, which turns out to be a characteristic of the country, where “there were no rules about not going to places and not doing things,” but not a characteristic of the city, where “everything is labeled ‘You musn’t touch.’”

Not only does contact with nature help children to flourish, but the reverse is also true—being denied contact with nature makes children “extremely naughty.” If the behavior of children is the same in the city as it is the country, then it is immediately evident how children can easily get into trouble in the city. The country is a place of vigorous physical activity and unchecked exploration. When they first arrive, Cyril, Anthea, Robert, and Jane engage in a “glorious rush round the garden.” Once Robert tumbles off a broken swing and bumps his head, and Cyril

34 Nesbit, Five Children and It (Devon, UK: Dover, 2002), pp. 2-3.
pinches his finger in the door of a rabbit hutch, the children “had no longer any doubts whatever” that “they were certain to be happy.” These activities would be a problem in London, where the garden, if there was one, probably wouldn’t be big enough to rush around in, and adults would have a vested interest in the property being explored, and would probably object to children examining, prying at, and playing with it. But rushing and exploring are not problems in the country where, as the narrator has told us, there are “nice things that children may play with without hurting themselves or the things.” Although Cyril and Robert have been slightly hurt, their little mishaps actually add to their pleasure, suggesting that real hurt is impossible in the country (as it is for Alice in Neverland), and they certainly have not damaged the “things.” There is no permanent harm. This is not the case in *Five Children’s* sequel, *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, which is set in London, and in which the children fall into deep disgrace for setting off firecrackers indoors, where they are trapped by rain. Add to all of this the fact that the children must be “caught and cleaned for tea,” rather like a mess of trout, and we discover Nesbit has given us a very Romantic group of children, primarily identified by their affinity with the natural world.

Nesbit’s assumed identity as a child allows her not only to explain children to adults, but to the children themselves. In the middle of her explanation about why children belong in the country rather than the city, she says, “This is why many children who live in the towns are so extremely naughty. They do not know what is the matter with them, and no more do their fathers and mothers, aunts, uncles, cousins, tutors, governesses, and nurses; but I know. And so do you, now.” The narrator, whom at least in this instance we can connect pretty clearly with Nesbit herself via *Wings and the Child*, is the only one who understands children. None of the official

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35 Nesbit, *Five Children*, pp. 3 and 2.
37 *Five Children*, p. 2, emphasis mine.
caretakers of children—parents, relatives, or hired educators—understand children. Crucially, neither does the intended audience of the book: children themselves. This is an open instance of what Nodelman describes in *The Hidden Adult* as a typically subversive process. He argues that children’s literature texts “encourage an adult understanding of childlike behavior in children, [and] often work to disperse innocence in the process of celebrating it. They thus encourage child readers, no longer purely childlike, to enact the childhood they have moved beyond.”38 Because Nesbit has set herself up as a child, it frees her from the necessity of being the “hidden adult.” It is her self-perceived status as child that allows Nesbit to explain how to shape the soul of a child, to explain the “truth” about children, without the need of concealing her own desire to be influencing the child. Her desires are so insistently identified as child desires, that, at least to herself, she falls under no suspicion of being an interfering grown-up. As a child, she can (supposedly) define other children without fashioning their subjectivity to fulfill adult desires.

Nesbit’s confidence in her own authority makes her definition of the child very easy to understand (in contrast to Carroll’s dual definitions in *Alice*), since she offers an assured definition with specific characteristics. Children are fragile because they are so easily hurt, in body and in spirit, in the city, where there are “none of those nice things that children may play with without hurting … themselves.” Children are natural because they fit easily with the natural world; children who live in the city are out of their element and cause conflict: “children who live in the towns are so extremely naughty,” not because they are bad, but because they are out of harmony with their surroundings. Naughtiness does not necessarily refer willful misbehavior. It also cover behaviors natural to children (such as getting their clothes dirty during play) that may come into conflict with unfriendly or restrictive environments. Children are playful because the primary thing for children to do in and out of their ideal element, is to play. And children are free

38 Nodelman, p. 79.
because children thrive where there are few rules: their own natural innocence keeps them from going wrong in freedom, while rules go against the children’s own instincts and thus naturally put them in the wrong.

_Wings and the Child_ adds a further emotional component to Nesbit’s definition of children. In addition to the defining adjectives “little and good,” which I have already quoted, Nesbit also describes children via the “children trapped in grown-up bodies.” She explains which of these grown-up children’s characteristics are at variance with those of the “real” grown-ups: “To them the world will be, from first to last, a beautiful place, and every unbeautiful thing will be a surprise, hurting them like a sudden blow. They will never learn prudence, or parsimony, nor know, with the unerringly instinct of the really grown-up, the things that are or are not done by the best people. All their lives they will love, and expect love.”³⁹ According to Nesbit, children see beauty and do not understand ugliness, they are incautious and generous, and they are not sufficiently civilized to understand the concept of taste. The governing principle of their relationships with other people is love, which they both give and constantly expect to receive.

A curious gap emerges between Nesbit’s actual life and the child lives she invents for her characters, which is yet another difference between her and her predecessors; as Raymond E. Jones points out, “Everywhere one turns, it appears that Nesbit the writer was at odds with Nesbit the woman.”⁴⁰ In the case of the previous writers, Kingsley and MacDonald both seem to have given their own children the benefit of the stable, privileged home bastioned by the middle-class moral values that their books upheld. Both writers believed in children as innocent, natural beings, and both apparently lived in such a way as to foster the kind of environment that would allow such children to thrive. Their own lives, although sometimes unusual, reflected their

³⁹ Nesbit, _Wings_, pp. 6-7.
beliefs. Even Carroll, although a childless bachelor, formed relationship with children that reflected his beliefs about them. His nonsense correspondence with many of his child friends, as well as the outings to venues of fun and creativity—the theatre or storytelling on the river—attest to that. But although Nesbit’s books express belief in the innocent, natural child, her life was not one of well-ordered middle-class morality. For much of her marriage to Bland, she lived ménage-a-trois with his mistress Alice Hoatson, agreeing to raise two of Hoatson’s children as her own. She herself conducted a long string of affairs, usually with younger men. Even more interestingly, she was not especially fond of children, even her own, preferring the stimulation of adult company that could appreciate her wit and form a court of admiration around her.41

This disparity between Nesbit’s life and writing offers one reason for the changes that she implements in the fantastic journey and her turn toward time. Her insistence on her own childhood and her own refusal to grow up reveal a discomfort with her own adult time. She recreates an idyllic child time and depicts domestic homes whole and happy as was neither her childhood home (her father died when she was young) nor her home with Bland. When she gives child characters power to restore fractured domesticity, it is easy to believe that Nesbit writes not for children but for herself. She had grown up in an era when the ideal of the Romantic child was readily available in both children’s and adult books. It may be that in the fractured reality of her own life, she was attempting to rewrite her own time in order to reach that idyll of happiness and safety—a Romantic childhood.

Journeying through Time: The Story of the Amulet

The purpose of the fantastic journey in The Story of the Amulet is to bring about a metamorphosis—an abrupt transformation—of time that restores a home whose fracture

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41 Jones, p. ix.
threatens childhood. This is different from the earlier fantastic journeys that focused on preserving the child itself. But Nesbit shares in common with those earlier texts the idea that a harmful environment with bad or no guardians is (aside from the inevitability of growth) the major threat to the child and childhood. (Later in the chapter, I will discuss Nesbit’s *Harding’s Luck*, which centers on a child who has been deeply damaged by his environment. Dickie, the hero of *Harding’s Luck*, bears a strong resemblance to Tom in Kingsley’s *Water-Babies.* In *Amulet*, Nesbit endangers her child characters with the loss of their parents and then focuses the power of the fantastic journey on transforming the threatening situation. Through the fantastic journey, the children are able to restore their home. However, by doing it via the means of magical time travel, they are shielded from any potentially negative effects such an effort might have. Instead the time of childhood is restored without negative side effects, and the children are allowed to enjoy themselves through play and exploration, relatively free of rules, while their innocence is protected. In this section, after a brief plot synopsis, I will explain the way that time travel, Nesbit’s form of the fantastic journey, works in the book. I will then consider the different kinds of time present in the book, and then the discuss the importance of a missing kind of time—biological time—to the book’s relationship with Darwin and with death. Finally, I will explore how Nesbit’s manipulation of the fantastic journey offers the possibility of adult metamorphosis.

In the concluding volume of the Psammead trilogy, siblings Cyril, Anthea, Robert, and Jane are miserable because their parents and baby brother are far away and in danger. With the help of the Psammead sand fairy, they purchase from a junk shop half of an ancient amulet that, when complete, can grant their hearts’ desire. They then use that half amulet to travel to different

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43 Their father, for example, is reporting on a war in Manchuria. Traveling to the front to bring him home without the aid of magic would expose the children to countless physical and moral dangers.
places in the past, searching for the lost part of the charm. Once the amulet is complete, it grants
their heart’s desire and brings home their father, who was in Manchuria acting as a war
correspondent, and their mother and baby brother, who were convalescing in Madeira.

Nesbit’s fantastic journey is time travel, an obvious choice given the shift in focus from
child bodies to child time.\textsuperscript{44} Time travel allows Nesbit to grant the children plenty of space and
time to explore without endangering their present. The children are first introduced to the
concept of time travel when they summon up the spirit of the Amulet by speaking the word of
power, which is the Amulet’s own name, engraved on its side in a hieroglyphic.\textsuperscript{45} The Amulet
explains that it has been split into two parts, one of which has been destroyed. The children must
travel into the past to recover the missing Amulet half before it is destroyed. Once the parts are
reunited, the Amulet will grant the children their hearts’ desire. In order to travel into the past,
they must follow the Amulet’s very specific instructions: “You must hold me up, and speak the
word of power, and one by one, beginning with the first-born, you shall pass through me into the
Past. But let the last that passes be the one that holds me, and let him not lose his hold, lest you
lose me, and so remain in the Past for ever.”\textsuperscript{46} Importantly, the children can control their
adventures into the past. They are not at the mercy of a higher (or at least Other) power that can
whisk them away without a moment’s notice. The choice to initiate each of their time travel
adventures is within their own power. Since the purpose of the time travel adventure/fantastic
journey is to preserve the children as children as well as giving them agency over the forces that
threaten their childhood, it is significant that the act of time travel should also give the children
agency—to go or not to go is their own choice. Employing this choice requires virtuous action:

\textsuperscript{44} Nesbit was undoubtedly inspired to use time travel by her relationship with H. G. Wells, who published \textit{The Time
Machine} in 1895 (Rahn, pp. 188-9).
\textsuperscript{45} Although the amulet is never explicitly identified with any deity, Rahn identifies it as a personification of the
Egyptian goddess Isis (p. 208).
\textsuperscript{46} Nesbit, \textit{Amulet}, pp. 71-2.
“It is no use to pretend that the children did not feel a good deal of agitation at the thought of going through the charm into the Past. That idea, that perhaps they might stay in the Past and never get back again, was anything but pleasing. Yet no one would have dared to suggest that the charm should not be used; and though each was in its heart very frightened indeed, they would all have joined in jeering at the cowardice of any one of them who should have uttered the timid but natural suggestion, ‘Don’t let’s!’”47 Thus, the children are only able to embark on their time travel adventures because they are already good—more specifically, in this case, courageous.48

Nesbit carefully explains time travel in the book in order to make it clear how the children can travel to other times without inferring with their own childhood time in their own present. Before they go on their first journey, the Psammead explains: “The [Amulet] existed in the Past. If you were in the Past, too, you could find it ... Time and space are only forms of thought.”49 In other words, time and space are only useful fictions used for organizational purposes. Once the children understand this, they can travel to any point in time. The Psammead explains the important implication of this after the children return from their first adventure and discover that no time has passed in the present during their absence: “You come back through the charm-arch at the same time as you go through it. This isn’t tomorrow … it’s today. The same as it’s always been. It wouldn’t do to go mixing up the present and the Past, and cutting bits out of the one to fit into the other … It took none of the modern time, anyhow.”50 At one point, the children try to manipulate time travel to cheat on their search for the Amulet. Cyril argues that if they go into the future they will be able to get the Amulet’s location from themselves: “if we’d found it we should remember that … where we want to go is where we shall remember about

47 Nesbit, Amulet, pp. 74-5.
48 As I discussed in my previous chapter, courage is one of the virtues that North Wind must teach Diamond before he can enter the country at the back of the north wind.
49 Nesbit, Amulet, p. 69.
50 Nesbit, Amulet, pp. 116-7.
where we did find it.”  

It is a clever plan, but when the children arrive in the future, they have the same memories they had back in their own present. The plan cannot work, because if the children traveled into the future to obtain their own future memories, then the whole point of the fantastic journey would be lost. If the children were able to access not just a future time but their future selves, then they would push themselves into their own adulthood. That perilous push is just what the fantastic journey is constructed to avoid.

Kinds of Time

Nesbit’s engagement with time in Amulet is complex and multi-dimensional, which is only to be expected, given that she lived and wrote in a culture that was rewriting its relationship to time and history. In place of a divinely designed and strictly ordered universe, nineteenth century thinkers were coming to view time as unknowable and unchartable in its vastness, yet also minute and measurable—a tool that could be mastered. In the recent anthology Victorian Time: Technologies, Standardizations, Catastrophes, Trish Ferguson, the volume’s editor, begins by suggesting three specific triggers for the Victorian responses to ideas of time in the second half of the nineteenth century, although they would be better understood as symptoms enabled by a shift away from an idea of history as rigid and inevitable. First, William Thompson’s 1852 formulation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics pointed to the end of humanity’s habitation of the earth, not as the result of the Second Coming of Christ but because of natural processes. Second, the 1859 publication of The Origin of Species acknowledged vast tracts of primeval time, before humanity’s appearance, a time uncharted by Scripture or mythology. Third, in the same year as Origin’s publication, the completion of Big Ben symbolized the centrality of public

51 Nesbit, Amulet, p. 282.
time—standardized, marked, and regulated.\textsuperscript{52} Standardized time regulated the global empire, binding it together with clocks.

There are multiple kinds of time at work in Nesbit’s narrative, and shifts or interplay among the kinds of time at work are usually signaled by textual cues that draw the reader’s attention from one kind of time to another. In an article on historicizing sentences in Victorian realist novels, Helena Michie describes the kind of time cue sentences found in novels by Dickens and Gaskell: “These sentences do important generic work, identifying the novel in question as being concerned not only with individual lives but also with an often elaborate social context. They are also markers of the multiplot novel, allowing the author to shift both focus and point of view by reminding the reader that, while he or she has been focusing on one character or one set of events, other characters have been developing and other plots unfolding just beyond the horizon of the reader’s attention. To be reminded, in this context, can call for an adjustment of ethics as well as of attention on the part of a reader too easily absorbed, say, in a particular heroine or a marriage plot at the expense of less privileged characters or trajectories.”\textsuperscript{53} These sentences weave multiple plot threads together and attach the story to a broader context. Where Michie is thinking primarily of separate characters who exist simultaneously within the community of the novel, Nesbit is writing about the same group of characters who exist simultaneously in different times—realist time, magical time, childhood time. In some ways, the workings of time in \textit{Amulet} resemble more closely the “Messianic time” of the pre-national religious communities Benedict Anderson describes, where there is “a simultaneity of past and


future in an instantaneous present.” Because the children’s time travel is controlled by a divine amulet which has access to all times and places, all historical and future times do exist for them at once—they travel out of their own time and arrive back at the same moment they left, so that they are simultaneously in the past/future and the present. But there are kinds of time apart from the Amulet that are also in play, which the children simultaneously inhabit and which often collide and cause conflict.

I have identified four kinds of time in *The Story of the Amulet* that I explain in terms of their relationship to each other and the fantastic journey. First, there is what I call passing time—the relentless march of realist time in the present of the children’s contemporary England. This kind of time can be divided into two parts: calendar time (artificially imposed) and natural time (determined by the natural cycles of the earth). Next there is magical time—the time that passes in the children’s consciousness during their time travel adventures, but which makes no mark on their present time. There is childhood time—the children experience time in a way that is different from the way adults experience it. And finally, there is a very important kind of time missing from the book—biological time.

Passing time is the relentless progression of time in the present, and it is passing time that fractures the children’s family. In the first chapter of *Amulet*, the narrator records,

> The summer holidays during which the Psammead had been found and the wishes given had been a wonderful holiday in the country, and the children had the highest hopes of just such another holiday for the next summer. The winter holidays were beguiled by the wonderful happening of ‘The Phoenix and the

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55 Passing time and child time are often in conflict. As Cyril grumbles, “It’s always meal-times just when you come to anything interesting” (Nesbit, *Amulet*, p. 279). Cyril’s reluctance illustrates the way naughtiness can emerge from a conflict between natural behavior and a restrictive schedule rather than willful misbehavior.
Carpet,’ and the loss of these two treasures would have left the children in despair, but for the splendid hope of their next holiday in the country. The world, they felt, and indeed had some reason to feel, was full of wonderful things—and they were really the sort of people that wonderful things happen to. So they looked forward to the summer holiday; but when it came everything was different, and very, very horrid.  

The children have confused passing time with childhood time. They experience the adventures in the previous books in the trilogy because they are children, “the sort of people that wonderful things happen to,” and they therefore think that their holidays, which are a part of calendar time, are actually childhood time—the time when they experience wonderful adventures. But this turns out not to be the case, especially at first. Instead, the children are confronted with a cruel passing time; that is, a time that imposes the harsh realities of an unprotected world full of war and illness: “Anthea went up to the room that had been Father’s, and when she saw how dreadfully he wasn’t there, and remembered how every minute was taking him further and further from her, and nearer and nearer to the guns of the Russians, she cried a little more. Then she thought of Mother, ill and alone, and perhaps at that very moment wanting a little girl to put eau-de-cologne on her head, and make her sudden cups of tea, and she cried more than ever.”

Time, “every minute,” is what is taking Anthea’s father from her, and time is also what is out of joint between Anthea and her mother—the instantaneous relationship between her mother’s desires and Anthea’s service has been disrupted.

Magical time is the kind of time that happens to children, who are “wonderful people,” but in *Amulet*, magical time comes about in a very particular way that is quite different from the

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57 Ibid.
58 Nesbit, *Amulet*, pp. 18-9, emphasis mine.
two prequels. In *Five Children and It* and *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, adventure time is inseparable from calendar time. In fact, as I have already mentioned, calendar time defined adventure time, because the holidays coincided with the magical adventures. In *Five Children*, the adventures are governed not only by artificial calendar time, but also by what we could call natural time—the wishes granted by the Psammead last only as long as the sun is in the sky, and disappear as soon as it sets. In *Amulet*, however, adventure time is separated from both calendar and natural times—both the artificial system imposed by the British empire, and the actual turning of the earth’s rotation. This remarkable feature of their adventures into the past does not become clear to the children until they have returned from their first trip. In primitive Egypt, the first place in the past they visit, a day and a night have passed, and once they return to their own present in England, the children believe that the same amount of calendar and natural time must have passed there, even though Nesbit offers the children (and the reader) immediate clues that no natural time has passed:

“We’d better go home at once,” said Anthea presently. “Old Nurse will be most frightfully anxious. *The sun looks about the same* as it did when we started yesterday. We’ve been away twenty-four hours.”

“The buns are quite soft still,” said Cyril, feeling one; “I suppose the dew kept them fresh.”

*They were not hungry*, curiously enough.59

When the children arrive home and find Nurse not at all upset, they are extremely puzzled until the Psammead explains, “You come back through the charm-arch at the same time as you go through it. This isn’t tomorrow … it’s today. The same as it’s always been.”60 Thus, in *Amulet*,

magical time is separated from both calendar and, more significantly, natural time. The sun does not move in the sky of the present while the children are in the past; therefore, the children’s bodies in the present of their ordinary world are not affected by any of their adventuring in the past. In the prequels, adventure time often clashes with natural time, and the children become terribly hungry (usually without handy provisions to take care of that hunger). In one memorable episode from Five Children and It, when the children have wished for wings, they fly through the window of the vicarage and rob the vicar’s pantry. Adventures, in those books, take a toll on the children’s bodies. But the children’s bodies remain untouched in Amulet.

The preservation of the children’s bodies points toward the kind of time that is not present in Amulet, or, in fact, in any of the three books of the trilogy: biological time (growth). Although the three books take place over the span of a year and a half (Amulet covers half a year, from the beginning of the summer holidays to the beginning of December), during which time the children might be expected to grow several collective inches, they do not do so. This is most evident in the body of the youngest brother, the Lamb, who remains a toddler with poorly developed verbal and motor skills. Perhaps this is why Nesbit has sent him safely off to Madeira in the third book, to avoid having to make him either grow, or risk raising reader speculation about why he does not.

This determination not to let the child grow, to completely preserve child bodies from change is, I argue, partly inspired by the threat to the Romantic child (idealized by Nesbit) that is presented by Darwinian evolutionary theory. Other constructions of the child are less threatened. The imperial child who stars in boy’s adventure stories, for example, is capable of coping in a world defined by survival of the fittest.61 That child, while often still a child of nature, is fully capable of aggressively fighting his (almost always his) way to the top of the food chain. Jim

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Hawkins in *Treasure Island* steals, fights pirates, and engages in double dealing, all for the sake of securing the treasure for legitimate British citizens (as opposed to the illegitimate British pirate). But the Romantic children envisioned by Nesbit are not capable of such things. The siblings depicted in *The Story of the Amulet* and its prequels are not capable of violence in either aggression or defense. Although they often claim they have bloodthirsty capabilities, they deeply regret wishing themselves into battles with Indians and castle invaders in *Five Children*, and in *Amulet* they always wish themselves back to their own time just before violence breaks out.

Nesbit’s children experience a high level of physical and emotional security, although they are, especially in *Amulet*, sometimes in danger. Carpenter, as part of his blanket dismissal of Nesbit, claims that “[t]here is a notable absence of threat of any kind, and the children, even when their outward circumstances are not pleasant, are sustained by a cheerful, even complacent, sense of security.”62 He is wrong. There are very real threats present in some of Nesbit’s books, particularly in *The Story of the Amulet*, but they are not the kind of threats, or “horrors,” Carpenter has in mind.63 Rather, the threats are to that “sense of security.” For Nesbit, the deepest danger lies in the fracturing of the home, a fracturing that is always repaired by the end of the tale. Although the child characters might seem “cheerful” or “complacent,” there is nevertheless a sense that if the fracture is not fixed, it will permanently damage the children.

The threat to the children’s home in *Amulet* is a variation on a theme very common in children’s literature. As Nodelman explains, a majority, if not all, of children’s literature follows a “home, away, home” pattern, where the child leaves the security of the home, explores an unknown space, and then returns home with a deeper appreciation of what that home represents. Children’s literature texts, argues Nodelman, “tend to be centrally concerned with justifying

62 Carpenter, p. 127.
63 Carpenter, p. 127.
Adult ideas of childhood to children … [that] children [are] opposite to adults in a number of significant ways and therefore in need of the adult to imagine safe spaces for them to be childlike and vulnerable within. As these texts tend to understand it, home is equivalent to what the texts are themselves: a controlled and limited space provided for a child by a more knowing and more capable adult in order to protect the child from the less limited but more dangerous world outside.” 64 Children need protection, and home (and texts) provide that protection. But in The Story of the Amulet, the home is fractured and incapable of providing the security the children need, thus threatening the fabric of their childhoods.

Although the absence of the parents and the fracturing of the home presents the largest threat to childhood in Amulet, other threats are also present, including that of the Darwinian evolutionary narrative about the origins of the human race. The labor of the fantastic journey to defend the home is credible only if childhood is, in fact, the Romantic Eden that Nesbit so carefully defines at the beginning of Five Children and in Wings and the Child. Darwin’s threat to this construction surfaces unexpectedly in Amulet, in an inconsequential section of dialogue. These are not lines that have any direct bearing on the novel’s plot, and are cast as idle chatter between two of the siblings while they browse through a pet shop, but they are symptomatic of a deep dis-ease. Robert, the younger brother, remarks, “I never could cotton to snakes somehow—I wonder why.” His older sister Anthea responds,

“Worms are as bad… and eels and slugs—I think it’s because we don’t like things that haven’t got legs.”

“Father says snakes have got legs hidden away inside of them,” said Robert.

64 Nodelman, p. 63.
“Yes—and he says WE’VE got tails hidden away inside us—but it doesn’t even of it come to anything REALLY,” said Anthea.  

I argue that in this moment where Anthea rejects her kinship with legless creatures and her descent from a primate, Nesbit is asserting that Darwinian time is incapable of accounting for childhood. In fact, the eons-long stages of evolutionary development are one kind of time not represented in the text. As Beer argues, “Evolutionary theory implied a new myth of the past: instead of the garden at the beginning, there was the sea and the swamp. Instead of man, emptiness—or the empire of mollusks. There was no way back to a previous paradise: the primordial was comfortless … Nostalgia was disallowed, since no unrecapturable perfection preceded man’s history. Ascent was also a flight—a flight from the primitive and the barbaric which could never quite be left behind.”  

If there is no Eden at the beginning of the human race, if there is no fall from grace, then the concept of the Romantic child becomes impossible. The child born close to nature is not born innocent but primeval. The lost self nostalgically sought in the Romantic child is not a purer self, but a monkey or a mollusk.  

In order for Nesbit to avoid the Darwinian narrative of development, she must offer an alternative, and I would argue that Nesbit’s use of time travel is just such an alternative narrative. Nesbit cannot deny the ultimate development of the child, acknowledging in the book that even her child characters must eventually grow up. She also is not trying to deny the fact of Darwin’s theory. Anthea does not protest that the story about snakes with legs and children with tails is not true. Rather, she says that it does not “come to anything.” It is irrelevant to the reality of her child existence. Nesbit sidesteps Darwin, suggesting childhood as a preserve, a time of special access to imagination, innocence and spirituality that is somehow outside of the relentless  

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66 Beer, p. 119.
progression of Darwinian time, a space where her child characters can wield an agency that leads to metamorphosis rather than development or growth.

This rejection of Darwin is, I argue, linked to the book’s attitude toward death, which is one of terror, in marked difference to earlier writers. For many of these, including MacDonald, Kingsley, and Dickens, death is only another transformation, a metamorphosis, and the child’s afterlife, where perpetual innocence is guaranteed, compensates for the child’s brief earthly time. Death also becomes a way of preserving the innocence of the child for the world—when the child grows too old, too near adulthood, it must die before it crosses that line, and in that way become a holy martyr, whose spiritual inspiration to the damaged adult world is secure. But for Nesbit, death is something to be shunned, a source of deep fear. Although death is never allowed to come near the child protagonists of Amulet themselves, its shadow does brush the most important adults in their lives.67

The possibility of death threatens the integrity of the children’s network of times. They receive the bad news in connection with the summer holiday, which is the time on the calendar that they associate with child and magical time: “So they looked forward to the summer holiday, but when it came everything was different, and very, very horrid. Father had to out to Manchuria to telegraph news about the war to the tiresome paper he wrote for … And Mother, poor dear Mother, was away in Madeira, because she had been very ill. And The Lamb—I mean the baby—was with her … So the children were left in the care of old Nurse, who lived in Fitzroy Street … the four children felt perfectly wretched, and when the cab had driven off with Father

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67 Nesbit herself suffered the deaths of three of her children—two of these were stillborn, and one died as a teenager. The first of these stillbirths happened in 1886. Her friend Alice Hoatson, who nursed her through the tragedy, records, “E. went nearly mad about this … She had promised to let me take [the dead baby] away … For one hour and a half I struggled to get it from her” (qtd. in Briggs, p. 112). Even more devastating was the death of her fifteen-year-old son Fabian in 1900, who died under anesthetic during a routine adenoid operation. For hours after he had died, Nesbit surrounded him with candles and hot water bottles, trying to warm him back to life, unable to accept his death (Briggs, p. 208).
… the stoutest hearts quailed.” Instead of the holiday they expected, the children are deprived of domestic wholeness. Mother is gone because of serious illness. Father has gone off to war, in real danger even if he is a correspondent rather than a soldier. What is at stake in *Amulet* is a family split by the shadow of death cast by those ominous words “ill” and “war.” Nesbit makes her point with a peek into the head of Anthea, generally portrayed as the wisest and most emotionally acute of the children: “After tea Anthea went up to the room that had been Father’s, and when she saw how dreadfully he wasn’t there, and remembered how every minute was taking him further and further from her, and nearer and nearer to the guns of the Russians, she cried a little more. Then she thought of Mother, ill and alone, and perhaps at that very moment wanting a little girl … and she cried more than ever.” The danger of death is again emphasized later in the book, when the children travel forward in time to try to discover from their future selves where they found the missing half of the amulet. After finding that they have turned into grown-ups they loathe (undoubtedly the wrong kind of grown-ups who have not retained their inner children), they make the further discovery that their old nurse is dead. When they return to their own time, the children rush at Nurse and Jane cries out, “Don’t die! … oh, don’t!” and Anthea adds, “Dear, ducky, darling old Nurse, don’t die!” The threat and terror of death raise the novel’s stakes significantly, illustrated by way the children are willing to devote the entirety of their slender resources to buy the Amulet. As Anthea says, “don’t you think it’s worth spending ALL the [pocket] money, if there’s even the chanciest chance of getting Father and Mother back safe NOW?”

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68 Nesbit, *Amulet*, pp. 17-8
71 Nesbit, *Amulet*, p. 43. The children’s generosity with their resources as well as the fact that their hearts’ desire is the reunion of their family is in line with Nesbit’s definition of a childlike character in *Wings and the Child*: “They will never learn prudence, or parsimony … All their lives they will love, and expect love.”
Because the adventure in *Amulet* has significantly higher stakes than those in its prequels, the narrative requires a number of plot and structural changes. For one thing, the power of the magic used in the book is significantly different. The Psammead and the Phoenix, the magical stars of the first two books, are talkative and highly amusing creatures. They both have an enormous sense of their own dignity and importance, which occasionally make them ridiculous. But the Amulet is quite a different matter. The first time the children summon the Amulet’s magic, the effect is profound: “the voice grew, not so much in loudness as in sweetness (though it grew louder, too), till It was so sweet that you wanted to cry with pleasure just at the sound of it … *this was not like the things that had happened in the country when the Psammead had given them their wishes. That had been funny somehow, and this was not.* It was something like Arabian Nights magic, and something like being in church. No one cared to speak.”

The immensity of the Amulet’s power, as well as its mystical, almost holy aura, gives *Amulet* a gravity lacking in the first two books. The solemnity fits with the increased importance of the children’s adventures—not just to have a jolly time, but to earn their hearts’ desire by restoring family unity.

The overall structure of *Amulet* is also different from the first two books in the trilogy. Nesbit’s earlier strategies for resisting growth are largely circular, sending the children in constant cycles of progression and regression, but a quest tale, like *Amulet*, has an irresistibly narrative structure. It has a beginning, where the quest is accepted; a middle, where the steps to accomplish the quest happen in a particular order; and an end, where the quest is accomplished. Unlike *Five Children* and *Phoenix*, where the magical parameters are established in chapter one, *Amulet* takes three chapters to explain how the magic will work. Not until chapter four do the children begin their first adventure into the past. At that point, rather than an adventure per

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72 Nesbit, *Amulet*, pp. 67-8, emphasis mine.
chapter, with the story being whirled in a regular rhythm, the story is split into unequal sections. This arrangement gives structure to the text in two ways. The first is on a chapter-by-chapter micro level. The chapters within each episode must happen in a particular order. The queen of Babylon cannot come visit London in chapter eight before the children have gone back in time and met her in ancient Babylon in chapter six. The sequential nature of the chapters within each episode necessitates the order of much of the book. The larger structure, the arrangement of the episodes, is also largely inflexible, linked by the transitions of the children’s growing experience of the past and their increasing wisdom. In *Five Children*, the children’s increasing experience with wishes does not help them to wish any more wisely, so that the chapters could be arranged in any order without making the story incoherent, but in *Amulet*, the children’s growing experience does shape their adventures and helps them progress with the quest until they reach its end.

The quest plot has a maturing effect on the children. They display more wisdom and forethought in *Amulet* than they ever have before. In the first two books, the children are strictly creatures of the moment, unable to think beyond the immediate pleasure or problem until they have had a lot of practice; once they reach a level of competency, their magical adventure is taken away, lest they grow too clever. In *Five Children and It*, Anthea figures out how to solve the problems with stolen jewels Jane inadvertently wished for. However, the only way Anthea can convince the Psammead to help with her clever plan is for all the children to promise to never ask him for another wish. In *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, the children literally wear out the carpet by excessive wishing. But in *Amulet*, being clever is rewarded with the fulfillment of the quest, which is the point of the adventures. The earlier adventures were largely pointless.

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73 The book is divided in this way: introductory section, chaps. 1-3; first adventure chaps. 4-5; Babylon adventure, chaps. 6-8; adventures with the learned gentleman, chaps. 9-10; how they achieved their heart’s desire, chaps. 11-14.
Nesbit also works to protect the children from the potentially negative effects of narrative through her construction of the past—the mythic/historical times that the children encounter on their adventures. Nesbit’s construction of the adventures in the past is not linear. The children do not progress through the past. Instead, they hop, skip, and jump back and forth between closer and farther times to fulfill an order different from the historical one, for quite a different purpose. Nesbit’s goal is not to give a history lesson on the development of civilization or the inevitability of the British empire. Rather she creates the past as a time outside of time where children can have adventures but remain safe from maturing in their own time. This purpose is furthered by Nesbit’s use of a pseudo-mythic time rather than strictly historical speculation. In each of the ancient places the children visit, the old gods and the old magic are very much alive and acknowledged by everybody—not just children. This belief in magic helps make the past an appropriate place for children—it is not only children who are “the kind of people wonderful things happen to.” Rather, wonderful things are practically commonplace—within the context of the book, the children are a throwback to the past.

The Amulet children also find the past more habitable than their own present because the past is often presented as inherently Romantic. When the children take a working-class orphan girl back to the past in order to find her a home, Anthea remarks, “We left her happy in the Past. I’ve often seen about people being happy in the Past, in poetry books. I see what it means now.” On this particular adventure, which is the only one to take place in ancient Britain, Nesbit makes an extra effort to construct the past as a time particularly hospitable to children.

When the orphaned Imogen finds her new (ancient) mother, the narrator says, “I wish you could

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74 In fact, as Mavis Reimer points out, Nesbit offers her readers an “unstable” position in regard to empire; although her child characters accept British imperialism, close attention to the texts offer readers the possibility of “challeng[ing] the textual trajectory” (“Writing Empire in E. Nesbit’s Psammead Book,” in E. Nesbit’s Psammead Trilogy, pp. 39-62, 60).
75 Nesbit, Amulet, p. 249.
have seen all the honours and kindnesses lavished on the children … by those ancient Britons. You would have thought, to see them, that a child was something to make a fuss about, not a bit of rubbish to be hustled about the streets and hidden away in the Workhouse.” With a combination of socialist sentiment and nostalgia, Nesbit suggests a golden age in British history when children are treated as valuable. Something similar happens on the children’s trip to the future—there, too, poverty and sickness and other threats to the time of childhood have been done away with, as the siblings learn when they tour the home of a future resident of Britain:

The oddest thing of all was the big room in the middle. It had padded walls and a soft, thick carpet, and all the chairs and tables were padded. There wasn’t a single thing in it that anyone could hurt itself with.

“Whatever’s this for?—lunatics?” asked Cyril.

The lady looked very shocked. “No! It’s for the children, of course,” she said. “Don’t tell me that in your country there are no children’s rooms.”

“There are nurseries,” said Anthea doubtfully, “but the furniture’s all cornery and hard, like other rooms.”

“How shocking!” said the lady; “you must be VERY much behind the times in your country! Why, the children are more than half of the people; it’s not much to have one room where they can have a good time and not hurt themselves.”

“But there’s no fireplace,” said Anthea.

“Hot-air pipes, of course,” said the lady. “Why, how could you have a fire in a nursery? A child might get burned.”

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“In our country,” said Robert suddenly, “more than 3,000 children are burned to death every year. Father told me,” he added as if apologizing for this piece of information, “once when I’d been playing with fire.”  

Both future and past Britains are places where children are given the special treatment proper to their special condition in life. In contrast, present Britain is represented as a site of abuse and misunderstanding. As is usual with the fantastic journey, the children are able to be more childlike in the fantastic space than they are in their ordinary world.

Adult Regression

Nesbit’s fantastic journey does more than restore the children’s childhood to them—it can also restore adults to their inner child selves. This transformation, as I explained in my discussion of *Wings and the Child*, is an integral part of Nesbit’s understanding of what it means to be and speak for a child. In *Amulet*, the representative adult is an archeological scholar usually referred as “the learned gentleman.” He is mixed up in the children’s adventures from the beginning, actually accompanying them on several, with the end result that he gains his heart’s desire, as well as renewed joy and life. However, because of the complications of his adulthood, he must undergo a progressive, or rather regressive, transformation as well as a moment of metamorphosis, and he is only ever able to gain limited access to the worlds of childhood.

The learned gentleman becomes progressively more childlike over the course of the book—he does not begin the story as one of Nesbit’s children hidden inside adult bodies. Rather than being able to connect with children through special empathy enabled by his own clearly recalled childhood memories, the learned gentleman is barely able to remember his own childhood at all. When the children cautiously approach him in order to learn how to read the

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hieroglyphic written on the side of the Amulet, the gentleman experiences only “[s]ome faint memory of a far-off childhood.”  

However, his change quickly begins as Anthea takes him under her wing, extending to him the maternal protection that she gives the other children:

The gentleman started when Anthea put her hand on his arm.

“I hope you won’t be cross and say it’s not my business,” she said, “but do look at your chop! Don’t you think you ought to eat it? Father forgets his dinner sometimes when he’s writing, and Mother always says I ought to remind him if she’s not at home to do it herself, because it’s so bad to miss your regular meals. So I thought perhaps you wouldn’t mind my reminding you, because you don’t seem to have anyone else to do it.”

Although the learned gentleman is an adult and not part of Anthea’s immediate family circle, he nevertheless becomes a part of Anthea’s little flock and enters into the children’s society through her maternal concern.

Another way in which the learned gentleman regresses to childhood is by coming to see himself as the children’s peer. Even at his first encounter with them, he fails to recognize any distinction between their position in life and his own, treating the children with full courtesy and causing Robert to whisper, “He treats us like grown-ups.” Later in the narrative, the learned gentleman’s behavior is reversed. Instead of treating the children like grownups, he openly desires to become one of them and asks them to call him by his childhood name: “When I was your age I was called Jimmy … Would you mind? I should feel more at home in a dream like this if I—Anything that made me seem more like one of you.”

81 Nesbit, *Amulet*, p. 211.
The most important way in which the learned gentleman becomes like the children is through his goodness. Every encounter with the siblings gives him a chance to practice the goodness that seems to have been collecting dust along with his books and antiquities. The children recognize his potential the first time they meet him, and although they must make him promise to be honorable before they show him the Amulet, Cyril affirms, “I’m sure, now I’ve seen you, that it’s not necessary.” It is the learned gentleman who finds a home for a little working-class orphan that the children encounter on the street, by kindly wishing in the presence of the Psammead that “we could find a home where they would be glad to have her.” Furthermore, it is the learned gentleman and not the children who retains his good character over the passage of time. When the children go to visit him in the future, the narrator remarks, “They knew him at once, though his hair was white. His was one of the faces that do not change with age.” The learned gentleman has achieved the inner youthfulness that Nesbit describes in *Wings and the Child*, so much so that it has even imprinted itself on his face.

The learned gentleman has learned how to “slip past the Customs-house with [his] bundle of memories intact,” but age destroys the children’s essential selves. During their visit to the future, the learned gentleman, who believes the children’s appearance is a dream, tells them, “I wish I could dream you oftener. Now you’re grown up you’re not like you used to be.” When he points to a photograph of their future selves “[t]he children saw four grown-up people’s portraits—two ladies, two gentlemen—and looked on them with loathing. ‘Shall we grow up like THAT?’ whispered Jane. ‘How perfectly horrid.’” Through this glimpse of the future, Nesbit informs the readers that not only will the effects of the fantastic journey in preserving the

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83 Nesbit, *Amulet*, p. 236
86 Ibid.
children’s identity be temporary, but the siblings will not even succeed in preserving their own memories of childhood—they will become adults whom children find unsympathetic. Although Nesbit holds out hope that some adults can carry their childhood with them, there is no way of guaranteeing that this will happen. Even children who grow up with all the advantages of a protective home and who have had their childhoods prolonged by magical intervention may lose possession of their essential child selves.

The gentleman’s essential goodness also enables him to experience his own metamorphosis. The children’s desired (and ultimately achieved) metamorphosis is the restoration of their domestic space, which will protect their childhoods. The learned gentleman’s metamorphosis also has to do with enhancing his essential character. Throughout the book, he is closely associated with the past—he is a dedicated historian who possesses a deep passion for his subject (he almost drowns on Atlantis because he refuses to leave before seeing the end of the city). This is in keeping with his essential goodness, since Nesbit associates the past with Romantic innocence, and it is this part of his personality which undergoes metamorphosis when his soul joins with that of an ancient Egyptian priest who desires to live in the present. The learned gentleman and the priest walk beneath the arch of the now whole Amulet, where “men may pass through … to the perfect union, which is not of time or space … thus they two may be one soul in one body.”

Afterward, although he cannot remember exactly what has happened, the learned gentleman feels like “a new man … Absolutely a new man … The dear children! It must be their affection that has given me these luminous apercus. I seem to see so many things now—things I never saw before!” The metamorphosis has redefined the learned gentleman’s essential self. Just as Nesbit’s ideal child-adults exist both in their adult bodies and their child

memories, so the learned gentleman now exists in two temporalities: his own contemporary England, and the ancient past of the Egyptian priest. His success as a historian is assured, but more importantly, his life has been renewed: he has become “a new man.”

However, the learned gentleman’s access to childhood time is limited. Although he accompanies the children on several of their journeys to the past, he always believes them to be dreams. He wonders whether he is going mad, and even thinks of his own metamorphosis as “the most extraordinary dream.”

Despite all of Nesbit’s protestations, even the power of the fantastic journey falls short for adults.

The Problem with Poor Children: *Harding’s Luck*

Nesbit continued to write about time travel in her children’s books—after the publication of *The Story of the Amulet*, it became a standard feature of her fantasy fiction for children. But she wrote only two other books that contained time travel as a major focus of the plot. The first of these, *The House of Arden* (serialized from January to November, 1908), works along similar principles to *Amulet*: two orphaned, impoverished middle-class children, Edred and Elfrida, inherit a ramshackle castle. With the help of the Mouldiwarp from the family crest, the children set out to find a long buried treasure. Along the way, they discover that their father is still alive, so the quest for treasure becomes a quest to restore fractured domesticity—just as in *Amulet*. But the sequel, *Harding’s Luck*, features a very different protagonist and reveals Nesbit’s own uneasiness with her ideal Romantic childhood and her method of preserving that childhood. Dickie Harding, the hero, is (in contrast to all of his Nesbit predecessors) neither middle class nor genteelly impoverished. He is really poor, the orphaned son of working-class parents. At the start of the book, he has neither education nor breeding, and this lack prevents him from having

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his childhood preserved by the fantastic journey. Just as Kingsley could not imagine preserving
Tom’s childhood, but only restarting it in order to turn a working-class boy into a productive
citizen, so Dickie is valued not for what he is, but for what he may grow up to be.

Despite his hard life, Dickie has not lost all traces of the essential child. When he joins
forces with a tramp, who takes advantage of Dickie’s lame leg to stir the sympathies of the
wealthy, Dickie receives his first exposure to the country. In a passage greatly reminiscent of
Tom’s first trip to the country in *Water-Babies*, Dickie finds the country perfectly marvelous:

All the country sights and sounds, that you hardly notice because you have known
them every year as long as you can remember, were wonderful magic to the little
boy from Deptford. The green hedge, the cows looking over them; the tinkle of
sheep-bells; the “baa” of the sheep … the stubby fields where barley stood in
sheaves—real barley like the people next door but three gave to their hens … the
shril thrill of the skylark’s song, “like canary birds got loose” … the splendor of
distance—you never see distance in Deptford … all these made the journey a
royal progress to Dickie of Deptford. He forgot that he was lame, forgot that he
had run away—a fact that had cost him a twinge of two of fear or conscience
earlier in the morning. He was happy as a prince is happy, new-come to his
inheritance.\(^9^0\)

Even a working-class child can appreciate nature and belong there, “new-come to his
inheritance.” Though Dickie has never visited the country before, he demonstrates that he has
always had an affinity for the natural world by comparing the country scenes around him to what
scraps of nature were available to him back in Deptford: “real barley like the people next door …
gave to their hens” and “canary birds got loose.”

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\(^9^0\) Nesbit, *Harding’s Luck*, pp. 30-1.
But while Dickie may have an affinity for nature the same way his middle-class counterparts do, he lacks the moral sense necessary to make him “good,” as the narrator makes clear in a description of Dickie at work in his new profession. At first, begging for a living seems like a game to him: “They had told lies, you observe … and had by these lies managed to get half a crown and a penny out of the charitable; and far from being ashamed of their acts, they were bubbling over with merriment and delight at their own cleverness. Please do not be too shocked. Remember that neither of them knew any better … To the little tramp the whole thing was a new and entrancing game of makebelieve.”  

91 Where Nesbit’s middle-class child protagonists are usually led into honorable acts by their games (even if those acts are often misunderstood by adults), Dickie is led into doing wrong by his childish pleasure in make-believe.

When Dickie’s conscience does make an appearance, it springs from social elitism instead of from his child nature. Dickie and his adoptive tramp burgle the home of some country gentry, in a replay of Oliver Twist. But unlike Oliver, Dickie is quite excited by the prospect. The narrator says in excuse, “If you come to think of it, burgling must be a very exciting profession. And Dickie had no idea that it was wrong. It seemed to him a wholly delightful and sporting amusement.”  

92 However, once engaged in the act, Dickie, again like Oliver, finds himself unable to go through with it: “a most odd feeling came to Dickie … a feeling of pride mixed with a feeling of shame. Pride in his own cleverness, and another kind of pride that made that cleverness seem shameful. He had a feeling, very queer and very strong, that he, Dickie, was not the sort of person to open doors for the letting in of burglars. He felt as you would feel if you suddenly found your hands covered with filth, and would not understand how you could have let

91 Nesbit, Harding’s Luck, p. 35.
92 Nesbit, Harding’s Luck, p. 42.
At first glance, this might seem like Dickie’s natural childhood innocence asserting itself—because he is a child and pure, he senses that burgling is wrong. But as the narrator hints, Dickie’s social conscience actually springs from his secret aristocratic heritage (his grandfather, heir to the noble house of Arden, was abducted as a baby, and the successive generations lived and died in abject poverty). Unlike his affinity for nature, this moral sense can have no root in the slums of Deptford. Dickie turns from burgling not because it is antithetical to his identity as a child but because it violates his inherited aristocratic identity: “he, Dickie, was not the sort of person to open doors for the letting in of burglars.” Unlike the children in the Psammead trilogy, who are “the sort of people that wonderful things happen to” because they are children, Dickie is not the sort of person to open doors for burglars because of his bloodline.

Again and again in the book, the pride of aristocratic lineage is asserted as the motivation for moral behavior. On Dickie’s first trip into the past, when he is told that he is a member of the great house of Arden and inducted into a different life, the narrator makes very clear the purpose of Dickie’s fantastic journeys. They are not to preserve his childhood, which, tainted as it is by working-class poverty and vice, is not worth preserving. Rather, the purpose of the journey is that “Dickie changed, every hour of every day and every moment of every hour, from the little boy who lived at New Cross among the ugliness … to Richard of the other name who … knew himself called to a destiny of power and helpful kindness.”

When he returns to his own time in early twentieth-century England, he is able to support himself in an honorable fashion, without any “low, dirty tricks,” because of the carving skills he has learned in the past. He also encourages Beale the tramp to find an honorable trade, and the two of them become respectable citizens.

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93 Nesbit, Harding’s Luck, p. 46.
94 Nesbit, Harding’s Luck, p. 84.
95 Nesbit, Harding’s Luck, p. 108.
The purpose of Nesbit’s fantastic journey for the working-class child, then, is not to preserve the golden years of youth but to rescue the child from childhood. When childhood is tainted by poverty, illness, and corruption, it is not worth preserving. Dickie gains from his fantastic journey a way out of poverty, but at the sacrifice of his childhood. Dickie must progress. Although the narrative seems to take a circular form, as it shuffles him back and forth between his present-day and Jacobean England, each new visit finds Dickie a little older and very conscious of his own hard-learned accomplishments and progress. Like the Amulet children, he is able to manipulate the magic that carries him back and forth in time and to return to the same moment in time that he has left. But unlike them, his progress in the past is cumulative. He gets older there, and he gets older in the present of his ordinary world. Furthermore, he is aware that using this magic highlights his own inevitable path toward adulthood. After one of his trips to Jacobean England, he tells himself, “I will only stay a month … a month here and a month there, that will keep things even. Because if I were longer there than I am here I should not be growing up so fast here as I should there … how silly if I were a grown man in that life and had to come back and be a little boy in this!”Dickie is not only aware of his own growing up—he negotiates it.

Unlike his middle-class predecessors, Dickie reaches adulthood within the confines of the text, after choosing to remain permanently in the past. Nesbit appends a narrated, telescopic view of Dickie’s journey to adulthood to the very end of the story:

And Dickie himself. I see him in his ruff and cloak … *living out the life he has chosen* in the old England … *I see him growing* in grace and favor, versed in book learning, expert in all noble sports and exercises. For Dickie is not lame now.

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96 Nesbit, *Harding’s Luck*, p. 159, emphasis mine.
I see the root of his being taking fast hold of his chosen life, and the life that he renounced receding, receding till he can hardly see it any more.

I see him, a tall youth, straight and strong, lending the old nurse his arm to walk in the trim, beautiful garden at Deptford. And I hear him say—

“When I was a little boy, nurse, I had mighty strange dreams—of another life than this.”

“Forget them,” she says; “dreams go to the making of all proper men. But now thou art a man; forget the dreams of thy childhood, and play the man to the glory of God and of the house of Arden.”

Dickie not only grows up but is enjoined to leave his childhood dreams behind, in direct contradiction to Nesbit in *Wings and the Child*, who encourages the preservation of childhood memories. But there is no value in Dickie’s memories. Working-class childhood is not a golden time to be preserved in literature or in memory. Rather, it is a problem to be fixed so that working-class children can grow up into productive British citizens.

Because of her shift in focus from individual children to the time of childhood, Nesbit ultimately departs from her predecessors in an even deeper way. For Carroll and MacDonald, the fantastic journey granted children agency that might actually be practiced by children outside of books. A child who engages in Nonsense, as did Alice, can really become more creative. MacDonald truly believed that children could wield a divine influence on the world. Even Kingsley thought that a regimen of cold baths and moral teaching could reform the characters of most children. But Nesbit, by turning the focus of the fantastic journey from the child to childhood, put the results of the journey firmly in the realm of wish fulfillment. No child ever restored her family by using a magical amulet, and Nesbit finds the natural child characteristics

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97 Nesbit, *Harding’s Luck*, p. 280, emphasis mine.
such as play and love to be powerless against the progress of growth and the threat of death. Instead, Nesbit places hope in the possibility of carrying one’s essential child identity into adulthood. In my final chapter, I will turn to Barrie, who gives up even imagining that children’s growth can be halted and pulls the veil away from the machinery of the fantastic journey to reveal its utter inability to halt time.
Barrie’s *Peter Pan* deconstructs the fantastic journey as not only impossible but as undesirable. The fantastic journey developed as an attempt to give the child the freedom and agency that children, as human beings, deserve, while simultaneously protecting and preserving the child from progressing toward adulthood for as long as possible. For Carroll, this means enabling the child’s creativity, but channeling that creativity into the non-progressive form of nonsense. For MacDonald, it means enabling the child’s divine capacities—bringing the child to an awareness of its own nature, but doing so in such a way that no growth is involved. For Nesbit, the fantastic journey means restoring the special space of childhood so that child time can be prolonged for as long as possible. But for Barrie, the fantastic journey falls apart. Far from preserving the child from growth, the journey Barrie depicts in *Peter Pan* deliberately demonstrates that the fantastic journey is an illusion and a sham. It cannot, even temporarily, prevent children from growing. And *Peter Pan* does more than that—it deconstructs two key elements of the essential child identity that the fantastic journey was constructed to protect and reproduce—the nature of the Romantic child and the sacred necessity of home to children’s well-being. I argue that in *Peter Pan*, Barrie challenges the narrative of the fantastic journey and deconstructs it—he ultimately concludes that children’s growth cannot be stopped in any context that involves them returning to the ordinary world. In *Peter Pan*, the fantastic journey is impossible.

*Walt Disney’s Peter Pan*

In one sense, it is difficult to discuss the fantastic journey in *Peter Pan* because it does not exist. The children’s journey to Neverland violates the definition of the fantastic journey
because the Darling parents know that their children are gone when Wendy, John, and Michael are frolicking on the island. The adventuring is happening in the same time frame in which the Darling parents exist, and in the same physical bodies the children inhabit while at home in their ordinary world. There is no fantastic journey. Yet the concerns and shape of the story interact so closely with those of the previously discussed fantastic journey texts that I could not complete this discussion without a close look at *Peter Pan* and its challenge to the trope. In fact, the story is so closely connected to the fantastic journey that, when Disney decided to capitalize on the story’s classic status by creating an animated film, the studio rewrote the story to fit the requirements of the fantastic journey’s master narrative.

Before I examine some of Barrie’s Peter Pan texts, I want to take a close look at Disney’s 1953 animated *Peter Pan* in order to highlight both how easy it would have been for Barrie to write *Peter Pan* as a fantastic journey and how Disney, notorious for its sanitizing and standardizing of children’s stories, chose the fantastic journey as the reconstructive trope for its own story. As Cathlena Martin and Laurie Taylor point out, “Once Disney adapted the story, it was no longer Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, but instead Walt Disney’s *Peter Pan.*”1 Disney has become the omnipresent producer of children’s culture in the English-speaking world, and the brand has been particularly successful with *Peter Pan*. Disney’s red-haired elf, clad in green tunic and leggings, is the image that pops into most American minds when they hear the name, and it is the image that has been franchised and reproduced millions of times across the globe. Disney’s version of the story is flattened and simplified and establishes a baseline of expectation—what we expect *Peter Pan* to be about before we encounter one of Barrie’s own versions. Disney’s

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film gets at the heart of what we, trained by the narrative of the fantastic journey, want Neverland to be.

From its opening sequence, the film works to establish a binary between the ordinary world and the fantastic, mythical space of Neverland. The narrator locates the Darling children firmly in London, giving the story a firm, real-world base with an address: “London … on a quiet street in Bloomsbury … that house on the corner.”² The real world is fleshed out with Mr. Darling, the practical, bad-tempered man of business; Mrs. Darling, the beautiful, gentle, mother who believes Peter Pan is “the spirit of youth”; and the three Darling children: motherly Wendy, erudite John, and babyish Michael. The children never waver from their primary traits throughout the film, flatly sticking to type. Other than the games they play in their nursery, there is no connection between the island of Neverland and the house in Bloomsbury.

The film creates a space for the fantastic journey by disrupting the security of the domestic order and by threatening a child, Wendy, with growth. Mr. Darling, enraged by his sons’ having drawn a treasure map on his last clean shirt front, blames their perceived disrespect on Wendy’s Peter Pan stories. Declaring that it is time for the girl to grow up, he decrees that this will be her “last night in the nursery.” The fantastic journey is motivated by a paternal push toward adulthood and Wendy’s protest—she is not ready to grow up. She wants to remain in the nursery with her brothers and her Peter Pan stories. As soon as the Darling parents depart for a party, a sly-eyed Peter appears slips into the nursery, searching for his lost shadow. His search wakes Wendy, and while she sews his shadow back on, Peter reveals that he loves to sit by the nursery window and hear Wendy’s stories (which are all about him) and that he then returns to Neverland to tell them to the Lost Boys. Wendy sadly tells him that she must grow up and that

² Barrie, Ted Sears, et al., Peter Pan, directed by Clyde Geronimi, et al., produced 1953 (Burbank, CA: Disney Enterprises), DVD.
this will be her last night in the nursery. Peter, horrified by the potential loss of stories, orders Wendy to come “to Neverland … You’ll never grow up there.” Neverland is thus explicitly identified by Peter as a location where one does not grow up. A journey there is a way of escaping adulthood.

Disney further alters the story by giving Neverland more mythical gravitas than it receives in Barrie’s texts. In the Barrie versions, Peter gives the directions to Neverland as “[s]econd to the right, and straight on til morning.” But while the Disney film treats this as a perfectly serious set of directions, Barrie makes it clear that it is no such thing, as the narrator of Peter and Wendy makes clear: “even birds, carrying maps and consulting them at windy corners, could not have sighted it with these instructions. Peter, you see, just said anything that came into his head.” In contrast, Disney adds the word “star” to the line: “Second star to the right and straight on til morning.” By making Peter point at two particularly brilliant stars as he speaks, Disney transforms the location of Neverland from a joke—more of Peter Pan’s misleading make-believe—to a place with cosmic connections. Stars are often connected with dreams, and this move gives Neverland more of the flavor of the country at the back of north wind, which is found by going north. This new address offers Neverland a kind of mythical legitimacy that it lacks in Barrie’s more complicated text, which I will discuss later.

A more important alteration that Disney makes is in subduing the violence present in Neverland. For example, Wendy is shot at by the Lost Boys, who are told by Tinker Bell that Peter wants Wendy killed. However, none of the arrows stick, and Peter saves Wendy at the last minute as she tumbles toward the ground. This is an important variation from Barrie’s narratives, where Wendy is actually shot (although the arrow sticks in an acorn Peter has given her), and the

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3 Barrie, Peter and Wendy, p. 37.
4 Ibid.
boys spend some time thinking she is actually dead before they discover she is merely in a deep swoon. Another instance of lessened violence occurs when John and Michael set off with the Lost Boys to capture some Indians, but their adventure goes awry when they are ambushed and captured themselves. However, the Lost Boys assure the frightened John that the Indians will soon release them—this is a game they often play, and the victor always releases his captives without harm. John is astonished to learn that “this is only a game.” Thus, the violence in Neverland is explicitly defined as play. Although the stakes are re-heightened when the chief threatens to actually burn the boys at the stake unless the kidnapped Princess Tiger Lily is returned, the scene is nevertheless a marked departure from Barrie, where the Indians are described as wearing belts of the scalps they have taken, and the Lost Boys “liked [blood] as a rule.” In Disney’s softened version, there is rarely true violence, and on the occasions when it emerges, only the inhabitants of Neverland, and not the children, are allowed to wield it, such as when Peter and Wendy encounter mermaids. The mermaids try to drown Wendy, who picks up a large shell and threatens the mermaids with violence, but Peter stops her—it is permissible for the native inhabitants of Neverland to act with violence, but it is not alright for the children.

While the film makes children less violent, it also makes them more sexual, in contrast to the child protagonists of the previously discussed fantastic journeys, as well as the Peter Pan of Barrie’s texts. Disney plays up the sexuality Barrie allows to his female characters and gently erases Peter’s asexual queerness—a trait he shares with characters such as Alice and Diamond. The girls in the film are not only sexual but sexualized, especially Tinkerbell, who looks like a pinup girl. Wendy tries to kiss Peter and is deeply jealous of Tiger Lily; and Tiger Lily (who is visually a child), does kiss Peter, although the act is shielded inside his feather headdress. What is truly surprising in the film is that not only the girls but Peter himself is given sexual

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5 Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*, p. 47.
awareness. The musical accompaniment to Tiger Lily’s flirtation chants, “What makes the red man red? Let’s go back a million years to the very first Indian prince. He kissed a maid and started to blush, and we’ve all been blushing since.” When Peter reemerges from the headdress that veils his kiss with Tiger Lily, he blushes furiously before leaping up, giving an ecstatic war whoop. This sexualizing of Peter—definitely not present in Barrie—fits in with the film’s overall commitment to lessening anything about the story that deviates from the norm.

Finally, Disney casts the entire Neverland adventure as a fantastic journey. By the time the Darling children are returned to their nursery by Peter’s flying pirate ship at least two nights and two days, calculated by the changing sun, have passed. However, when we segue from the flying pirate ship to the Darling home, we see Mr. and Mrs. Darling just returning from the same party they were attending at the beginning of the film. The successful social occasion has elevated Mr. Darling into a better mood, and when Mrs. Darling brings up the subject of Wendy, he says jovially, “Mary, you know I never mean these things.” Wendy is thus given a paternal reprieve, so that her return from Neverland need not signal her immediate growing up. When Mrs. Darling walks into the nursery, she finds Wendy asleep on the windowsill. By positioning Wendy in a sleeping position, the film suggests that her adventure in Neverland has perhaps been a dream, since she appears to have returned to the same time in the ordinary world that she originally left, although Wendy herself displays complete confidence that her adventure has been real.

Even though the film used a threat of growth to initiate the fantastic journey, it is careful to remove it before the end through Mr. Darling’s relenting. This restoration of domestic harmony is not directly linked to the fantastic journey to Neverland, as are the time travels of the children in *Amulet*, but the film as a whole works to restore wholeness to the family. Wendy
willingly abandons her parents, causing the fracture, then voluntarily returns after her adventure. Mr. Darling moves from threatening to force his daughter out of the nursery into willingly delaying the moment when she will leave. Disney’s fantastic journey serves its purpose by removing Wendy from her ordinary world until the threat of forced growth has passed.

Although Disney’s story fits into the classic fantastic journey narrative, Disney does seem to deviate from the trope by apparently using the fantastic journey to prepare Wendy for adulthood, rather than to prevent her from moving toward it. After Wendy returns from Neverland, she tells her father that she is “ready to grow up.” This at first seems contrary to the purposes of the fantastic journey, which should have been working to preserve Wendy’s childhood, not push her toward adulthood. However, if we consider that a key element of all fantastic journey texts is the right relationship of the child to her home, then it becomes possible to see Wendy’s willingness to grow up not as a move toward adulthood, but as a move toward domestic harmony—she is becoming a better daughter by trying to be obedient to her father’s wishes. Her father has also come to a better understanding of his role in the family. Instead of accepting Wendy’s offer to grow up, he tells her, “All in good time.” The fantastic journey protects Wendy’s childhood by removing her from Mr. Darling’s corrupted parental influence and returning her only after she can assume the right role of a child toward a parent and still be safe in her childhood.

Not only is Wendy saved from adulthood by her fantastic journey, but she, and the other children, are aware of a desire not to grow up—a striking change between the film and the tradition of the fantastic journey as I have thus far examined it. Wendy, with Peter conspiring to help her, chooses the fantastic journey in order to avoid the fate of leaving the nursery. Children in the earlier texts I have examined have also deliberately chosen the journey—Alice is driven by
her curiosity, and Diamond deliberately chooses to go with North Wind because he loves her and wants to be obedient. Similarly, the Amulet children also choose their journey—in fact, must do so repeatedly and show great courage in doing so when the adventures become frightening—in order to restore their scattered family. In all these cases, the children choose the journey for other reasons than knowingly avoiding their own growth. This awareness of the dangers of growth and deliberate clinging to childhood is present in Barrie’s own texts, but only in the special case of one of the child characters—Peter Pan himself. In my collection of texts, a wider awareness of and desire to avoid impending adulthood exists only in the film, in the characters of Wendy, who chooses to grow up, and the Lost Boys, who ultimately choose not to.

Barrie’s Peter Pan Texts

When writing about Peter Pan the first question that arises is always: Which Peter Pan? Barrie, although somewhat coy about the story’s origins, locates them in his famous relationship with the five Davies brothers. In his dedication to the 1928 publication of the play—a text finalized only after two decades of revisions—Barrie addresses himself directly to the brothers and explains, “The play of Peter is streaky with you still … A score of Acts had to be left out, and you were in them all … I suppose I always knew that I made Peter by rubbing the five of you violently together, as savages with two sticks produce a flame. That is all he is, the spark I got from you.” Barrie openly acknowledges that the invention of Peter Pan was a collaborative effort, saying that while he may have been “abetting … you used to provide corroboration that was never given to you by me.” Peter Pan is presented as a form of imaginative play that, in a

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6 Barrie, “To the Five: A Dedication,” in Peter Pan and Other Plays, ed. Peter Hollindale (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 75-86, 75. Hereafter, Barrie will be cited for “To the Five,” and Hollindale will be cited for editorial commentary from this Clarendon edition.

7 Ibid.
more real way than any other fantastic journey text I have examined, allows for the creative agency of children.

Not only does Barrie credit the Davies boys with the shared invention of Peter Pan, but he is able to produce textual evidence of their involvement in the creative process. What we could call Barrie’s first published version of *Peter Pan* was a book titled *The Boy Castaways of Black Lake Island*. It was a narrative composed entirely of pictures and chapter headings, and it starred the three eldest Davies boys, chronicling their imaginary adventures as castaways during a summer of play with Barrie. Although the narrative, privately published in only two copies, bears little resemblance to the Peter Pan story we now know, Barrie locates the origins of several famous characters in it: “In *The Boy Castaways* Captain Hook has arrived but is called Captain Swarthy … The dog … seems never to have been called Nana but was evidently in training for that post … Even Tinker Bell had reached our island before we left it.”

Wendy’s origins are additionally located in the nurse who constantly interrupts their playing to put the littlest Davies down for his nap.

But when Barrie is discussing the writing of the play *Peter Pan* and not the invention of the basic characters, his story of creation changes. For a sentence, Barrie tries to maintain the collaborative narrative (“What was it that made us eventually give the public in the thin form of a play that which had been woven for ourselves alone?”), but then abandons “us” for “I”: “I know what it was, I was losing my grip.” It immediately becomes evident that he means his grip on the boys and their imaginations. One by one, the Davies brothers are outgrowing their belief in fairies, which had enabled them to participate in the act of creation. Barrie concludes, “That was a quarter of a century ago, and I clutch my brows in vain to remember whether it was

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8 Barrie, “To the Five,” pp. 82-4.
9 Barrie, “To the Five,” p. 84.
10 Barrie, “To the Five,” p. 75.
a last desperate throw to retain the five of you for a little longer, or merely a cold decision to turn
you into bread and butter.” Barrie openly states the goal of the fantastic journey. Although he
draws back from the full force of the statement by balancing it with the possible motive of
financial exploitation, that possibility is lessened by the emphasis of the rest of the “Dedication,”
which is on memory and not money. Barrie explicitly says that a purpose of writing Peter Pan
the play was to “retain” or preserve children in a certain stage of maturation. While the play itself
denies the possibility of delaying growth, Barrie suggests that it is, itself, a kind of fantastic
journey—a means of preserving children from growth.

Even as Barrie confesses to the attempt to preserve children, he also confesses to his
failure. Of the two youngest Davies boys, who had not yet lost belief in magic at the time the
play was first written, Barrie says, “They had a long summer day, and I turn round twice and
now they are off to school.” The longest he has been able to revive their belief in magic once
they have lost it is two minutes. All that remains is the same nostalgia Carroll offers to Alice in
his prefatory poem: “A childish story take … Lay it where Childhood’s dreams are twined/In
Memory’s mystic band.” Barrie says of Castaways, Peter Pan’s earliest incarnation, that it was
“Published to whet your memories. Does it whet them? Do you hear once more, like some long-
forgotten whistle beneath your window … the not quite mortal blows.” The play’s dedication
reveals the uselessness of any attempt in real life to preserve children and keep them from
growth, and the text is made even more melancholy by the fact that by 1928, when the
Dedication was first published, two of the Davies boys had died.

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11 Barrie, “To the Five,” p. 76.
14 Carroll, Alice’s Adventures, p. 4.
15 Barrie, “To the Five,” p. 81.
The hopelessness of retarding of children’s growth was a conclusion Barrie had already reached in 1902, when Peter Pan’s name first appeared in print in the novel *The Little White Bird*. The protagonist/narrator is a bachelor who begins to live vicariously through a woman he observes out of his club window. He follows her courtship, marriage, and entry into motherhood, then decides that he will “steal” her child, David, by winning his love away from her. One way the protagonist attempts to do this is by rewriting the boy’s origins. He invents a mythology that claims all children were once birds so that their mothers have little to do with their coming into the world, other than requesting them. The narrator makes David complicit in this mythology, which includes Peter Pan, by encouraging him to take part in the storytelling. Peter Pan chooses to run away from home, confident that he can return at any time. When he makes up his mind to go home, he finds the nursery window barred and his mother with her arm around another little boy. Peter is forced to return to Kensington Gardens where he lives with fairies and is exiled to eternal childhood. However, in the narrator’s real world, David’s mother does not forget him, nor does David forget his mother. David remains attached to his mother and on a steady growth track. The narrator, foiled in his plan to steal the child, is at last persuaded to take up a more participatory and normal role in the wider society.

*Peter Pan* the play was first produced in 1904, and its basic shape remains the one that we recognize as the Peter Pan story, including the failed fantastic journey. Although the play is an unstable text (even after it was in production Barrie constantly reworked scenes), most of the changes are relatively unimportant. Roger Lancelyn Green, who has made extended study of the play’s various versions, explains, “The first draft of *Peter Pan* shows that from the start Barrie had the course of the play clearly defined right through as far as the Return Nursery scene.” 16 By its second production in 1905, it was “virtually completed in its final form … future alterations

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consist only in the addition, omission, or alteration of old lines and scraps of business.”¹⁷ Many of the changes made had to do with practical aspects of good theatre, such as cutting out all traces of the very outdated Harlequinade and traditional Pantomime. Other changes included a repression of Tiger Lily’s rather aggressive sexuality (to make the play more suitable for children, as well as to strengthen the play’s complicated sexualities) and a series of alterations that served to make “Wendy more important … highlighting her situation as both child and incipient mother … The evolving clarification of the play’s form, therefore, sharpens the focal contrast between time and timelessness which Wendy’s relationship with Peter represents.”¹⁸ (I discuss both the sexuality of the characters and Peter and Wendy’s contrasting relationships with time at more length later.) The one significant portion of the play that remained in flux for years was the ending. Barrie at first attempted a highly humorous and chaotic ending, with elements of Pantomime, but that was cut before the first production, and a usual ending to the play became one where Peter returns to the nursery a year after the first adventure and takes Wendy back to Neverland to do spring cleaning. This was seen as an appropriately happy ending for a children’s play, with a feeling similar to that created at the end of the Disney film, where the reunited Darling family happily watch Peter’s flying pirate ship sail away.¹⁹ The ending with which most of us are now most familiar—where Peter returns after Wendy has grown up and takes her daughter with him in her place—was not written until 1908, and was performed only once.²⁰ But this additional scene, titled “When Wendy Grew Up,” is now widely accepted as the most appropriate ending for the play. Certainly, it illustrates more clearly than any of Barrie’s other endings the failure of the fantastic journey.

¹⁷ Green, p. 109.
¹⁸ Hollindale, p. xiii.
¹⁹ Green, pp. 58-9.
²⁰ Green, p. 58.
Barrie’s other important textual incarnation of Peter Pan, and the one on which I focus in this chapter, is his novelization Peter and Wendy, which may be regarded as the most complete Peter Pan story, although not the text most friendly to children. The novel remains very close to the play. Green verifies that “Barrie’s book contains nearly every word of the play as acted … and is indeed much nearer to the acting script still in use today than the published edition of the play itself.”

Additionally, Peter and Wendy uses “When Wendy Grew Up” as its conclusion, reproducing the dialogue almost verbatim. Of course, given the larger textual canvas of the novel, Barrie wrote at more length and indulged his narrative voice, often in passages that puzzle child readers. Green offers this as a reason why the book has never really become a “nursery classic … perhaps Barrie’s elusive prose style in the patches of narrative have put off children in the days when all children knew the story and had seen or were about to see the play.” Rose confirms that the story is considered “a classic for children, despite the fact that they could not read it.” Although Green and Rose suggest deeply different reasons behind the impenetrability of Barrie’s language for children, Green because children see no reason to put up with Barrie’s “elusive prose style” when they already know the story and Rose because she sees Barrie’s “impossibility to read” as a sign that children’s literature can never actually speak to children, both critics are troubled by the same problem with Barrie’s novel: it is not entirely suitable for children.

I argue that Peter and Wendy’s unsuitability for children is a result of its departure from the fantastic journey, which necessitated a shift in focus. I partially draw this reading from Jack Zipes, who suggests that the reason Peter and Wendy seems inappropriate for children is that

21 Green, p. 115.
22 Hollindale, p. vii.
23 Green, p. 115.
24 Rose, p. 6.
adults, and not children, are its intended audience: “The ‘definitive’ novel is the most complicated and sophisticated of all the versions of *Peter Pan*, and though it may have been directed in part at young readers, it is clearly … written primarily for adults. It is *not* fiction for children. There are too many in-jokes, asides, allusions, and intrusions made with the wink of an eye for children to fully grasp what is occurring throughout the novel … it is apparent that the narrator of the novel is sharing his story with adults and, given his intimate knowledge of children and their world—something he tends to lord over his readers—he has made it his mission to explain children to adults.”

Like Nesbit’s narrator in *Five Children and It*, Barrie’s narrator also regards himself as one with special knowledge of children to be imparted to adults. Zipes further claims that the book takes the forms of a “meta-commentary on the proper roles of fathers and mothers and … a handbook for adults on how imaginative play must be safeguarded for children so that they can evolve into responsible adults.” In Zipes’s view, the novel’s purpose is to teach adults to be good parents, the right kind of guardians heralded by all fantastic journey authors as the rightful defenders of childhood.

While I agree with Zipes that the purpose of the book is to correct adult behavior, the push for better parenting is only one side of the coin. In order to become these better parents and guardians of imaginative childhood, adults must also give something up—the ideals of the Romantic child and the fantastic journey. If adults are going to acknowledge that the purpose of imaginative play is, as Zipes says, so that children “can evolve into responsible adults,” then the foundation of the fantastic journey has been removed. The purpose of the fantastic journey is no longer to preserve children through the abrupt changes of metamorphosis, but to help them grow, to “evolve.” Evolution can only happen inside time. Just as Barrie explains in his dedication to

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26 Zipes, p. xxv.
the published play that real children cannot be retained, so his novel carefully explains to adults that even in imaginative play, the idea of a Romantic child who remains a child must be given up. This turn of the novel toward adults to enable a focus on the collapsing Romantic ideals is why I have based my own argument about Peter Pan mainly on the novel.

The Fantastic Space of Neverland

As in all fantastic journey texts, the relationship between the child and the fantastic space is critical in Peter and Wendy. But while for MacDonald and Nesbit the fantastic spaces maintain an existence separate from the child (people other than children could visit both the country at the back of the north wind and the past) even though the children’s identity gave them special access to the spaces, in Barrie, the children and the space of Neverland are so organically and intimately connected that they are actually the same thing. Barrie uses the metaphor of a map to describe the way the characteristics of Neverland actually build the shape of the child’s mind and vice versa:

I don’t know whether you have ever seen a map of a person’s mind. Doctors sometimes draw maps of other parts of you, and your own map can become intensely interesting, but catch them trying to draw a map of a child’s mind, which is not only confused, but keeps going round all the time. There are zigzag lines on it, just like your temperature on a card, and these are probably roads in the island, for the Neverland is always more or less an island, with astonishing splashes of colour here and there, and coral reefs and rakish-looking craft in the offing, and savages and lonely lairs, and gnomes who are mostly tailors, and caves through which a river runs, and princes with six elder brothers, and a hut fast going to decay, and one very small old lady with a hooked nose. It would be
an easy map if that were all, but there is also first day at school, religion, fathers, the round pond, needle-work, murders, hangings, verbs that take the dative, chocolate pudding day, getting into braces, say ninety-nine, threepence for pulling out your tooth yourself, and so on, and either these are part of the island or they are another map showing through, and it is all rather confusing, especially as nothing will stand still.

Of course the Neverlands vary a good deal. John’s, for instance, had a lagoon with flamingoes flying over it at which John was shooting, while Michael, who was very small, had a flamingo with lagoons flying over it … But on the whole the Neverlands have a family resemblance, and if they stood still in a row you could say of them that they have each other’s nose, and so forth. On these magic shores children at play are for ever beaching their coracles. We too have been there; we can still hear the sound of the surf, though we shall land no more.”

The child’s mind is Neverland. The syntax of the paragraph clearly equates the two: “a map of a child’s mind … [has] zigzag lines on it, just like your temperature on a card, and these are probably roads in the island, for the Neverland is always more or less an island.” This idea is reiterated toward the end of the paragraph, where the narrator says that the features of the ordinary world may be “part of the island.” In no other text that I have examined is the child so explicitly its own fantastic destination.

Alice comes the closest to Barrie’s idea, since Wonderland turns out to be the product of Alice’s dream—still, Wonderland is not Alice’s perpetual state, but a place to which she must be lured. Alice’s journey is an unconscious or subconscious one. She needs to journey to

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Wonderland to become acquainted with the chaotic creativity of her own mind, and everything she encounters seems to her to be strange and curious. Neverland, on the other hand, is the shape of the child’s mind—as described by the narrator—but it is also the deliberate invention of the child. When awake, Wendy, John, and Michael are always playing at being in Neverland. Peter Pan actually lives there, so that his inner mind and outside environment are literally the same. Carroll postulated a child who needed to be thrust back into her own nature, one who does not follow the dictates of Wonderland either before or after her dream. But Barrie’s Darling children and Peter Pan have embraced their child natures and play them out as fully as possible.

Neverland in Peter and Wendy (and in Peter Pan—a version of this passage is spoken by the play’s narrator) is both the child and the destination. The journey in Peter Pan is the child’s journey to herself, although each self and Neverland differ slightly: “John’s … had a lagoon with flamingoes flying over it … while Michael, who was very small, had a flamingo with lagoons flying over it.” In a way, this conflation of identity between fantastic space and child eliminates the need for a fantastic journey. Children have no need to travel to a fantastic space that allows them imaginative agency, since that space is already contained within themselves. The children’s whole (un)fantastic journey is driven by the spirit of childhood—children become their own adventure.

Because the child carries her fantastic space around with her, the fantastic and ordinary worlds intermingle in a “confused” fashion, which so complicates things that it keeps doctors from drawing a picture of a child’s mind. The narrator thus discredits any scientific efforts to understand children, while maintaining his own stance of authority and proceeding to explain how the confusion is perpetuated by the intermingling of fantastic (Robinson Crusoe-type adventures and fairytale images) and ordinary (“first day at school”) worlds. The halves are not
neatly divided, but “either these are part of the island or they are another map showing through.” The child lives simultaneously in two different realities—that of play and imagination and that of daily living—and gives both equal validity in her mind. Again, this stands in marked difference to the other texts. Alice is either in Wonderland or out of it. When she is in, her ordinary experience seems like nonsense, and when she is out, her Wonderland experience is only a dream. Although Nesbit’s children maintain their sense of reality both in and out of adventures, that very coherence means that the adventures are separate from their ordinary lives. Diamond comes closer to a Neverland kind of existence, since after visiting the country at the back of the north wind, he carries its effect around with him, living in a new spiritual reality. But the country at the back of the north wind shapes Diamond. It does not proceed from him, as the Neverlands proceed from their individual children.

The fantastic journey acknowledges that children cannot be held static and remain healthy, and Neverland reflects the child’s mental activity. Not only does the child live in two worlds at once, but she is constantly in motion among the various aspects of her worlds: everything “keeps going round all the time,” and “it is all rather confusing, especially as nothing will stand still.” Children’s minds are extremely active—standing still is unnatural for them, but adults find their motion chaotic, “confusing.” Carroll develops a similar idea with Alice, who must be rescued from her ordinary world, where she is stagnating from lack of motion and stimulation—she is falling asleep because she has no “pictures or conversations” to entertain her. Carroll plunges her into Wonderland, where she is forced into constant motion (the one thing Alice does not do in Wonderland is sleep). Just as in Barrie, the motion is chaotic, with bits of Alice’s ordinary world coming into play in Wonderland. But in her story, Wonderland trumps the ordinary world, and Alice is distressed by her inability to accurately reproduce any of her
memorized poems in an unaltered state. In Barrie, children do this mixing naturally and without
the impetus of a trip down a rabbit hole. Alice has to be taught to be a better child by being
weaned from the torpid reality that has stagnated her, but Barrie’s narrator insists that children
are already living in this state of constant motion between the imaginary and ordinary worlds.

Even as this passage acknowledges that the child creates her own fantastic space, it also
admits that her childhood cannot last forever, and the narrator concludes with a reflection on the
inevitability of growth. Childhood is always a preliminary to adulthood. In what has become one
of the most famous lines from the book, the narrator laments, “On these magic shores children at
play are for ever beaching their coracles. We too have been there; we can still hear the sound of
the surf, though we shall land no more.” This line suggests both that play is the passage to
Neverland, since the shores are reached by children “at play,” and that adults have lost the ability
to play and thus can no longer reach the shores. This is the most explicit lament for a lost
childhood that we have seen in the fantastic journey texts, although it is similar to the tone of
some of the remarks in Grahame’s *The Golden Age.* Childhood is not presented as a blissful
primary state which runs into the accident of adulthood, as it seems to be presented in the other
texts. Rather, the narrator emphasizes that all adults were once children but have lost access, not
just to the island, but to a part of themselves, since Neverland and the child’s mind are the same
thing. The narrator does not clarify whether the trouble is that the imaginative bits have
completely disappeared from the adult’s mind, or that the two maps have become quite distinct,
so the adult can no longer see through one to the other. The fact that “we can still hear the sound
of the surf;” indicates that for at least some adults the map is still present but inaccessible.

Grown-ups who can still “hear … the surf” are like Nesbit’s adults in *Wings and the Child,* “who
have managed to slip past the Customs-house with their bundle of memories intact,” although

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28 Grahame, p. 9.
Barrie’s adults seem to be more completely separated from their childhoods than Nesbit’s, who at least know that “that which we have brought with us from the land of childhood is genuine.”

This insistence on the inevitability of growth is present throughout the text. Peter and Wendy emphasizes growth from the very first sentence: “All children, except one, grow up.” From the beginning, it is clear that the emphasis of the story will be on growth, as opposed to the other texts examined in this dissertation, where growth is almost frantically hidden and avoided. The paragraph goes on to explain that not only will children grow up, but they know that they will do so: “They soon know that they will grow up, and the way Wendy knew was this: One day when she was two years old she was playing in a garden, and she plucked another flower and ran with it to her mother. I suppose she must have looked rather delightful, for Mrs. Darling put her hand to her heart and cried, ‘Oh, why can’t you remain like this for ever!’ This was all that passed between them on the subject, but henceforth Wendy knew that she must grow up. You always know after you’re two. Two is the beginning of the end.” Wendy does not just learn that she must grow up—she learns that there is a sense of loss associated with growth because Mrs. Darling regrets the coming change. The narrator emphasizes this by his sentence, “Two is the beginning of the end,” with its tragic and ridiculous overtones. This is in marked contrast to the Disney film, where Wendy learns she must grow up only after her father’s unfair edict.

However, at the point when the main narrative of the story begins and Peter appears in the Darling nursery, Wendy is not being threatened with adulthood—Mr. Darling’s threat that this is Wendy’s “last night in the nursery” is an invention of Disney’s—and she chooses to travel

29 Nesbit, Wings, p. 5.
30 Barrie, Peter and Wendy, p. 5.
31 The exception is Alice’s physical changes in Wonderland, but those changes are the result of metamorphosis and do not count as growth that progresses toward adulthood.
32 Barrie, Peter and Wendy, p. 5.
to Neverland for reasons unrelated to delaying growth. Peter, desiring Wendy’s presence as a story teller, lures her with various promises—he will teach her how to fly, she will see mermaids, and she will take the position of lone woman in the band of Lost Boys: “how we should all respect you,” coaxes Peter, adding, “you could tuck us in at night” and “you could darn our clothes and make pockets for us,”—temptations Wendy finds entirely too much to resist. She runs away out of the desire to see Neverland and mother the motherless boys, embracing early the responsibilities that she will have as an adult wife and mother. In Barrie’s texts, it is left to Peter to willfully escape growing up, including the responsibilities that he will have as a man.

Barrie’s *Peter Pan* and *Peter and Wendy* texts present an extreme argument on both sides of the growth problem. It insists that children must grow up—that there is nothing to be done to delay that outcome and that children themselves know it. But the narrative also allows for the existence of one boy who uses the knowledge of his own impending adulthood to escape growth completely and willfully: Peter Pan is, as the play’s subtitle insists, “The Boy Who Would Not Grow Up.” But within the context of Barrie’s narratives, this perpetual childhood can occur only if the child is completely severed from home. According to the narrative given in *Peter and Wendy*, Peter has spent his entire life choosing to not grow up. He claims, “Wendy, I ran away the day I was born … It was because I heard father and mother … talking about what I was to be when I became a man … I don’t want ever to be a man … I want always to be a little boy and to have fun. So I ran away to Kensington Gardens and lived a long long time among the fairies.”

Peter runs away from home because his parents threaten him with adulthood, just as Mr. Darling threatens Wendy in the Disney film.

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33 Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*, p. 11.
34 Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*, p. 27.
Once Peter leaves his home, he derails himself from his growth track, but he cannot put himself out of time. Unlike the *Amulet* children, who travel outside of time for an adventure and then return to the same moment they left so that they never miss any time at home, Peter must remain inside the same time flow as his home and mother, even when he lives with the fairies. While the first part of his story of escape is celebratory, the second part is tragic. In *Peter and Wendy*, Peter, upset by Wendy’s confident faith that her mother will welcome her back at any time, warns her that mothers are fickle: “Long ago … I thought like you that my mother would always keep the window open for me, so I stayed away for moons and moons and moons, and then flew back; but the window was barred, for mother had forgotten all about me, and there was another little boy sleeping in my bed.”  

Peter assumes that his ordinary world will stop its progression until he returns—he thinks of his mother as being in a perpetual state of waiting, even if he has not developed a sophisticated theory about time not actually passing (such as Nesbit’s “time and space are only forms of thought”). He assumes that children and mothers work on different sorts of time and that mothers’ time does not progress unless their children are present. Peter is therefore horrified to discover that his mother’s time has progressed at the same rate as his own, and that by the time he decides to go home, after “moons and moons,” she has replaced him with another boy, this one fenced in with window bars to prevent his escape.

Wendy has not made the same choice as Peter and never contemplates refusing to grow up; nor does she assume that time will stop. However, she believes that she can return to her home at any time, and that at the very least, emotional time will not have progressed for her parents. The narrator of *Peter and Wendy* asks,

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35 Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*, p. 98.
As time wore on did [Wendy] think much about the beloved parents she had left behind her? This is a difficult question, because it is quite impossible to say how time does wear on in the Neverland, where it is calculated by moons and suns, and there are ever so many more of them than on the mainland. But I am afraid that Wendy did not really worry about her father and mother; she was absolutely confident that they would always keep the window open for her to fly back by, and this gave her complete ease of mind.\textsuperscript{37}

Although the narrator is somewhat evasive about the passage of time in the story, claiming that time moves differently in Neverland than it does back in England, it is evident that time is progressing in both places. Wendy has a partial awareness of the effects that time will have on herself and her brothers. When she makes up a story about their future return home, she actually imagines that they “stayed away for years” and will be adults upon their return.\textsuperscript{38} Spinning out the suspense of her tale, Wendy asks, “who is this elegant lady of uncertain age … who are the two noble portly figures accompanying her, now grown to man’s estate?”\textsuperscript{39} Establishing the identity of these respectable adults as herself and her brothers, Wendy then describes them as flying back through the nursery window “to their mummy and daddy.”\textsuperscript{40} Wendy recognizes that the passage of time will necessitate physical growth, but she does not understand that as a necessary corollary, her status as a child will have changed. The end of the book reveals that children forget how to fly as they grow up, but Wendy has no conception of this.\textsuperscript{41} She understands the passage of time and the necessity of growth but not other forms of change.

\textsuperscript{37} Barrie, \textit{Peter and Wendy}, p. 70.
\textsuperscript{38} Barrie, \textit{Peter and Wendy}, p. 97.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} Barrie, \textit{Peter and Wendy}, p. 145.
As the narrator of Peter and Wendy makes abundantly clear, the ordinary world is not changeless, and it does continue to progress, with or without children. The readers remain aware of the continuation of time because they follow a simultaneous narrative focusing on the Darling parents. Mr. and Mrs. Darling actually arrive home before the children fly out the window, but they do not make it to the nursery in time. As they rush through the door, they discover that “[t]he birds were flown.”42 Later in the book, we are given an accounting of how they have spent their time with an empty nest, which makes it clear that time has passed for them, just as it has for the children: “It seems a shame to have neglected No. 14 all this time; and yet we may be sure that Mrs. Darling does not blame us. If we had returned sooner to look with sorrowful sympathy at her, she would probably have cried, ‘Don’t be silly, what do I matter? Do go back and keep an eye on the children.’”43 The passage of time has not been kind to the Darling parents. Mr. Darling is so filled with shame over his part in his children’s escape that he now lives in the dog kennel and refuses to come out.44 Mrs. Darling has suffered: “The corner of her mouth [where there is a kiss] is almost withered up. Her hand moves restlessly on her breast as if she had a pain there.”45 Although the narrator almost always uses the past tense, the sudden shift into present tense here makes Mrs. Darling’s misery very immediate for the reader. The children’s absence has not only been marked in the ordinary world, but it has been the cause of pain, something that Nesbit is very careful to avoid in Amulet.

The children’s discovery about the failure of parallel time—that their ordinary world will not wait for them to return—precipitates the narrative’s main crisis. This realization about time is the inciting event that inspires not only the Darling children and the Lost Boys to return to

42 Barrie, Peter and Wendy, p. 36.
43 Barrie, Peter and Wendy, p. 135.
44 Barrie, Peter and Wendy, p. 136.
45 Barrie, Peter and Wendy, p. 137.
London because they fear being forgotten. This is in marked contrast to the Disney film where the children choose to return because they find themselves in need of the emotional support provided by a protective framework of parents, much as do the children in *Amulet*. They miss their mother and discover that they feel unbearably sad without her. But in Barrie’s novel, the children return because they are afraid of being forgotten by their mother. They enjoy their independence in Neverland, but they have no desire to give up their existence in a home. Wendy fears, “Perhaps Mother is in half mourning by this time,” meaning that the children are already half-forgotten. Before this, the Darling children are oblivious to their own danger. They have no conception that by their absence from home, they are in danger of losing their histories, their futures, and even their childhoods.

As we have seen in every text examined in this dissertation, ideal childhood depends on having the security of a sheltering home that allows the child to avoid onerous responsibility. No matter how wonderful the adventures, at the end of the day, one can only be an ideal child if one has a home with caring parents to return to. Otherwise, the duties assumed by the child during the course of the adventure take on an ominous reality. If Peter and Wendy are truly the parents of the Lost Boys and the Darling brothers, as they play that they are, they would suddenly become actually responsible for the daily well-being of their large family. For example, it would be unconscionable to have the “children” only imagine their meals as Peter does, since he does not feel a difference between imaginary and real food (although all the other children do). However, when it comes to playing parents, Peter becomes uneasy about his own inability to distinguish between the imaginary and the real and seeks reassurance from Wendy to try and draw a line between the two:

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46 Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*, p. 98.
47 “Make-believe was so real to him that during a meal of it you could see him getting rounder. Of course it was trying” (Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*, p. 69).
“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 father.”

“But they are ours, Peter, yours and mine.”

“But not really, Wendy?” he asked anxiously.

“But if you don’t wish it.”

Peter recognizes that accepting the responsibilities of fatherhood in reality would make him grow up. Not only does he not want to be their father, but he does not even want them to be “ours,” denying the possibility of any real responsibility toward Wendy, as he would have if they were true partners in child raising. Peter, who is permanently cut off from his home, needs for the Darlings to belong someplace else—he cannot be responsible for them.

Wendy, on the other hand, is quite willing to embrace her pretend maternal responsibilities. This is one reason why Wendy must ultimately leave Neverland—because she yearns for true, persisting responsibility (she enjoys having charge of other people), she can have no permanent place by Peter’s side. Furthermore, Wendy is the group’s chronicler—thus, she must age, because it is she who, from the beginning, remembers their history. Wendy is an authority on Peter Pan (a fact which the Disney film states explicitly and which Barrie’s text implies), almost from the moment of his being mentioned in the text. At the beginning of the story, Mrs. Darling, working from a vague memory of her own girlhood, tells Wendy that Peter must be grown up by now, but Wendy protests, “Oh no, he isn’t grown up … and he is just my size.” The narrator adds “She meant that he was her size in both mind and body.”

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Peter and Wendy start out equally sized in mind and body, Wendy soon outpaces Peter. In fact, she does so in their very first scene together, when she exhibits her sexuality in her attempt to kiss him. Peter has no sexuality; he is the true, sexless Romantic child, who cannot tell the difference between a thimble and a kiss. Wendy even aspires toward marriage, as she makes clear when Peter, after delivering her back home, tells her that he is leaving. She asks, “You don’t feel, Peter … that you would like to say anything to my parents about a very sweet subject?” and to this pitiful inquiry, Peter heartlessly answers, “No.” Instead of a marriage, they arrange that Peter shall fetch Wendy next year to do his spring cleaning. But when he comes, although Wendy “had looked forward to thrilling talks with him about old times … new adventures had crowded the old ones from his mind.” He remembers neither Hook nor Tinker Bell, and this, more than Wendy’s increasing stature, indicates that she is older than he is. Peter Pan never has more than a handful of half-recalled memories, which may or may not be true. Wendy remembers a history at which she was present—she has both a past and a present self.

Redefining the Romantic Child

Barrie’s insistence on growth for all children (except Peter) is connected to a different definition of the child than the one prominent in the earlier fantastic journey texts. Although there are variations between Carroll, MacDonald, and Nesbit, they all maintain a Romantic paradigm where the child is accepted as essentially innocent and good in that innocence. Barrie challenges that idea, suggesting that children are not Romantic (that is, not good), and that if a child were to be as totally innocent as the ideal Romantic child, he would become grotesque. Gubar describes the problem as Barrie taking the ideal to its extreme. She explains, “this character [Peter] really does function as a kind of thought experiment based on the Romantic

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50 Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*, p. 143.
51 Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*, p. 145.
paradigm. What would a child be like if he could completely avoid adult influence, if he could detach himself entirely from family, school, and culture? Peter is that child … This mode of being, Barrie suggests, is not only cruel to others but also represents a kind of living death for oneself. In every version of the story he wrote, he characterizes Peter as a liminal figure who hovers between the realms of the living and the dead … he is trapped in [a] static, moribund state.”

Peter has such an extreme form of innocence—he is so untainted by “adult influence”—that he is unable to form human connections. Far from the naturally loving child Nesbit and MacDonald depict, Peter is utterly self-contained because self is the only thing that truly exists for him. Yet, as Amanda Phillips Chapman points out, this very isolation with self makes Peter unselfconscious. She argues, “If the Romantic child can even be said to have a self of which to be conscious, it is a self undifferentiated from animate and inanimate nature, undetermined by the specificity of relations to other humans … it is a self defined by a lack of definition, by continuity, by eternalness. The tragedy of becoming self-conscious is exactly the process of acquiring a socially aware, socially determined self.”

Barrie does not deny that this Romantic ideal holds a certain attractiveness, but it is also tragic. Because Peter cannot become aware—because he cannot have a history or imagine a future—he is alone.

In Barrie’s text(s), the journey to Neverland cannot stop children from growing because it does not sever the connection between the children’s time and parental time. The only possible way for a child to stop growing is for that child to become like Peter Pan—without a memory, history, or home and therefore able to keeping from progressing. But no other children are able (or perhaps willing) to make the choice to abandon their homes forever. Even the Lost Boys are not exempt from the growth imperative, despite their having lived in Neverland from infancy:

52 Gubar, pp. 205-6.
since growing up is “against the rules, Peter thins them out.”\(^{54}\) The phrasing is ambiguous, but it certainly sounds like Peter, at best, banishes his loyal followers or, at worst, slits their throats, a possibility entirely in line with the rest of the text, given Barrie’s unique perspective on innocence.

Barrie’s definition of innocence has nothing to do with children being morally good—rather, he postulates an amoral existence. If children are not indoctrinated with a moral code by adults, then they cannot be held guilty for crimes, but neither can they do good. For example, the relationship between children and murder in Barrie’s text is simultaneously brutal and matter-of-fact. All of the children except Wendy kill pirates and possibly Indians during the narrative. Yet the children survive to the end of the story with their childhoods intact (or as intact as possible given the relentless press of time). Committing personal acts of violence does nothing to age them. This stance was one Disney was unwilling to take in their animated film adaptation, and they softened or removed all violence involving the children. Earlier fantastic journey texts also separated children and violence. When Alice grows increasingly aggressive and violent at the end of her story, she must leave Wonderland. Diamond is kept too physically weak to commit acts of violence, and the *Amulet* children run rather than fight when faced with danger on their adventures. But Barrie, in defining innocence as the absence of moral training, finds no contradiction in describing children as “gay and innocent and heartless.”\(^{55}\)

Barrie’s denial of the idea that children are essentially good is made clear throughout the book from the beginning. Before we have met Peter Pan, the narrator describes the way mothers rummage through their children’s minds at night, in order to straighten their thoughts just as they might straighten their toys: “When you wake in the morning, the naughtinesses and evil passions

\(^{54}\) Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*, p. 46.  
with which you went to bed have been folded up small and placed at the bottom of your mind.\textsuperscript{56}

In earlier fantastic journey texts, authors admit that children are not always perfectly behaved, and that sometimes this is an attractive or funny quality, such as when Alice is rude at the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party. But Barrie takes things a step further. Not only does he use the word “naughtiness,” a traditional word to describe children’s misbehavior that carries an attitude of tolerance and diminishment, but he adds “evil passions.” “Evil passions” sounds like a phrase out of an early nineteenth-century didactic text and does not carry the same air of tolerance that clings to naughtiness. The narrator makes evil passions natural to the child. In the previous texts, the only children who exhibit anything close to an evil passion are those whose childhood has been tainted by poverty or abuse. Instead, Barrie seems to be indicating both that the child is a special creature and that parts of it can be evil—Romantic innocence does not equal moral innocence.

An important characteristic of the completely innocent child is that he cannot tell the difference between play and reality. If we think back to the narrator’s explanation of a child’s mind, where the fantastic and ordinary worlds are so mixed that they cannot be separated, it becomes clear that in \textit{Peter and Wendy}, children are depicted as living in a different kind of reality not only during a fantastic journey but all the time. Thus, a child who is innocent of morality can escape the consequences of evil actions because he cannot tell the difference between play and reality. Playing is the only mode of being that Peter understands. What other children only play at doing—killing pirates and Indians—Peter does for real, and he cannot tell the difference. This inability to distinguish between play and reality is true for many young children, but because Peter does not have a home with guardian parents, he never grows beyond this stage. No adult sets boundaries for him, to keep his play in check and separate the real world

\textsuperscript{56} Barrie, \textit{Peter and Wendy}, p. 8.
from the imaginary one. Without adult intervention and the progress of growth, children’s play has no boundaries.

Peter’s lack of boundaries further explains why growth is such a threat to him—were he to grow, he would cease to exist as Peter Pan. Most children eventually learn these boundaries and impose them on themselves. At the end of *Peter and Wendy*, the final chapter based on the scene “When Wendy Grew Up,” we see Wendy as a grown mother who loves her daughter and who has taken on the real responsibility for her care. But Peter is horrified when he discovers that Wendy has grown up—he had not imagined such a thing being possible and had no conception that Wendy would be subject to the rules of growth and the passage of time:

He was exactly the same as ever … He was a little boy, and she was grown up.

She huddled by the fire not daring to move, helpless and guilty, a big woman …

“I have forgotten how to fly … I will turn up the light … and then you can see for yourself.”

For almost the only time in his life that I know of, Peter was afraid. “Don’t turn up the light,” he cried … she turned up the light, and Peter saw. He gave a cry of pain; and when the tall beautiful creature stooped to lift him in her arms he drew back sharply.

“What is it?” he cried again.

She had to tell him.

“I am old, Peter … I grew up long ago.”

“You promised not to!”

“I couldn’t help it.”

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Peter spends his whole life fighting against growing up. It is the only thing that can make him afraid because it threatens his very existence in a way that death or betrayal do not. Growing up would give him a memory and impose boundaries between his make-believe and the ordinary world.

The differences between Peter Pan’s and the Darling children’s understanding of play and reality are further illustrated by their respective relationships to Neverland. All of the children have a part in the island’s shaping. When the Darling children first see Neverland, “Wendy and John and Michael stood on tip-toe in the air to get their first sight of the island. Strange to say, they all recognised it at once, and until fear fell upon them they hailed it, not as something long dreamt of and seen at last, but as a familiar friend to whom they were returning home for the holidays.” But the Darling children also experience Neverland’s threatening side: “In the old days at home, the Neverland had always begun to look a little dark and threatening by bedtime. Then unexplored patches arose in it and spread, black shadows moved about in them, the roar of the beasts of prey was quite different now, and above all, you lost the certainty that you would win. You were quite glad that the night-lights were on. You even liked Nana to say that this was just the mantelpiece over here, and that the Neverland was all make-believe.”

Although the Darling children are not capable of drawing their own boundaries, they like to have adults (even if those adults are dogs) put boundaries in place for them, to tell them that at night “the Neverland was all make-believe.” The child’s mind has its darker side.

Peter Pan has no one to draw boundaries around or inside his Neverland, and instead of his Neverland taking on a life of its own after dark, its vitality is intimately tied to his presence. Neverland only has vibrancy when Peter is in it: “Feeling that Peter was on his way back, the

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58 Barrie, Peter and Wendy, pp. 40-1.
59 Barrie, Peter and Wendy, p. 41.
Neverland had again woke into life … In his absence things are usually quiet on the island. The fairies take an hour longer in the morning, the beasts attend to their young, the redskins feed heavily for six days and nights, and when pirates and lost boys meet they merely bite their thumbs at each other. But with the coming of Peter, who hates lethargy, they are all underway again: if you put your ear to the ground now, you would hear the whole island seething with life.” No one on Neverland has energy or adventures when Peter is absent. Instead, they settle into a pleasant domestic routine or holding pattern—playthings put on the shelf until their owner comes back for them. Even though it is now real (the chapter which opens with the previous passage is titled, “The Island Come True”), Neverland is still a giant playground animated by a child. This is why the island gives the impression of being almost a living thing: “if you put your ear to the ground … you would hear the whole island seething with life.” In a literal way, this sentence indicates simply the echoes of footsteps, but it also seems to indicate that the island itself is alive—you put your ear to the ground to hear its heartbeat.

Another necessary component of Peter’s innocence and eternal youth is a lack of memory and an inability to learn, even from pain. This is clearly illustrated in a passage where Peter is fighting with Hook, and the pirate cheats: “Not the pain of this but its unfairness was what dazed Peter. It made him quite helpless. He could only stare, horrified. Every child is affected thus the first time he is treated unfairly. All he thinks he has a right to when he comes to you to be yours is fairness. After you have been unfair to him he will love you again, but he will never afterwards be quite the same boy. No one ever gets over the first unfairness; no one except Peter. He often met it, but he always forgot it. I suppose that was the real difference between him and all the rest.” This inability to learn from injustice is “the real difference between him and all the rest”

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60 Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*, p. 47.
61 Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*, p. 82.
that keeps Peter from growing up. He forgets, so he cannot mature or lose his original understanding of the world. The Darling children are unable to imitate Peter by halting their growth because they cannot stop this learning process. Even though in Neverland, they retain their memories, and they return to London specifically because of memory. They cannot bear to be forgotten, to have their histories erased, which is what happens to Peter every time he forgets.

Since Peter cannot learn or remember, his sexuality is also stunted, so much so as to be nonexistent. This limits his connections to the females in his life. He is only able to relate to them in a maternal/filial relationship, in what Hollindale calls “the play’s most disconcerting element of sexual comedy, namely its presentation of the male as child, and its investment of female gender attraction in the role of mother rather than wife.”\(^{62}\) Barrie seems to make an assumption throughout both *Peter Pan* and *Peter and Wendy* that men struggle to achieve sexual maturity, and would prefer to continue viewing women as mothers. Peter’s insistent asexuality and preference for mothers creates conflict with the girl characters because Barrie, along with jettisoning child goodness, has restored child sexuality for his female characters. Girls, carefully kept pre-pubescent in fantastic journey texts before *Peter Pan*, are now allowed to envision marital and maternal futures with sexual partners. Wendy, who has known since the age of two that she will grow up, wants to kiss Peter the first time she encounters him. She perceives him as an object of desire and a potential future mate. But Peter, who cannot imagine the future or keep track of past relationships, does not even know the vocabulary of sexuality (he does not know the difference between the words “kiss” and “thimble”), much less its gestures and actions.\(^{63}\) Wendy teaches Peter how to kiss, but it has no effect on his romantic sensibilities. Nevertheless, so strong is Wendy’s desire to be part of a sexual partnership that she never gives up hope that some

\(^{62}\) Hollindale, p. xii.

\(^{63}\) Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*, pp. 29-30.
spark of sexual attraction will finally flare between herself and Peter, as she demonstrates much later in the book:

[Peter] uttered a hollow groan.

“What is it, Peter?” [Wendy] cried, running to him, thinking he was ill.

She felt him solicitously, lower down than his chest. “Where is it, Peter?”

“It isn't that kind of pain,” Peter replied darkly.  

The obvious source Peter’s pain is a stomachache, but Wendy’s obscurely worded exam, when she feels “lower down,” offers another possibility. I suggest the narrator is enjoying a bit of humor at Wendy’s expense. Her hope that Peter will return her romantic interest drives her to immediately check his sexual organs for some sign of life, even if it is a pain, but as Peter “darkly” tells her, “It isn’t that kind.” He is not sexual, nor does he have any desire to become so.  

Another result of Peter’s sexual obtuseness and the female characters’ subsequent frustration is sexual jealousy. Wendy’s kissing lesson fails to awaken Peter’s sexuality, but it does provoke Tinker Bell, who attacks Wendy in jealous fury. Tiger Lily, the other female child in the book, is also very sexually aware of Peter. In early versions of the play, she is quite sexually aggressive, wanting to become Peter’s “squaw,” but most of this was edited out, probably, as Hollindale argues, to draw more attention to Wendy. Nevertheless, the jealous

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64 Barrie, Peter and Wendy, p. 97.
65 Peter’s resistance to sexuality is eroded in the Disney film and is consistently altered in late twenty- and twenty-first-century adaptations of the story. In Stephen Spielberg’s Hook, for example, Peter grows up because he finally sees a girl that he cannot live without. In Dave Barry and Ridley Pearson’s Peter and the Starcatchers, which writes a new origin story for Peter Pan, Peter accidentally becomes the boy who cannot grow up, and he deeply laments his state since it means his romantic interest, the book’s girl protagonist, will soon outgrow him ([New York: Hyperion, 2004], pp. 449-50). In the latest live action Peter Pan film by Peter Hogan, the sexual tension between Peter and Wendy is thick enough that the film trips over it every other scene (Barrie, P. J. Hogan, and Michael Goldenberg, Peter Pan, directed by Hogan [2003]). This erasure of Peter’s asexual queerness is symptomatic of a general impulse to bring child sexuality into line with heterosexual norms.
66 Hollindale, pp. xii and xiii.
tension between Tiger Lily and Wendy remains, as Wendy reveals at the end of the chapter “The Happy Home,” where the narrator details the domestic game where Peter and Wendy play at being parents. Wendy, completely enamored of her role as Peter’s domestic partner, tries to force him into an actual emotional commitment:

“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.

“You are so queer,” he said, frankly puzzled, “and Tiger Lily is just the same. There is something she wants to be to me, but she says it is not my mother.”

“No, indeed, it is not,” Wendy replied with frightful emphasis. Now we know why she was prejudiced against the redskins.

“Then what is it?”

“It isn't for a lady to tell.”

“Oh, very well,” Peter said, a little nettled. “Perhaps Tinker Bell will tell me.”

“Oh yes, Tinker Bell will tell you,” Wendy retorted scornfully. “She is an abandoned little creature.”

Here Tink, who was in her boudoir, eavesdropping, squeaked out something impudent.

“She says she glories in being abandoned,” Peter interpreted.

He had a sudden idea. “Perhaps Tink wants to be my mother?”

“You silly ass!” cried Tinker Bell in a passion.
She had said it so often that Wendy needed no translation.

“I almost agree with her,” Wendy snapped.67

The major female characters in Neverland want to possess Peter sexually and view each other as rivals. But Peter himself cannot even conceive of sex, and ironically refers to Wendy as the “queer” one. The only relationship he can understand between himself and a female of any kind is a maternal one, and his indifference to sex and romance is shared by the other boys. Within the context of the book, the only man with a demonstrated interest in sexual passion is the negative role model, Mr. Darling, who has three children (although the narrator is careful to erase any possibility of sexual passion surrounding their births, describing the process as though the children are sent by some outside agency and the Darlings must decide after the arrival of each child whether they can afford to keep it). Neverland itself reproduces asexually, since it is populated by children who have fallen out of their prams.68

This difference in sexuality is closely linked to boys’ and girls’ different attitudes toward growing up. Wendy, well aware of her own sexuality, wants to grow up and enter into a romantic relationship. But boys resist the growth process, trying to avoid it for as long as possible. Although Wendy persuades the current group of Lost Boys to return to London with her, there is no evidence that previous generations of lost boys have made any attempt to leave the island and return home to resume their course toward manhood. Peter, of course, has managed to halt his growth process entirely. Thus, he cannot even conceive of sexuality, because to do so would force him to take a step closer to adulthood.

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67 Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*, pp. 92-3
68 Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*, p. 29.
Barrie’s Conclusion

Like Nesbit, Barrie abandons the solitary protagonist in favor of a group of children who form a self-sufficient society. But unlike the Amulet siblings, who need their parents to continue to provide a framework of financial and emotional support, Barrie’s children really do break free of all parental bonds and become truly self-sufficient since they are actually absent from their nursery and away in Neverland for a considerable period of time. While in Neverland, the children organize a family structure through their play and actually seem to prove that no dependence on adults is necessary. But because Barrie does not allow the independence of children’s imaginative play to be the story’s conclusion, because he insists on the return home, Peter and Wendy ends not with the triumph of childhood, but with the half-tragic, half-hopeful reality of growth, albeit a hope and growth that is much more accessible to women than to men.

The children’s imaginary family, parented by Peter and Wendy, seems to demonstrate that children have no real need of parents. As Peter promises her when he lures her away, Wendy becomes the mother of the band of boys. The narrator says of Wendy, “When she sat down to a basketful of their stockings, every heel with a hole in it, she would fling up her arms and exclaim, ‘Oh dear, I am sure I sometimes think spinsters are to be envied’ … Her face beamed when she said this.”69 Wendy is performing both actual the physical chores and the emotional role of a housewife, pretending to lament her workload, when actually she is immensely proud of her position. Zipes argues that Peter and Wendy’s home underground demonstrates ideal parenting and that Barrie wrote Peter and Wendy as an instructional manual for parents—the novel’s purpose is to demonstrate ideal parenting and inform current parents of what they are doing wrong. This better kind of parenting amounts to leaving children on their own: “parents …

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69 Barrie, Peter and Wendy, p. 69.
must be re-educated so that they will grant their children the freedom to fly off into their own realms and receive the nurturing that they want and need.”\textsuperscript{70} Parents are unnecessary to children’s well being and happiness and even their education. When Wendy suggests that the children all return to London and mother, the boys are at first bewildered and do not understand why they should. The narrator explains that this is because “[t]hey knew in what they called their hearts that one can get on quite well without a mother, and that it is only the mothers who think you can’t.”\textsuperscript{71} It is parents, not children, who depend on the family structure for a sense of well being. Zipes even goes so far as to argue that children can learn about parenting from each other: “It is through Peter’s help, for instance, that Wendy learns to become a mother, and it is through Wendy that Peter learns what it means to be a father.”\textsuperscript{72} The text does present parenting as a substantial and natural portion of the children’s play. Toward the beginning, when the Darling children are still in their nursery, Wendy and John are playing at being their own parents, and John solemnly announces the birth of their children to Wendy.\textsuperscript{73} In Neverland, Peter Pan takes on the role of father to the group of children, and he and Wendy talk comfortably about their “armful.”\textsuperscript{74}

While I agree that Zipes is correct in identifying adults as the primary audience and even that the book’s message to parents is that they need to allow their children complete imaginative freedom, I would argue that the children’s ability to learn adult roles from each other and to keep those roles contained within a society of children is limited. Carpenter describes this failure as a problem of imagination: “Barrie seems to be saying that the childish imagination, splendid as it is, has the most terrible limitations, and can never (without growing up) come to terms with the

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\textsuperscript{70} Zipes, p. xxv.
\textsuperscript{71} Barrie, Peter and Wendy, p. 98.
\textsuperscript{72} Zipes, p. xxv.
\textsuperscript{73} Barrie, Peter and Wendy, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{74} Barrie, Peter and Wendy, p. 91.
\end{footnotesize}
real world. *Peter Pan* thus manages … both to celebrate imagination and to give a rather chilling warning of its limitations.” As much as Peter Pan’s narratives celebrate the freedom of imagination, they always falter in the face of a reality of growth that simply cannot be imagined away.

Peter’s role as father is particularly problematic. For one thing, as I discussed earlier, he can only act in the role of father temporarily. Too much time in the role would create responsibility and history, which would threaten Peter’s status as an eternal child. More than the threat of history, however, playing father could literally kill Peter because courage and fatherhood are set at odds from the beginning of the book. In the first chapter, the narrator details an unfortunate incident where Mr. Darling plays a trick on his children. When Michael refuses to take his nasty-tasting medicine, Wendy helpfully suggests that Mr. Darling should take his own horrible medicine at the same time so as to hearten Michael. Mr. Darling, although he has just been scolding Michael for not “be[ing] a man” experiences a sinking of his spirits “in the strangest way.” He desperately tries to avoid taking his medicine, which results in his son calling him “a cowardy custard.”

Significantly, Peter is also put to a test of medicine by Wendy. When he is left behind after the Darlings and Lost Boys leave for London, Wendy leaves his medicine out for him. Although he refuses to take it when she is present, he feels repentant in her absence and decides that he will drink it—proving himself the “man” that Mr. Darling abjures Michael to be. However, in the interim, the medicine has become an instrument of death because Hook has

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75 Carpenter, p. 179.
76 Paige Gray goes so far as to argue that the tragedy Peter Pan associates with growing up can be detrimental to some child readers, especially girls, who may turn to eating disorders to delay their own maturation (“Finding Our Timeless Neverland: Reconstructing Our Age Identity through Imagination,” in *Barrie, Hook, and Peter Pan: Studies in Contemporary Myth; Estudios sobre un Mito Contemporáneo*, ed. Alfonso Muñoz Corcuera and Elisa T. Di Biase [Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2012], pp. 175-84). However, as I will discuss at the end of this chapter, I believe that better readings of *Peter Pan* and *Peter and Wendy* allow space for growing up that includes creativity and community as well as tragedy.
77 *Barrie, Peter and Wendy*, pp. 18-19.
poisoned the cup, and Peter is famously saved when Tinker Bell rushes in and drinks the poisoned medicine herself. The act of submitting to Wendy and responsibly performing the actions of a father threatens to destroy Peter. He is becoming too much the man that Mr. Darling is not. The narrative cannot imagine the courage of the boy and the duties of the man in anything other than a destructive combination.

Successful growth is possible, and it is exemplified in Wendy, who finds no contradiction between her play and her pending adult responsibilities. She has no reservations about playing mother, as Peter does about playing father. But it is her very dedication to the pretend family that means she will never permanently give up her chance to grow up. Out of loyalty to Peter, she does try for awhile “not to have growing pains,” but, as the narrator explains, “She was one of the kind that likes to grow up. In the end she grew up of her own free will a day quicker than other girls.” When Peter comes to visit her one last time, she is married with a little girl of her own. During this final encounter, Wendy and Peter both cry, and it is the nuances of their tears that illustrate the final difference between them. Peter, after threatening violence toward Wendy’s daughter, “sat down on the floor and sobbed.” He is heartbroken by the loss of Wendy’s child status, but he is soon comforted by her daughter, and immediately accepts Jane as his new mother. In contrast, Wendy “was a grown woman smiling at it all, but they were wet smiles.” For Wendy, the loss of her childhood is not heartbreaking but bittersweet. Although she misses her adventures with Peter, she prefers the life she now lives. It is Wendy, and her daughter, and her granddaughter, who ensure that Peter Pan is not forgotten. The women pass the stories about Peter down to each other. Adults may not be needed for the immediate wellbeing of childhood, but grown women are the keepers of its past and its future through their memories.

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78 Barrie, Peter and Wendy, p. 146.
79 Barrie, Peter and Wendy, p. 151.
80 Ibid.
and storytelling skills. Although, as Paige Gray points out, our popular cultural conceptions of Peter Pan might preclude the survival of imagination into adulthood, in fact Barrie imagines strong artistic potential for grown women.  

Tragically, in Barrie’s texts, men are largely shut out of this bittersweet continuation. Robson, writing of the Victorian era in which Barrie grew up, argues that because childhood was perceived as an essentially feminine time, women were able to maintain a sense of continuity with their childhood memories while boys, who were completely severed from their feminine beginnings once they left the nursery, experienced a profound disconnection with their early selves. This perfectly describes the situation of Barrie’s grown boy characters when the narrator dismisses them toward the end of the work: “All the boys were grown up and done for by this time; so it is scarcely worth while saying anything more about them … The bearded man who doesn’t know any story to tell his children was once John.” In terrible contrast to Wendy, who preserves Peter Pan’s history and ensures his future through storytelling, John does not know a single child-appropriate story. Although Michael, who had more imagination than the rest, is allowed the exciting profession of engine-driver rather than a dull future in an office, the lot of grown men in Peter Pan is grim.

Yet Barrie himself was unwilling to relinquish his younger self. In his dedication to the officially published play, he writes, “Some say that we are different people at different periods of our lives … I don’t hold with it; I think one remains the same person throughout, merely passing, as it were, in these lapses of time from one room to another, but all in the same house,” and he

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81 Paige Gray, pp. 176-81. Ronald D. S. Jack argues that although “Barrie accepted both the truth of Darwin’s ideas and the challenge they represented to conventional Christian beliefs … he differs from Darwin and most other writers of the time … in granting to woman, as child-bearer and possessor of many minds, both natural and artistic superiority” (“Creating the Deathless Boy,” in Barrie, Hook, and Peter Pan, pp. 2-25, 9). Barrie envisions Wendy’s future as both biologically and artistically rich and creative.

82 Robson, Men in Wonderland, pp. 3-15.

83 Barrie, Peter and Wendy, p. 147.
follows this argument with some early memories of his own childhood.\textsuperscript{84} Peter and Wendy, directed at an audience of adults who need to learn to relinquish the fantasy of the fantastic journey, allows no glimmer of hope for the future of Peter Pan the Romantic ideal. But in Peter Pan the play, which included both children and adults in its intentions, the narrative voice allows himself to ruminate on Peter’s inability to understand Wendy’s feelings for him: “If he could get the hang of the thing his cry might become ‘To live would be an awfully big adventure!’ but he can never quite get the hang of it.”\textsuperscript{85} To live—to grow and move through history and into relationship with other people—is an awfully big adventure. Though it is impossible for Peter Pan, the ultimate Romantic child, stuck forever in a fantastic space, it may not be so impossible for children who are less Romantic, who will never be preserved via a fantastic journey, but who will inevitably grow into their futures.

\textsuperscript{84} Barrie, “To the Five,” p. 78.
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1 Where multiple works from a single edited collection are listed, each individual work is listed with a short reference that includes the title and editor of the collection. Full publication information for the collection is given in a separate entry.


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