

Little Do We Know: Conceptualizing the “Little” in
Children’s Literature

by

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INTRODUCTION

We are all born into a world that is not made for us. We are born with small bodies and young minds. We innately lack knowledge and experience. We are weak, and powerless, and dependent. We are little. We are children.

It is in this state of weakness and vulnerability that we enter the world but it is also as children that we endure the most important, formative part of life – its beginning, our introduction to a world that has been constructed by and for the big, the knowledgeable, the experienced, and ultimately, the adult. Although our little selves provide the central vehicle through which this introduction is experienced, the child inherently lacks all the qualities necessary to navigate the adult world. Thus, children are inherently marginalized, viewed as wholly different than and therefore “other” to the adult.

The child has not always been “other,” however, as conceptions of the child and childhood have changed drastically over the past few hundred years, following the child’s evolution from a miniature version of the adult to a being entirely separate and distinct from the adult. In his *Centuries of Childhood*, Philippe Ariès traces the “discovery of childhood,” through examining depictions of children in European paintings from the tenth through the nineteenth centuries. Though Ariès has been criticized, in particular for relying too much on subjective art analyses and for calling childhood a post-medieval “discovery,” his influential case is compelling as it carefully details differences in perceptions of childhood over the course of European history. Ariès begins in the tenth century, claiming that during that time period, “artists were unable to depict a child except as a man on a smaller scale” (10). While

the thirteenth century introduced the image of the child as angel, as the Infant Jesus, and later as the “naked child” (35), the image of the child as merely a smaller version of the adult persisted. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw children portrayed not only as religious iconography but in anecdotal paintings, placing them in their social contexts of the family, work, and school, while still situating them in the world of adults, as “man on a smaller scale.” The child was not a separate and distinct being from the adult – not an “other” – but rather a miniature version of the adult that he or she would one day become.

It was not until the nineteenth century’s rise of Romanticism and the Victorian era that the concept of the child’s mind as an innocent *tabula rasa* free from sin emerged and the child was suddenly in need of protection designed to preserve that innocence. Ariès delineates two types of childhood – the one in which the child was coddled and childhood lasted only about a year, and the other in which childhood was designated as a life stage lasting many years but during which adults carried the burden of morally guiding the child through life, serving a pedagogical rather than a “coddling” function. While Ariès’ analysis ends in the nineteenth century with the latter conception of childhood as the dominant one and is limited to European cultures, these perceptions of childhood and the child carried over into American culture.

Paula Fass and Mary Ann Mason illustrate this crossing over of conceptions of the child from Europe to America in their anthology *Childhood in America*. While the “child” as a concept became the center of philosophical and artistic discussion in the eighteenth century, as Ariès notes, in terms of the life of the family both in

Europe and America, children were still valued based on their economic worth, or how much they could contribute to the family economy. This does not take into account American slavery that placed pure economic value on both adults' and children's lives and enslaved one in five American children by the beginning of the War for Independence in 1776 (2). Children's value, both white and black, was clearly highly economic and based on what we would now term the "adult" value of work. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the development of sentimental Victorian conceptions of the child took hold in America as the advent of industrialization placed women in the home and the economic modes of production outside the domestic sphere, defining family life independent of its economic functionality for the first time (2). It was during the second half of the nineteenth century, however, that children truly began to take on emotional rather than economic value as child labor laws were put into place and institutions that emphasized play and learning were established to benefit the child's holistic growth as a human being rather than a means of production. This placed pressure on American parents with economic means to put intentional effort into how they were raising their children, sending them to school and allowing them structured play time rather than focusing on the economic gain they could extract from them.

This emphasis on the education of children was not a distinctly American phenomenon but rather found its roots in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Europe, further highlighting the crossover between conceptions of childhood from Europe to America. In his treatise, *Some Thoughts concerning Education* (1692), John Locke presents "governing convictions that the human being has no

innate ideas at birth; that the child learns from the experiences of the external world; that pictures, toys, and models can assist in teaching words and concepts; and, finally, that the goal of education should be both instruction and delight” (Lerer 104). Locke’s attempt to define the education of children depends greatly on his definition of the child as a *tabula rasa*, capable of being molded by education, though it must be an education that entertains if it is to be effective. Current American conceptions of the child as needing collective, societal systems of “fun” or “playful” education to shape the child into an effective member of society seem to largely derive from Locke’s philosophy but they represent ideas influenced by Rousseau, too. Writing a little less than a century later, Jean Jacques Rousseau penned his treatise on education, *Émile*, in 1762, agreeing with his predecessor that children are malleable and must be raised properly to contribute to society, but straying from Locke’s faith in systems of education, instead condemning how society fails to educate the child and suggesting a return to nature. He claims, “We know nothing of childhood; and with our mistaken notions the further we advance the further we go astray. The wisest writers devote themselves to what a man ought to know, without asking what a child is capable of learning. They are always looking for the man” (1). Rousseau rejects the view of the child as “man on a smaller scale” (Ariès 10) and in an effort to demonstrate an alternative to this educational shortcoming, he invents a fictitious tutor who guides the child Émile into adulthood, allowing him to be curious and free to explore the world. Rousseau seeks to embrace the child’s natural state and teach him to reason so that he may live in society comfortably while still acknowledging the faults of a societally influenced education. Despite their differences, both

philosophers' schools of thought have had visible and lasting impacts on education in Europe and America to this day. The concept of recess, for example, a well-established period of "play-time" in every American elementary school student's daily schedule, seems to be inspired by Locke's emphasis on education as learning and entertainment, as well as Rousseau's desire to free children to explore their own nature. Rousseauian and Lockean concepts of education would also heavily influence the field of children's literature, as books sought to playfully teach children through beautifully illustrated primers, and invite them to independently explore the world, through fairy tales and fantasies.

Just as these philosophies influenced attitudes toward childhood education that have lasted into present-day America, so, too, did they influence modern American definitions of the child. As Fass and Mason assert, "it was ultimately the view of the child as a separate being whose nature was not pre-adult, but non-adult, and for whom play rather than work was the defining environment, that was most indelibly inscribed in modern views of childhood" (5). This "play rather than work" concept was further supported by the American state, with the establishment of public schools throughout the nineteenth century and mandatory school attendance laws passed beginning in the mid-1800s under the leadership of Massachusetts' Secretary of Education, Horace Mann, which centered childhood on the institutional school experience. The free and compulsory education movement was further supported by the National Child Labor Committee, founded in 1904, which also worked to achieve the end of child labor through the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, perhaps the state's most explicit definition of childhood as

“play rather than work.” With the development of foster care and juvenile court systems toward the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, the state further solidified its view of childhood as “non-adult,” requiring separate and specific treatment.

While these historical moments reflect much of the American view of childhood, Fass and Mason argue that today there has been a state shift away from treating the child as “non-adult” and instead imposing adult expectations on the young, as is evidenced by the fact that “children as young as thirteen can now be tried as adults for some crimes” and that “the fate of the juvenile court, which emerged at the turn of the twentieth century to protect the separateness of childhood, is in doubt” (5). This claim, however, is only representative of the public sphere, while in the private domain, “the emotional value of children has soared despite, and perhaps because of, the breakdown of marriage” (4) in America. Within the home, adults now seek the long-term emotional support once found in a spouse in their children, who cannot divorce them. Though these are also the very adults who “child-proof” their homes, signaling the domestic sphere’s quite visceral acknowledgment of the necessary separateness of childhood, these adults also implicate themselves in a relationship in which they are just as dependent on children as children are on them.

With this further complication of the child-adult relationship, the definition of the child in contemporary America has clearly evolved from its time in seventeenth-century Europe. However, the conception of the child as “distinct and different from adults” (Shavit 4) or “non-adult” (Fass 5) is evident in the child’s

definition across the most recent centuries, which highlights the one consistent aspect of the definition: that the child is “other.” As children’s literature critic, Perry Nodelman, argues:

If adults actually believed that children differed from themselves only in degree, then there would be no need for disciplines like child psychology that focus obsessively on the otherness of children and of childlike thinking, no conceptions of differing stages of cognitive development or characterizations of who children at various ages are and what they like or need – probably not even any literature for children. All of these institutions of culture presume differences significant enough to transcend mere degree. (142)

While Nodelman points to “institutions of culture” and Fass and Mason highlight the state’s action, all scholars point to the institutionalization of childhood in Western culture – this obsession with the “otherness of children.”

The child is, indeed, “other,” but as Lynne Vallone argues in her essay, “Ideas of Difference in Children’s Literature,” the child is “a unique Other to the adult” (189). While the concept of the “Other” has been expounded upon at length in terms of race, class, culture, gender, sexuality, and ability, it has rarely been used to describe the child. Simone de Beauvoir argues, “Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself” (xvii). And yet, the child’s relationship to the “One” – adults – is complicated and unique. Children have an inextricable connection to adults who are their creators and caretakers, their role models and teachers. The relationship between children as “other” and the dominant group is

often one of love, an uncommon factor in an “Other-One” relationship, which frequently engenders hatred. Like other marginalized groups, however, children are also distrusted and voiceless in telling their own history or advocating publicly for themselves. While much of this stems from the fact that children lack the knowledge and experience to navigate the world independently with ease and safety, they are still frequently underestimated, rarely taken seriously, and their problems are trivialized.

Like other “others,” they are not only devalued but they are overvalued. The young child is seen as pure, innocent, sinless, and incapable of corruption. Children are thought to be extraordinarily imaginative and their fresh, wondrous view of the world is glorified and sought after longingly by nostalgic adults. In “The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children’s Literature,” Perry Nodelman argues that although “we may claim to believe that the inability of children to speak for themselves is not inferiority at all, but a wonderfully ideal state of innocence,” in doing so, this assumption “makes the other wonderful at the expense of making it not like us—in essence, not quite human” (29). Yet, children will become “human” by becoming “adult” and thus are unlike other marginalized groups as they are bound to become members of the dominant group. Nodelman points out that children “quite literally turn into ourselves,” with the great irony that “all those who survive childhood become adults, adults who tend to think of children as their other” (33). Since this transformation into the “One” is impossible of virtually every other “Other,” the child indeed represents a unique “other.”

Nowhere, however, is the child’s “other” identity more fully defined and challenged as in the field of children’s literature. As the field that defines who adults

believe children are and who they want them to be, molding them into functioning members of society while presenting alternative worlds to explore, the child's "otherness" is both reinforced and questioned. It is reinforced as the genre is written, governed, sustained, and reproduced by adults who, Nodelman asserts, "show children what we 'know' about childhood in hopes that they will take our word for it and become like the fictional children we have invented" (32). And yet, the child's otherness is also questioned by the subversive nature of the genre, which allows children a degree of adventurous autonomy, free from adults. As Maria Tatar argues in her essay, "Why Fairy Tales Matter," fairy tales allow "children [to] move from that disempowered state to a condition that may not be emancipation but that marks the beginnings of some form of agency" (63). By giving children the opportunity to imagine themselves in a world where they are the brave protagonists fighting off monsters and exploring the deepest depths of the woods without the comfort of an adult's guidance, Tatar points to how the genre at times seeks to defy its very own definition of children as marginalized and powerless.

The varying societal attitudes toward children's otherness are, in fact, reflected in children's literature as it has evolved and varied over time. Children's literature critic, Zohar Shavit, points to the genre's function as a reflection of the culture it comes from, claiming, "society's changing concepts of childhood are responsible for different texts for the child in different periods" (Shavit xi). Shavit goes on to quote fellow critic John Rowe Townsend saying, "Before there could be children's books, there had to be children – children, that is, who were accepted as beings with their own particular needs and interests, not only as miniature men and

women” (4). Townsend reveals how children had to be accepted as “other” from the adult in order for their own literary genre to exist.

As a product of the child’s otherness, the genre inevitably reflects and grapples with the nuances of that otherness as societal definitions of the child evolve over time. For example, early picture books such as Johann Amos Comenius’ *Orbis Pictus* (1658) and primers such as *The New England Primer*, appearing at the end of the 17th Century, depict children as ignorant as they explicitly address children’s lack of knowledge by presenting them with facts about the world embedded with religious ideology. Books compiled of nursery rhymes such as *Mother Goose’s Melody, or, Sonnets for the Cradle* (1780) and moral-oriented stories such as *Aesop’s Fables*, which have been translated and passed on across cultures since Ancient Greek times, serve to remedy children’s ignorance of social mores, proper manners, and moral values. Fairy tales intended for children provide them with adventures that expose them to the world’s dangers from the safety of their mothers’ laps, depicting the child as inexperienced and curious. Sometimes these stories serve as cautionary tales in the way of the German *Der Struwwelpeter* (1845) and sometimes as empowering fictions of childhood independence in the face of danger such as “Hansel and Gretel” (1812) or “Little Red Riding Hood” (1697). Stories such as “Tom Thumb” (1621), “Thumbelina” (1835), and even more recently, *The Borrowers* (1952) define children by their diminutive stature, embracing the child’s small body, its special access to small worlds, and its subversive nature through the child’s ability to hide from the larger adult world. As children are defined as especially imaginative, the literature of the genre’s Golden Age (1850-1920) particularly seeks to encourage that quality by

sending child readers to places such as Wonderland and Neverland, where their imaginations can run wild and their childhood remain protected from the impending threat of growing up.

Thus, children's literature serves as a societal and cultural mirror of conceptions of the child, inevitably defining the child as "other." However, it would be reductive to limit the genre's definition of the child to that. Although children's otherness is necessary in order for the genre to exist, children's literature does not solely define children as "other," emphasizing their separateness, but also embraces who they are, by defining the child as "little."

One need only glance at the titles of children's literature classics to notice the omnipresence of the word "little" in the genre: *Little Women* (1880), *Little House on the Prairie* (1935), *The Little Prince* (1943), *A Little Princess* (1905), "Little Red Riding Hood" (1697), "The Little Mermaid" (1836), "The Little Match Girl" (1845). Though it may seem small and unimposing, its ubiquitous presence hints at the fact that the word "little" is in fact a powerful term. Rather than the word "other," which acknowledges what or who the child is *not*, the "little" encapsulates the binary aspects of the definition of the child. It both includes otherness, since the "little" is always a relative term antithetical to the adult, and simultaneously validates children's small, young, and imaginative – "little" – selves. It allows for both identity negation – the child is *not* big, old, adult – and identity formation – the child is small, young, and imaginative. By representing both who the child is not and who the child may be, in one word, the "little" embodies the dual nature of children's literature as it tries to

teach children who they should and should not be. Perry Nodelman describes this dual function in his definition of the genre:

It offers children both what adults think children will like and what adults want them to need, but it does so always in order to satisfy adults' needs in regard to children. It offers what children presumably like by describing characters and telling stories that fulfill theoretically childlike wishes for power and independence. It fulfills real adult needs and children's presumed needs by working to colonize children – imagining a fictional child reader as a model for actual child readers to adopt. But its imagined child reader is divided, both teachable and incorrigible, savage and innocent – eternally ambivalent. It possesses a double vision of childhood, simultaneously celebrating and denigrating both childhood desire and adult knowledge and, therefore, simultaneously protecting children from adult knowledge and working to teach it to them. It is both conservative and subversive, and it subverts both its conservatism and its own subversiveness. (*The Hidden Adult* 243)

The common thread in this complex and conflicted definition of the genre is its desire to demonstrate and indoctrinate, to both present children with an appealing version of their little selves and to teach them to leave parts of that self behind in the process of growing up, becoming a member of society, and becoming an adult.

By using the lens of littleness to look at how children's literature defines the child in terms of size (physical smallness) in Chapter One, in terms of age (youth/youngness) in Chapter Two, and in terms of imaginative capacity in Chapter

Three, we may come to a greater cultural understanding of our own views of the child and the power embedded in adult relationships to children. Michel Foucault claims, “Power is not something that is acquired, seized or shared... power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations” (94). The adult-child relationship indeed is one of those “nonegalitarian and mobile relations” and if “power is exercised from innumerable points” in the world, children’s literature is one of those points, as it impresses upon children who they should or should not be, always in relation to the explicit or implicit adult. The “little,” then, expresses this power dynamic in children’s literature. As we take a long look in the cultural mirror that is this unique genre, we see reflected back our own societal perceptions of the child, the adult-child relationship, and what it means for the future, as expressed through our attempts to define, mold, or empower our “little” children.

CHAPTER ONE

“A Person’s a Person No Matter How Small”: Exploring Littleness as Size

To describe the child as “little” immediately invokes an image of the physically small. This diminutive physicality characterizes children’s identity in the world and is primarily defined by the physical power that the “big” adult has over the little child’s body. Children are perceived as tactile creatures that engage with the world physically long before they can communicate verbally. Their physicality makes them dependent on the adult; since parents carry children from the time they are born, and mothers carry them even before then, the child’s little body is perceived to be permanently within the adult’s control. Even when children develop a means of communication beyond physical expression, moving past what child psychologist Jean Piaget calls their first “sensorimotor stage,” this idea of adult control over the child’s body persists. Despite children’s newfound physical autonomy, adults teach behavioral rules such as proper table manners that direct the use of their bodies. Children’s books such as Hugh Rhodes’ *Book of Nurture and School of Manners* (c. 1550), Heinrich Hoffmann’s *Struwwelpeter* (1845), and even today’s picture books such as Taro Gomi’s *Everyone Poops* (1993), written for the youngest and smallest of children, help reinforce these adult-imposed standards on the child’s “little” body.

Andrea Immel explores the implications of defining children by their physical smallness by examining children’s literature’s own physical manifestation: the children’s area of a bookstore. Immel emphasizes how defining children by their diminutive physicality results in the physical institutionalization of the child’s otherness and difference, as she describes “the semi-enclosed room painted in bright

primary colours that announce the existence of a kid space” (20) separate from the rest of the store, which is the implied “adult space.” She points out the inherent power of the bigger body in this section of the store that is meant to accommodate the little: the bookshelves are primarily of adult height as “little children can comfortably access only the lower shelves of the book cases” (21). This space, according to Immel, is then only pseudo-targeted to children in a way that pleases adult consumers’ conception of the child’s smallness, while adults maintain ultimate control over the space. Immel’s observations suggest that children’s little bodies are both definitive of and physically disadvantageous to their experience of the world. Though small size is a real characteristic of kids, it is romanticized by the adults who design these “kid spaces” to fulfill their own perceptions of who children are. She explains how “the concessions made to children...are relatively minor” (21), writing,

It is the adults who can easily navigate the shelves and are therefore invited to locate – and therefore screen and select – any book. Adults will bring the material chosen mostly under their supervision to the cash register, which is also sized for the big people who pay for the books, not for little people who will read them. (21)

In her description of the children’s literature section of the bookstore, Immel points to the central conflict of children’s literature itself. By exposing the disadvantages of children’s “little” size, she also exposes the adult’s power, an implicit power that can never be entirely ignored whether in children’s lives or children’s books. Children’s own power may stem from the adult’s impulse to cater to their needs, but this

catering is always dependent on adult assumptions about what those needs are, just as children's literature presumes to know the same.

The obligation to care for the weak, little body is indeed a source of the child's power, binding the big to the little, but the child's true sense of physical autonomy comes when children are out of the sight of the adult. As the child's body can hide and fit into small spaces that no adult can go, children use their bodies to play and create worlds to which only they have access. Countering the adults' ownership over their own bodies, they construct little worlds like that of Mary Norton's tiny Borrowers who "thought they owned the world" (8), enacting Gaston Bachelard's statement, "The cleverer I am at miniaturizing the world, the better I possess it" (150). As Maria Tatar says, "smaller than adults, children are drawn to miniaturization, seeing in *Thumbelina's* tiny bed and blankets something consonant with the dimensions of their own world" (*Enchanted Hunters* 80). They are attracted to other physically small things – tiny insects, little animals, bird's eggs, spider webs, pebbles, doll houses, toy soldiers – creating entire microcosms with them, which their literature reflects. As children's literature defines children by their size, it demonstrates the ways in which children are weak, vulnerable, and sometimes nearly invisible, but it also reveals how this implied power dynamic may shift as children use their physical smallness to their own advantage, finding resourceful, clever ways of moving through the world, and ultimately proving that their littleness is an essential part of their personhood.

The “Little” as Power Dynamic in *Gulliver’s Travels*

When the “little” is defined in physical terms, it often connotes powerlessness. This powerlessness can mean weakness, vulnerability, invisibility, and an inability to fit into a big world. It can only exist in relation to its opposite and thus is dependent on the big, in the way that the child is dependent on the adult. Immel highlights that children’s literature is defined, produced, and sustained by adults and thus the definition of the “little” is also dependent on the adult, emphasizing the power dynamic between big and little, strong and weak, adult and child.

As a book that directly confronts what it means to have a “little” body in a big world, Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) tells the story of Lemuel Gulliver, an adventure-craving seafarer whose adventures to the lands of Lilliput and Brobdingnag give him firsthand experience with what it means to be physically giant among tiny men and physically small among the big. Originally written for adults, *Gulliver’s Travels* only years later became a children’s classic, perhaps appealing to the child because of how it deals with littleness. Thus, Swift’s novel serves as an illuminating discourse on what it means to have a “little” body, shedding light on what this littleness means when later applied to the child.

Gulliver’s experience as a giant in Lilliput demonstrates how the “big” body is a powerful body. In this case, Gulliver’s power is first physical, and then political. Although the tiny Lilliputians physically restrain him on the beach, Gulliver believes he “might be a match for the greatest armies they could bring against [him]” (Swift 7) and “the whole strength of the empire could hardly subdue [him]” (64). His physical power translates into political power as he is capable of conquering an entire empire

and the Lilliputians employ his giant body to drag the enemy's warships away from their island. Since his physical size gives Gulliver such an advantage over the Lilliputians, he cannot avoid being an "other" as a giant among tiny men. His otherness does not mean he is powerless, however, but rather too powerful. The Lilliputians make a point of shaming the very aspect of him that gives him power, dehumanizing him for his great size by calling him the "Great Man-Mountain" (20). Gulliver is seen as so "non-human" that he is even sexually shamed. The Lilliputians see his genitalia as vulgar and his bodily functions as grotesque, ridiculing his big body. When Gulliver attempts to put out the fire in the royal palace by urinating on it, he finds himself permanently in the bad favor of the Empress, rejected by one of the highest powers of Lilliput. It is this act that leads those who already distrust Gulliver to devise a plot accusing him of treason, prompting him to leave Lilliput. While this may be perceived as evidence of weakness, it is because his size makes him too powerful over the bodies of little people that he lacks a kind of social power – the Lilliputians cannot trust him and so he is "othered."

Gulliver's big body gives him so much power that he can exploit it simply for the sake of demonstrating it. Although he never harms the Lilliputians, he sometimes scoops them into his pocket just to scare them and claims that he is "often tempted...to seize forty or fifty of the first that came to [his] reach, and dash them against the ground" (9) solely because he has the ability to do so. Though Gulliver is an "other" in Lilliput, this otherness does not signify a lack of power but rather too much; he is overly powerful because he is oversized.

In contrast, when Gulliver goes to Brobdingnag where he is tiny among a land of giants, his small size signifies weakness, vulnerability, and even invisibility. As a tiny person in a world not made for him, Gulliver is as vulnerable as a child, encountering numerous dangers in Brobdingnag as he claims, “I should have lived happy enough in that country, if my littleness had not exposed me to several ridiculous and troublesome accidents” (112). Birds do not fear him, for example, in the way that they fear the Brobdingnagian people. Gulliver is mistaken for a toy and a baby, as a dog picks him up in its mouth to play with him and a monkey kidnaps him because it confuses him for its own offspring, animalizing the tiny man. A Brobdingnag baby’s first reaction to seeing Gulliver is to pick him up and put his head in her mouth, thinking him a “plaything” (84) like the dog. In all of these instances, Gulliver is incapable of physically fighting back because his small size makes him weak. Even normal natural events such as a hailstorm turn deadly as an ice pellet would destroy his tiny body, demonstrating how little Gulliver is perpetually vulnerable.

His small size also leads to his otherness, but rather than stemming from too much power, it is because he is not powerful enough. This manifests in a kind of invisibility particularly evidenced by the Brobdingnagians’ perceptions of his sexuality. While as a giant, Gulliver was hyper visible to the point where his genitalia were difficult to hide from public viewing, with a tiny body, Gulliver is so small that his genitalia are practically incapable of being seen. The Queen’s Maids of Honor play with him as if he were a doll, stripping him naked and later stripping their own clothes in front of him as if he were “a creature who had no sort of consequence”

(115). He is desexualized and thus dehumanized. While his Lilliputian dehumanization as a “Man-Mountain” (20) occurs as a result of his power, this time he is dehumanized for being powerless. His lack of social power is further emphasized by the fact that he must be cared for by a “little nurse” (113), who is a young girl named Glumdalclitch. Among adults, he endures social mortification as he is not taken seriously in court and the Queen’s dwarf “seldom failed of a smart word or two upon [his] littleness” (102), emphasizing his low social position. Gulliver is even taken on the road with Glumdalclitch’s father to perform as a freak show, which is what eventually draws the Queen’s attention to him, demonstrating how he is only able to attain visibility through the dehumanizing exploitation of his littleness.

Regardless of whether Gulliver is big or small, in both the land of Lilliput and Brobdingnag, those who are physically “little” are weak, highly vulnerable to physical danger, and possess a certain kind of invisibility as human. Despite the fact that the Lilliputians have created an entire world of little people, Gulliver in his gigantism is able to crush their whole empire with his huge, strong body. Conversely, when Gulliver is tiny, a little baby is capable of threatening his life. Littleness is thus always a relative term embedded with power.

By exposing what it means to be “little” in the world, Gulliver implicitly mimics the child’s journey through the world. As John Traugott argues in his work, “The Yahoo in the Doll’s House: ‘Gulliver’s Travels’ as Children’s Classic,” Gulliver’s journey enacts “childlike doll’s play” (129) in both Lilliput and Brobdingnag. When he first enters Lilliput, the Lilliputians become the dolls and Gulliver is the child who plays with them. Traugott describes how, “It is the child’s

fantasy of dominion over the world, of absolute freedom to be a quick-change artist and perfect puppet master” (130). Gulliver not only plays with the Lilliputians as if they were dolls but watches them fight on his handkerchief as if they were toy soldiers and goes to war with their ships as if it were bathtub play. Lilliput is composed of “reduced models of king and court, town and castle, politician and warrior” (133), a kind of dollhouse-empire. In Brobdingnag, though, his role is reversed, as Gulliver becomes the doll in a “reverse image of the child's fears” (133), where the child is entirely powerless at the hands of the all-powerful adult. Traugott explains Gulliver’s experience as,

Ineptitude of body and understanding, dependence on uncertain protectors, authority that may become capricious and dangerous: the stuff of nightmare is the main imagery of this voyage. And all this in the person of Gulliver, who is now a doll, toyed with by various protectors, housed in a doll's house, dressed and undressed by a girl, and, worst of all, encouraged to perform like a clockwork toy, first by threat and exploitation and then by his need to ingratiate himself with dubious protectors. (133)

Gulliver’s experience, then, is not just about the limits of the “little” body, but may be seen as a representation of the child’s anxieties about littleness and its implied powerlessness. Even as Gulliver enters the world of Laputa and the land of the Houyhnhnms where size is not an issue, he mimics the child’s entrance into a world unknown, reminiscent of the eighteenth-century educator John Clarke’s statement that “Children are Strangers in the World” (Lerer 104), as Gulliver himself is a stranger in a foreign land.

Though *Gulliver's Travels* was originally written as an English political satire for adults, its role in the canon of children's literature suggests that its confrontation with the state of physical littleness comments on the child's physical state, too. Gulliver's story has been retold and abridged countless times as a children's book, further solidifying Traugott's interpretation of Gulliver's experience as childlike. In "Like me, Like Me Not: Gulliver's Travels as Children's Book," M. Sarah Smedman rejects Traugott's interpretation, however, claiming that "he reads the book as one about childhood rather than as one for children" (75), representing the adult's nostalgia rather than the child's experience. Smedman takes Traugott's interpretation a step further by claiming that Gulliver acts not simply "childlike" but as a pseudo-child throughout his journey. She asserts that children identify "with Gulliver as a person who sees things as they do" (80-1) and that they "revel in Gulliver's benevolent power in Lilliput and share the troubles his size brings upon him in Brobdingag" (81). Regardless of the extent to which *Gulliver's Travels* is an explicit representation of the child's physical littleness, its discourse on the ramifications of the "little" body describes the defining factors of the child's small physicality – weakness, vulnerability, invisibility, inability to fit in to a big world – which permeate conceptions of the "little" throughout children's literature.

Littleness as Weakness and Vulnerability in "Thumbelina"

As Gulliver demonstrates, the little body signifies weakness and vulnerability. This is especially true of the child's "little" body. As one of the tiniest children imaginable, Thumbelina, from Hans Christian Anderson's 1835 tale of the same name, wholly embodies the weakness and vulnerability of this "little" body. Also

called “little Tiny” (Andersen 588), Thumbelina is so small that she was born in a flowerpot, “a walnut-shell, elegantly polished, served her for a cradle,” and her bed was “formed of blue violet-leaves, with a rose-leaf for a counterpane” (588). At first glance, Thumbelina’s small size seems to be a charming advantage as it is the source of her delicate beauty for which she is admired, as other creatures exclaim “what a lovely little creature” (590) upon seeing her. But though this beauty seems advantageous, it also attracts larger animals to her who take advantage of her small size. The very instigator of her journey through the world, for example, is a big toad who is captivated by her beauty and kidnaps Thumbelina to make her marry her son. In this way, Thumbelina’s “little” appearance, especially due to her consequent “little” beauty, makes her extremely vulnerable. As she is kidnapped multiple times, she is described as “so light and small...[that] she cannot escape” (589) from the bigger animals that take her, demonstrating how her littleness is synonymous with physical weakness, as well.

Thumbelina’s vulnerability is perpetual even when she finds strength by relying on her “little” allies. When the “little fishes” (589) help her escape the toad, she ends up floating aimlessly down a river on a lily pad, exposed to all the elements. Though some “little birds” (590) admire her from afar, they do nothing to help her find her way. It is only a “little white butterfly” (590) that helps Thumbelina sail down the river but this does not protect her from the “large cockchafer” (590) that soon snatches her off of her lily pad.

Thumbelina is not only physically vulnerable but emotionally vulnerable, too, highlighting the little child’s all-encompassing vulnerability in the world. When little

Tiny is kidnapped by the bird, the other cockchafers dislike how “her waist is quite slim” (591), claiming, “she is ugly” (591), and ridiculing her physical appearance. Thumbelina cries upon receiving such criticism of her small size. While emotional vulnerability stems from her youthful littleness and lack of experience in the world, the impetus of Thumbelina’s sadness is her small size, demonstrating how her littleness causes her to be vulnerable in the world in various ways.

Thumbelina’s vulnerability also implies extreme dependence, as the little girl relies on creatures that are physically bigger than she for her own survival. After she leaves the cockchafer, she finds a field mouse that is willing to house and feed her. Though this comes at the cost of enduring interactions with the mole neighbor who wants to marry her, Thumbelina is forced to stay because she is too little to fend for herself in the world aboveground. She is so dependent that she almost marries the mole, who will prevent her from seeing daylight ever again but who will also provide for her physical well being. It is not until Thumbelina finds another large animal to depend on that she is able to escape. After bringing a “little bird” (595) back to life, Thumbelina finds an ally in him. The bird turns out to be “a great deal larger than herself” (595) and she flies away on his back, escaping her life of dependence on these large, adult creatures by depending on another one instead.

It is not until Thumbelina becomes an adult by marrying her Flower Prince, changing her name to Maia, and owning her own pair of wings, which symbolize her full metamorphosis into an adult, that her littleness no longer represents her vulnerability and weakness. This is truly because she “grows up.” While Thumbelina remains “little” in relation to the world she comes from, she has found a world where

she physically fits in and has power, as she becomes “queen over all the flowers” (601). In the eyes of the other flower fairies, Thumbelina is no longer “little Tiny” but a normal sized woman, capable of serving as their queen. Her story, through her leap from little, vulnerable, weak child to powerful, adult queen, underscores Gulliver’s conclusion that the little body will always be weak and vulnerable while simultaneously hinting at the possibility of power for the physically little. Though Thumbelina is physically and emotionally vulnerable, dependent, and weak, her littleness contains great potential as she eventually finds herself in a position of power. By ending her story with the gift of wings, Thumbelina’s tale suggests that little children, too, have the potential to metamorphose like a caterpillar into a butterfly – though they may not be powerful in the moment, their littleness is a source of potential power into which they simply need to tap.

Littleness as Invisibility and Subversion in “Tom Thumb”

Another aspect of the little body that Gulliver encounters is invisibility, not because he is incapable of being seen in general but because his diminutive stature makes adults incapable of seeing him as human. They underestimate his capabilities and overlook his sense of agency much in the way that children are underestimated and overlooked, treating him as if he were a doll, toy, or even a baby. Just as Gulliver’s invisibility is embodied in a lack of sexual recognition, children are also perceived as asexual. And just as Gulliver in Brobdingnag is too small to move through the world independently, so children are assumed to be incapable of navigating the world with the ease of an adult. They lack the ability to be perceived as

humans with physical agency, since their physical littleness is largely written off as nothing more than cute or charming in the way of Thumbelina.

Particularly in children's literature, however, children's small bodies and the invisibility they afford are also the source of their subversive power. As children's littleness is underestimated as weakness, the children's story portrays that littleness as the way children move through the world and manipulate the adult to achieve their desires. The "little" body is perceived to be trustworthy, incapable of acting for itself and therefore incapable of transgressing – the "little" body's agency goes unseen. No character depicts this phenomenon better than Tom Thumb, the mischievous little boy of folklore. In the Grimm Brothers' 1826 version of "Tom Thumb" written for children, Tom Thumb defies the "play rather than work" (*Childhood in America* 5) characterization of childhood as he uses his small body to his advantage, proving he is capable of adult work. Since Tom receives his name because he is the size of his father's thumb, he is also able to fit into the ear of his father's horse and thus direct the horse to carry a cart of wood all the way into the woods. Tom surprises his father in accomplishing this task, as all adults in the story assume he is limited by his physical smallness.

Tom learns that because of his small size, any of his ulterior motives are invisible to the adult. This figurative invisibility – the incapacity to be seen as having agency – allows him to use the trust that his small size engenders to deceive others and accomplish adult tasks, demonstrating the subversive power of his littleness. Tom completes the work of an adult not only by helping his father but also by earning his father money. As two onlookers witness Tom transport wood into the

forest, they discover his little size and offer to purchase Tom as an oddity that would earn them money by taking him “from town to town as a show” (Taylor 172), recalling the spectacle of Gulliver’s freak show in Brobdingnag. These adults are blind to Tom’s deceitful power, however, and precisely because of that, Tom is able to use *them* to make money for his father. As the strangers pay his father gold in exchange for the tiny boy, Tom whispers in his father’s ear that he will return to him. This deft communication goes unseen by the strangers because Tom is so small. Then, when the men ask Tom where he wants to ride, Tom takes advantage of their trust in him and their assumption that no matter where he sits, he is always under their control by choosing to ride on one of their hat brims. The tiny boy is then able to escape into a mouse-hole as soon as one of the men places his hat on the ground, becoming truly invisible to them. Thus, by using the implied trust of his littleness to his own benefit, Tom earns his father some gold.

Tom further employs the invisibility of his small size for the purpose of doing good in the world, as he foils the plan of two robbers who fail to see his true intentions. The robbers make the same mistake of trusting Tom because they do not see him as a human with agency to make his own choices but rather as a nonthreatening little child. Just as Tom is described as a “little urchin” (172) by the first two strangers he encounters, the robbers also call him a “little urchin” (174), emphasizing their inability to see him as a human with ulterior motives like them. Instead, the robbers presume their own power over Tom based on their relative gigantism to him. They believe, like the strangers, that because Tom is so little, he will automatically do work for them asking, “What can you do for us?” (174). Tom

uses his “trustworthy” size to deceive them, convincing the thieves that he will help them rob a church. By doing them the “favor” of sneaking into a window where they cannot see him, the little boy sabotages their plans by making too much noise and getting them caught. Thus, Tom proves that he is capable of using the invisibility of his small size for the sake of justice.

While Tom proves he can use his size to do adult work, earn money, and restore justice in the world, his smallness does pose inevitable obstacles to him reminiscent of Thumbelina’s weakness and vulnerability. Tom encounters danger much like those of Gulliver in Lilliput when he decides to sleep in a bundle of hay, for example, and is fed to and swallowed by a cow. Though Tom’s cry for help from inside the cow is a freakish phenomenon that scares the milkmaid, it is also what saves him as it prompts the parson to kill the cow. Because of his weakness, however, Tom remains trapped in the cow’s stomach in a pile of garbage where he is again eaten by a wolf. Tom exercises his voice one more time, though this time to deceive the wolf, convincing him to find a feast in Tom’s family’s house. The little boy’s trickery not only transports him home but also frees him as his father kills the wolf to liberate his son. In this way, Tom’s little body still means he is weak and vulnerable like “little Tiny,” but he is able to use another part of himself – his voice – to overcome that disadvantage. He proves that even when his diminutive stature cannot be employed to his advantage, as a tiny person, Tom has found clever ways of overcoming those obstacles.

Overall, Tom Thumb exhibits tremendous power in his littleness as he subverts the powerlessness, weakness, invisibility, and even freakishness of his

diminutive size, making it do good work for him and others instead. In comparison to Thumbelina's weakness and constant vulnerability that entirely determine her life's path, Tom rarely lets his vulnerability get the better of him; he insists on bending his path to meet his own needs and whimsies. Unlike Thumbelina, Tom does not have to grow up in order to overcome his small size, returning to his loving parents at the end of his tale, a young son in the arms of his mother. This discrepancy is probably due to gender differences. If Thumbelina had been male, perhaps she too would have been able to use her size to such noble ends rather than be forced to find her own Tom Thumb in the guise of a flower prince to whom she must chain herself.

But while Tom Thumb and Thumbelina will forever differ in their gender identities and thus their experiences in the world, they will also always have in common their tiny, thumb-sized bodies and their creative ways of moving through the world due to their size. Just as butterflies drag Thumbelina on lily pads and Tom sits on hat brims as transportation, children's literature characterizes the little body as capable of overcoming its higher risks of danger and manipulation through resourcefulness. It is this resourcefulness that gives them agency in the world and this agency gives them a sense of personhood. Though Thumbelina's sense of personhood comes from escaping a world in which she is tiny and Tom's comes from his ability to use his smallness to move through the world with ease, both characters arrive at their senses of self through their resourcefulness. While the genre points out the disadvantages of being physically small, it also creates little worlds that demonstrate the powerful capacity of the little to be resourceful in asserting their own personhood. These worlds provide solutions to the physical obstacles the child

encounters and in doing so, acknowledges the personhood of the little body. As a story all about the reclaiming of personhood of a little people, Mary Norton's children's classic, *The Borrowers* (1952), provides the perfect example of the resourcefulness and agency of the physically little, especially the little child.

Littleness as Resourcefulness and Personhood in *The Borrowers*

As Tom Thumb especially proves through his unique ability to move through the world, the little body can be used to one's advantage. Norton's *The Borrowers* takes Tom's experience one step further, demonstrating that the physically "little" person is just as much a person as one of the big "human beans" (Norton 84). Through their ability to move deftly through the world, using the big peoples' resources to their advantage and thus creating homes, communities, and cultures, the "race" (116) of Borrowers proves Dr. Seuss' assertion in *Horton Hears a Who!* – that "a person's a person no matter how small." They accomplish this largely through their resourcefulness. As Homily and Pod Clock teach their borrowing skills to their daughter, Arrietty, she is able to reinterpret their resourcefulness on her own terms, proving her own personhood in order to claim that of her people and thus "save the race!" (Norton 116).

Arrietty first learns to be resourceful from her parents, whose skill in creating a comfortable home furnished with all the necessities, and even some luxuries that demonstrate their valuing of culture, proves their personhood. Although the Borrowers attain everything they own from the Big People under whose floorboards they live, their ability to repurpose everything to their own use demonstrates both their valuing of human culture and their desire to possess it as their own. The

Borrowers are incredibly creative in the repurposing of these items that Pod expertly “borrows,” as Homily makes Arrietty “a small pair of Turkish bloomers from two glove fingers” and uses “penpoints...as flour scoops” (96). On the walls, Homily hangs stamps for paintings and uses red blotting paper for a carpet while Arrietty’s entire bedroom is made out of a cigar box. Pod siphons hot water and steals food from the kitchen, taking miniature teacups to appease Homily’s desire for luxury and “any form of culture” (19). By being resourceful and repurposing these objects, the Borrowers exhibit all signs of “human” personhood, creating a cozy home and emphasizing the importance of culture with art on the walls and Arrietty using large pencils and Victorian *Tom Thumb* books to learn how to write. In doing so, the Borrowers make objects that were meant to serve the big, serve the little, rejecting their dehumanization and proving that they are not “mice dressed up” (142) nor is their home a “nest” (141) as the big Mrs. Driver asserts, but rather they are little people with a little home.

As Arrietty learns to borrow with her father, sneaking through the house unseen and stealing bristles from a doormat to make a broom, she takes the resourcefulness she has learned and reinterprets it for her own use. Not only does she learn how to use her littleness to her own advantage as her parents do, but she refuses to let it be a disadvantage to her, either. Since Arrietty lacks her parents’ fear of larger beings, her littleness is no obstacle to her as she befriends a big human boy against her parents’ wishes. Rather than use the human’s objects to her advantage as her parents do, she reinterprets her parents’ resourcefulness by using the human himself to help her send a letter to family far away. By redefining the Borrowers’

typical resourcefulness, Arrietty is able to find out whether her extended family is still alive and thus prove that the Borrowers are a distinct people, not three little “fairy” (77) creatures.

Arrietty eventually proves her peoples’ personhood by first proving her own. As she redefines the limits to which “human “beans” can be used as resources, she learns to act independently of her parents who have set the limits of her world her entire life. Against her parents’ wishes, after meeting the boy, Arrietty continues to sneak out at night to talk to him. Unlike her mother who is perfectly content to live indoors the rest of her life, Arrietty rejects her closed-mindedness, longing instead for freedom outside under blue skies. Her independence and strong sense of self even begin to influence her parents as she convinces them that friendship with humans is acceptable despite the fact that it is a deeply forbidden rule of the Borrowers. Arrietty asserts herself not only in the face of her parents and her Borrower ancestry but in the face of the big human, too. When she first meets the boy, for example, Arrietty stands up to him bravely, challenging him to hit her as he threatens he will. The boy quickly backs off “trembling a little” (73) when she asks him why he threatened her and he claims he did so “in case...you came and scabbled at me with your nasty little hands” (73). Arrietty’s littleness is no detriment to her ability to impose a physical threat, an accomplishment that her parents are never able to achieve. As she proves that the “little” is not synonymous with the “weak,” Arrietty also proves her own personhood, as she can stand tall in the face of the much taller.

Once Arrietty has employed her own resourcefulness and expressed her own personhood, she is able to stand up for that of her race of “little people” (9). Just as she does not deny her own littleness, she carries her peoples’ littleness proudly into the big world, sharing every aspect of the Borrowers’ ingenuity with the boy, telling him stories of her ancestors. With this approach, Arrietty succeeds in making a valuable human ally who believes in the personhood of her people as he brings them dollhouse furniture and other riches that make their house appear more like that of the “human beans.” Although the Borrowers seem to define their personhood by how much it resembles that of the big people, they are innately “borrowers” – they borrow everything from the big people, including their sense of personhood, because that is who they are; this does not make them any less of a “people.” At the end of their story, however, the Borrowers prove that they no longer even need the human beans for their own self-definition. As the Clock family escapes the human beans’ house without ever being seen again by the little boy, they prove that it is no longer true that “human beans are *for* Borrowers – like bread’s for butter!” (84). They prove that they can live on their own in an old badger set rather than a human house. Human beans are not essential to their survival as the Borrowers are a people that can act, escape, and endure on their own.

In this way, *The Borrowers* is a text that asserts the personhood of the physically “little.” That’s not to say that the tiny Borrowers do not deal with the same defining qualities of physical littleness as the protagonists of *Gulliver’s Travels*, “Thumbelina,” and “Tom Thumb.” They exhibit weakness as the presence of a cat threatens the survival of their entire family, and demonstrate dependence as the “human beans”

unknowingly provide everything that sustains them. The little Borrowers are extremely vulnerable as the act of simply being “seen” (28) threatens their existence. Because of that threat, they maintain invisibility, hiding under floorboards and sneaking through dark passages beneath the house. But despite these qualities of the “little” that they embody, the Borrowers succeed in exerting the personhood of their race. That is the power of Norton’s novel – it reminds child readers that they are not alone in their littleness; their physical smallness does not negate their personhood but defines it.

Conclusion

Upon first glance, the “little” does not immediately connote “resourcefulness” or “personhood.” Children’s literature, however, thinks it does. As the genre defines children as physically little, it confronts their weakness, vulnerability, invisibility, and the inherent big-little power dynamic by creating characters that define littleness differently, overcoming those “little” disadvantages. Through depicting the resourceful ways in which the little body moves through the world, children’s literature seeks to redefine the child’s diminutive physicality as not that which hinders them but rather as that which defines them. Whether this depiction empowers the child can never truly be known, but the literature highlights the fact that children’s littleness comes with a certain kind of resourceful power that allows them to assert their own personhood.

Just as little Gulliver in Brobdingnag makes use of a hanger as a weapon to fight a rat, or Thumbelina uses a walnut for a bed, or Tom Thumb climbs into ears to whisper directions, the big world is not to be feared but employed to their advantage.

This resourceful cleverness provides children with ways to counter the physical disadvantages of littleness and allows them to take ownership of their physically little identities. In the way that children play with household objects and small bits of nature to make a doll's table setting or miniature fortresses for tiny soldiers to do battle, their books provide another space for the physically little to captivate the child. Whether the little literary characters are children themselves or simply beings living in small bodies, the child reader is meant to identify with them on the basis of shared physical littleness. It is this identification with the "little" character's own expression of personhood in the story that the adult hopes for the child to experience, too. As Maria Tatar says, "absorbed early in life, words and stories powerfully affect the formation of identity" (*Enchanted Hunters* 22), and these stories are no exception. Children's identity formation is the power that children's literature hopes to have and it manifests in more than one definition of the child as "little."

CHAPTER TWO

Texts of Innocence and Experience: Theorizing Littleness as Age

The “little” accounts not only for the child’s place in space but in time, as well, as it connotes both small size and young age. Thus, children’s littleness defines both their physical experience in the world and their mental experience. Despite the fact that Arrietty, for example, possesses a little body much like that of her father, Pod, Arrietty’s approach to the world is quite different than her father’s due to the fact that she is young and therefore ignorant. The little girl lacks knowledge of the world and life experience, making her more vulnerable to exposure and less effective at borrowing than her adult father; her youthfulness is a disadvantage to her. However, Arrietty’s unique perspective provided by her newness to the world also gives her the ability to envision a more independent future for her family, which she eventually accomplishes. As her youthful perspective provides Arrietty with a unique advantage despite its disadvantages, Arrietty’s experience can be applied to that of children in general. Since everyone is born into the world with a lack of knowledge and experience, we are also born innocent, as a clean slate with a fresh perspective. As the Victorian era would put it, we are born as sinless, perfect creatures deserving of ultimate protection and love, representing hope for the future just as Arrietty represents hope for her race, too. Thus, youth is perceived as both ignorance and innocence. Rather than the more static sense of personhood provided by small size, which the genre’s depiction of the permanence of the small body emphasizes – Thumbelina, Tom Thumb, and the Borrowers will forever remain small – depictions of children’s youth highlight the fluidity of their identity as it fluctuates between ignorance that must be erased and innocence that must be preserved.

Littleness as Ignorance in Early Children's Literature

Children's literature reflects the child's fluidity of identity in various ways, as it sometimes seeks to eliminate ignorance through teaching children everything they need to know in the way of *The New England Primer* (c. 1690) and other times lovingly glorifies innocent characters such as Little Lord Fauntleroy whose "childish soul was full of kindness and innocent warm feeling" (Burnett 6). Unlike children's small size, which the genre has no ability to change, the genre's didacticism actively influences the state of children's ignorance as it seeks to mold their young minds; it has the capacity to truly alter that aspect of their littleness. In doing so, the genre addresses the different types of children's ignorance, teaching them about facts, religious morals, and social mores of the world, and seeks to expose them to new experiences by depicting the fantastical journeys of fairy tales. As Jack Zipes says, "fairy tales were cultivated to assure that young people would be properly groomed for their social functions" (14), and these words apply to the vast majority of children's literature in general. The genre's earliest literature in particular, however, focuses on the child as ignorant, and seeks to address the many ways in which children lack different categories of knowledge.

Early children's literature's focus on the child's ignorance paints their youthfulness as a temporary and changeable state of being as the literature attempts to rid children of their ignorance by approaching it from its varied perspectives. As children are perceived to be ignorant of facts, morality, social norms, cultural expectations, and religious doctrines, their literature reflects and addresses that. Books as early as the fourteenth-century *The Babees' Book*, Hugh Rhodes' *Book of*

Nurture and School of Manners (c. 1550), and Heinrich Hoffmann's later *Struwwelpeter* (1845) seek to teach children behavioral standards that are based on cultural and societal expectations of them, implying their ignorance of these norms. One of the foundational texts of the genre and the first picture book published for children in Nuremberg in 1658 and initially written in Latin and German, is Johann Amos Comenius' *Orbis Pictus*, which particularly demonstrates children's ignorance of facts – they do not know how to read, they do not know the alphabet, they cannot identify different animals or features of the earth. By teaching children about the world, Comenius seeks to rid children of their ignorance by introducing them to the facts of the world, at least as adults know and want to portray them. In doing so, Comenius must make bold claims, asserting in his preface that he hopes to provide children with “the knowledge of the prime things that are in the world, by sport and merry pastime” (Comenius xiv), anticipating Locke's theories of education, and describing his book as “a brief of the whole world, and a whole language: full of Pictures, Nomenclatures, and Descriptions of things” (xiv). Through these ambitious statements that portray his book as encompassing explanations of the “whole world,” Comenius depicts children as capable of overcoming their ignorance simply by reading his book where they will learn everything they need to know and thus become less ignorant.

As children lack knowledge of facts but also of social, cultural, religious, and moral norms, the books that seek to address their ignorance in these categories quickly define them not only as ignorant but as capable of being indoctrinated, too. While Comenius is not wrong that children's short time on this earth implies a need

to be introduced to and taught about it, children's youth, ignorance, and impressionability – what makes them *little* – often leaves them vulnerable to being instilled with ideologies, religious, cultural, and otherwise. *Orbis Pictus*, for example, also depicts the child as religiously ignorant, as it follows a Biblical description of the beginnings of the world, describing God's omnipotence and his role as creator, and instilling a religious center to the book from its beginning pages. While the book teaches children how to read and identify concrete concepts such as "Wind" (10) or "Sun" (7), it also teaches them about the abstract ideas of "Heaven" (7) and God as "a most perfect and most blessed Being" (5), placing knowledge of these religious ideals on par with basic knowledge of how the world works. It is clear that the society and culture within which Comenius is working is a Christian one that seeks to pass on not just an understanding of its language and labels but also its values, which it views to be of equivalent importance to "facts." The text utilizes the child's "little" identity as an opportunity to teach and ultimately mold another member of that society and culture. Comenius' book, however, was by far the most secular children's book of its time; Maria Tatar even describes it as "a strong secular counter-tradition" (*Enchanted Hunters* 165) in comparison to its successor, *The New England Primer*, and the moralizing texts that would come to define the young child as ignorant and therefore in need of indoctrination.

Introduced at the end of the 17th Century, *The New England Primer* demonstrates how the child is defined as "little" in the sense of "young" from the earliest beginnings of the genre and how this identity leads children to be further indoctrinated morally and religiously. Maria Tatar describes the primer's far-reaching

influence as well as its strong religious bent that seeks to make good Christians out of children saying, “*The New England Primer*, with an astonishing six million copies in circulation between the end of the seventeenth century and the mid-nineteenth century, famously begins with the cheerful message: ‘In Adam’s Fall/We sinned all’” (165). In the pages before this religiously infused “cheerful message,” the book begins with two prayers for children praising God as the maker of everything, followed by a series of Biblically centered rhymes meant to teach the alphabet, lists of questions that test the child’s knowledge of the Bible, and more prayers and verses designed to help the child learn to read while gaining a deeper understanding of the Bible. *The New England Primer* treats the child much more blatantly as a religiously and morally ignorant being who needs to be taught Christian ways, rather than Comenius’ text which situates an understanding of the world on a foundation of God but strays from it in its encyclopedic efforts to educate about everything. Either way, both foundational texts of the children’s literature genre clearly depict children’s littleness as youthful ignorance capable of being influenced, thus asserting the child’s identity as fluid.

Conceptions of the child have certainly changed since these first books for children were written and published, but have always and will always, in part, be defined by their youthful ignorance in their literature as “from its inception, children’s literature [has] been a vehicle for moral instruction, spiritual edification, and behavioral coaching” (*Enchanted Hunters* 166-5). Even the ancient Greeks defined children as in need of general and moral education centuries before Comenius, as demonstrated by Aesop’s fables, whose every story ends with a “moral of the story,”

or what the French call “moralité.” Though nursery rhymes serve as a unique branch of children’s literature, their portrayal of children in rhymes such as that of Mother Goose’s Jack and Jill who tumbled down the hill or silly Miss Muffet who ran away from a spider, serve as further proof of how children have always been defined as ignorant and children’s literature has always sought to influence that part of their “little” and youthful identity. However, the emphasis on which aspects of that identity need to be altered has shifted as children’s ignorance is also perceived as inexperience – their lack of knowledge cannot be remedied simply through the presentation of knowledge to the child but by exposing the child to new experiences. While there are many types of children’s ignorance, their ignorance defined as inexperience is one of the most defining aspects of the child’s youth, as they lack all kinds of physical and emotional experiences in the world. Rather than address the child’s inexperience with didactic children’s primers, however, it is through fairy tales that the genre immerses children in new worlds where they are forced to grow up, to age, to get “bigger,” and ultimately, to learn.

Littleness as Inexperience in the Fairy Tale

In contrast to the overtly religious primer style of children’s books or the blatant moralizing fable, the fairy tale offers children a world of moral ambiguity in which the monsters, villains, and creatures they encounter encourage them to confront their greatest worldly fears. While the primer offers up all of the information the child supposedly needs to know about the world at face value, the fairy tale conceals its knowledge, morals, and truths under the guise of wicked witches and lost children, winding wooded paths and loving grandparents. The

“moral of the story” is no longer always at the end of the tale but may be picked up along the way; it all depends upon the child reader’s experience of the text. These fairy tales that first emerged in written form at the beginning of the 19th Century offered child readers an adventurous autonomy that they did not have with the primer or fable. Some of this autonomy may come from the fact that most fairy tales were originally written for adults who already possess autonomy, but they were soon adapted for children and thus intentionally deal with the child’s circumstances. Fairy tales for children, then, serve a clear, if morally ambiguous function, as they seek to eliminate children’s inexperience by bringing experience right to their doorstep, or more accurately, to their bedside. While children sit in the comfort of their mothers’ laps and read about the world’s evils through the fairy tale, they are becoming prepared for the real and evil experiences they may face when they leave the comfort of that lap. Bruno Bettelheim, the child psychologist, claims that fairy tales serve the purpose of demonstrating that the happy ending:

...is not made possible, as the child wishes and believes, by holding on to his mother eternally...Only by going out into the world can the fairy-tale hero (child) find himself there...The fairy tale is future-oriented and guides the child...to relinquish his infantile dependency wishes and achieve a more satisfying independent existence. (11)

The fairy tale, then, is not simply “future-oriented” but experience-oriented, as well. It is only through the new experience provided by fairy tales that children can become experienced, doing away with the ignorance that has become the defining aspect of their youthful littleness according to their literature. Ultimately, this

exposure to experience is employed in the hopes of preparing children for a future where their ignorance, unless partially erased, will be a burden and detriment, but in doing so, it emphasizes the changeable nature of the child's identity.

The story of "Little Red Riding Hood," for example, is a tale of the child gaining experience in the world and therefore losing her ignorance as she learns from her experience in the woods not to talk to predatory creatures in the woods and not to "stray from the path" (*The Classic Fairy Tales* 16). Little Red's tale is especially effective in demonstrating how despite differences in time period, the fairy tale has always defined children as inexperienced and sought to address it by offering them experience. In comparing Charles Perrault's French 1697 version of "Little Red Riding Hood" with the Grimm Brothers' 1812 "Little Red Cap," it becomes clear that the fairy tale across the centuries addresses children's ignorance by consistently providing them with experience despite temporal differences in conceptions of the child. Zohar Shavit argues that the difference between Perrault's and the Grimm brothers' versions is "the result of the different perceptions of the concept of childhood which prevailed in each of the two periods in question, thereby yielding differing assumptions concerning the intended audience and the manner in which the child is presented in the texts" (Shavit 326), but the constant quality of both text's concepts of childhood is that the child is ignorant and inexperienced. Thus, Little Red's story demonstrates how fairy tales in particular address littleness as inexperience, and that children's youthful ignorance is a part of their identity that their literature has always sought to change.

While Perrault's and the Grimm Brothers' texts carry the same characterization of Little Red, they differ in their approach to changing her identity. In Perrault's version, the punishment that Little Red endures for her youth and inexperience is harsh and abrupt as the wolf "gobbled her up" (*The Classic Fairy Tales* 13) and he ends the story much in the way that Aesop's fables end with a rather lengthy but clearly defined "moralité:"

From this story one learns that children,
Especially young girls,
Pretty, well-bred, and genteel,
Are wrong to listen to just anyone,
And it's not at all strange,
If a wolf ends up eating them.
I say a wolf, but not all wolves
Are exactly the same.
Some are perfectly charming,
Not loud, brutal, or angry,
But tame, pleasant, and gentle,
Following young ladies
Right into their homes, into their chambers,
But watch out if you haven't learned that tame wolves
Are the most dangerous of all. (13)

The moral turns the story into a "cautionary tale which spells everything out completely" (Bettelheim 169), stating that this moral is the sole message that young

children, “especially young girls,” with a jab to the particular littleness of girls, should take away from reading this story and consequently labeling young children as ignorant. The moral blames Little Red for having listened to the wolf and suggests that although “not all wolves/Are exactly the same,” they are all equally as “dangerous,” and so young girls must learn the lesson that Little Red never did by avoiding any “wolves,” or rather, the predatory men of the world. Perrault’s approach shames children for their ignorance and leaves little room for interpretation in much the same way that Aesop’s fables do – there is a transgression and a punishment, and the young child must learn not to do the same so as to avoid such a fate. This approach is reminiscent of the primer’s blunt presentation of information to the child and hints at Shavit’s idea that the texts differ due to their respective temporal perspectives; it eliminates children’s ignorance by showing them exactly what they need to know with no room for interpretation. Children’s littleness remains defined as youthful ignorance, which must be actively abolished by the text since this ignorance is not a quality that children may eliminate on their own.

The Grimm brothers’ version of the tale, however, brings the true fairy tale concept to the fore. It continues to define the child’s littleness as ignorance due to inexperience but rather than take on the moralizing tone of Perrault, the Grimm brothers seek to let children experience the tale in order to realize their own moral conclusion. Rather than inscribe an explicit moral at the end of the story, the Brothers Grimm offer two possible conclusions from which the child reader may choose, implying that children may have agency in the changing of their ignorant identities. In the first ending, after the wolf has been killed by the huntsman, there is

no moral inscription although Little Red does think to herself, “Never again will you stray from the path and go into the woods, when your mother has forbidden it” (16), serving as a kind of moral conclusion. Immediately following this ending, the Brothers Grimm provide a second story in which Little Red encounters the wolf in the woods but is “on her guard and kept right on going” (16) to her grandmother’s house. After she and her grandmother kill the wolf together, the last line of the story states, “Little Red Cap walked home cheerfully, and no one did her any harm” (16), providing the story with a happy ending rather than the moral judgment of Perrault. By offering two possible conclusions, the Brothers Grimm encourage the child reader to consider the different consequences of Little Red’s actions and how that would change the outcome of the story, displaying a faith in the child reader’s capabilities that Perrault never had.

The fact that the Grimm brothers’ version, in its two conclusions, lacks the moral clarity of Perrault’s version demonstrates the fairy tale’s desire to immerse children in their own experience where they can eliminate aspects of their littleness themselves. The Grimm brothers present the child reader with two endings to choose from and while the second conclusion avoids much more pain for the grandmother and Little Red than the first, both endings have the same end result – the wolf is killed and Little Red is happy. It seems there is no wrong choice, only a different one, emphasizing the fact that children must make their own decisions in how to respond when encountered with a “wolf in the woods.” Though the Grimm version of Little Red’s story puts more faith in the child’s autonomy while Perrault’s version imposes an unwavering moral conclusion that the child is expected to adopt,

these tales' differences do not outweigh their unified depictions of Little Red as in need of experience to overcome her ignorance. In both versions, Little Red is a different girl by the end of her story, having learned her lesson the hard way not to trust strangers and thus, she serves as a model for the child reader who, after adventuring alongside her, is expected to learn a lesson, too.

The act of learning is what fairy tales cleverly conceal under the guise of adventure in an effort to eliminate the child's ignorance. As children's inexperience is simply another iteration of their ignorance, fairy tales in particular are able to address it in an entertaining way that conceals children's literature's didactic intentions while covertly teaching the child at the same time. This phenomenon extends far beyond the fairy tale of "Little Red Riding Hood," as countless other tales such as "Hansel and Gretel," "Bluebeard," "Thumbelina," and "The Goose Girl," include child protagonists who either through curiosity or force are exposed to life experiences through which they learn a lesson and shed a part of their ignorant inexperience, losing part of their youth along the way, too.

The most common way that fairy tales demonstrate this loss of youthful littleness is by the child's arrival at adulthood through experience, which is most frequently demonstrated by monetary gains or marriage. In "Hansel and Gretel," for example, a tale in which the eponymous children are forced to experience the dangers of the woods without their parents' guidance, their assumption of the adult role of monetary provider in the end demonstrates the shedding of Hansel and Gretel's youthful ignorance. As they journey through the woods, abandoned by their parents, they are forced to confront the dangers of the world, as they are soon

trapped by an evil witch who enslaves and cages them in her house of candy. While the witch has successfully tricked the ignorant children, it is in overcoming this ignorance and learning from it that they are able to escape their predicament. Only once the young children demonstrate that they have learned from their experience, committing the adult act of killing the witch and the adult act of stealing her jewels that they are able to return home to their parents. By taking the jewels back to their father, the young children take on the adult role of providing the money for the family that their father could not provide, achieving a role reversal proving that they are capable of being self sufficient and their father, who originally abandoned them, can now rely on them for monetary support. Through their assumption of the adult role of monetary provider, which they achieve through committing typically “adult” acts of killing and stealing, the children demonstrate how they have both grown up and learned from their experience, but also lost a part of their former identity. Through exposure to experience, Hansel and Gretel are no longer the young, ignorant, and inexperienced children whose parental abandonment puts them in direct danger. Rather, they have proved their self-sufficiency, a quality usually reserved for adults, and thus shed part of their “little” ignorant identity.

The Grimm Brothers’ version of the tale of “Bluebeard” (1812) describes a similar, if more grotesque, version of the young child who endures painful life experience and attainment of monetary wealth, though this time through marriage, too, signifying the loss of her ignorance. In this infamous fairy tale, the old, wealthy Bluebeard seeks the hand of one of his neighbor’s two daughters and after much cajoling, convinces the youngest daughter to marry him. It is this young girl’s

experience of living with Bluebeard that makes her grow up, losing her ignorance through grotesque experience. As Bluebeard forbids his young wife from entering only one of the many rooms in his house, the girl's curiosity gets the better of her. She eventually enters the room, in the way of Little Red, Hansel, and Gretel, choosing to explore the unknown, to open the door, and ultimately expose herself to some of life's darkest evils – the bloody, dead bodies of Bluebeard's ex-wives. Though Bluebeard soon returns to discover his young wife's transgression and decides to kill her, the girl's brother kills him first, leaving the girl with all of her husband's wealth. Though she need not steal his riches, the girl's situation is reminiscent of Hansel and Gretel's acquirement of the wicked witch's jewels. This attainment of wealth as an end result of enduring life experience symbolizes the adult-like stability achieved by the now-experienced child, marking the change in their ignorant, inexperienced identities.

As marriage served as the experience that changed Bluebeard's wife's youthful identity, so it serves as symbol of Thumbelina's attainment of experience and achievement of adulthood in Andersen's tale. While the ending to Thumbelina's story represents her achievement of personhood as she becomes queen and finds her power, the metamorphic quality of her arrival at her final destination of marriage also emphasizes her change in identity; her marriage to the Flower Prince symbolizes not only an attainment of power but also her metamorphosis that has actually occurred over the course of her entire story. While Thumbelina learns to deal with kidnapping, large animals, long journeys, and bad weather, she gains the life experience that makes her capable of growing up. By the end of her tale, she is not longer the same

girl as she was at the beginning not only because she finds her fellow tiny people but because she no longer cries because cockchafers think she is ugly, but instead flies on the backs of birds to start her life anew amongst others who respect her so much that they bestow upon her the identity of queen. In this way, Thumbelina's marriage to the Flower Prince symbolizes both an achievement of an "adult" role in society and as such, a loss of her youthful identity – she has enough experience now to be a ruler.

"The Goose Girl" delivers another marriage narrative where through the process of gaining life experience, the young protagonist grows up and sheds her littleness, the ultimate evidence of which is her marriage at the end of the tale. As a widowed queen sends her daughter to a far away kingdom where her betrothed prince awaits her, the life experience of going on a journey into the unknown is repeated much in the way that Thumbelina, Hansel, Gretel, and Little Red embark on their journeys. Like her fellow fairy tale characters, the princess must confront the hardships of life experience as her accompanying maid turns out to be evil, threatening to kill her in order to steal her identity. Upon arrival at the kingdom, the princess undergoes the ultimate identity shift as she has now become a "goose girl" while the maid is posing as the princess. When the king finds out and kills the maid, the goose girl is restored to her proper identity as the new wife of the prince. But like Thumbelina, the princess cannot attain this new, more powerful identity without first enduring life experience that changes her identity along the way.

The fairy tale's approach to addressing children's ignorance as inexperience signifies a counterpoint to the belief that children need to be told exactly what they should know by demonstrating that children can correct their own identity flaws and

come to conclusions themselves as long as they are afforded experience. In her essay, “Why Fairy Tales Matter,” Maria Tatar claims, “Fairy tales help children move from that disempowered state to a condition that may not be emancipation but that marks the beginnings of some form of agency” (63), highlighting the adventurous autonomy offered by the fairy tale and its belief in the child’s agency. Whether children are encouraged to change their identities by gaining more knowledge or more experience, it is their youth that their literature emphasizes as that which makes them open to these changes – while they may find a sense of personhood in the end, it will not come without first shedding some of their ignorance and experience, and even with that, their identities remain fluid until true adulthood is reached.

Littleness as Innocence & Imagination in Golden Age Children’s Literature

Children’s literature of the Golden Age (1850-1920), however, views children’s youthful identities not as something to be overcome but as something to embrace. This very desire to preserve the child’s innocence, a direct result of their youth, inherently implies that the child’s identity is fleeting and should be glorified while it lasts, not overcome through education or experience. It is, after all, Little Lord Fauntleroy’s innocence that charms the Earl Fauntleroy into further securing his inheritance. Rather than needing knowledge or life experience to gain monetary stability, it is instead his very youthful innocence with his “loving little heart” (Burnett 2) that does so. It is also not the fact that Little Lord Fauntleroy mimics the adult gestures of his father, calling his mother “Dearest” (1) for example, but his innocence in believing he can act that way seriously that gives him his charm and endears him to everyone, thus ensuring his full adult protection. In his ignorance of

what it means to be a “lord” or his lack of understanding that a mother should protect her son rather than the son serve as her protector, Little Lord Fauntleroy is a model of the ignorantly innocent child glorified in children’s literature, especially that of the Golden Age. Maria Tatar describes the adult’s glorification of this innocence when she writes, “...wondrous innocence is seen by many as the privilege of the young and adults can do little more than stand in awed envy of its raw magic” (*Enchanted Hunters* 181). It is perhaps no coincidence that innocence and imagination, as embodied in “raw magic,” are intertwined as defining aspects of children’s youth. As Little Lord Fauntleroy innocently believes he can act as his father did toward his mother, he *imagines* himself to be her protector, though in reality this is impossible. Thus, an important quality of the child’s youthful innocence is also their extraordinary imagination at least as perceived by the adult, since it is the imagination that allows the child to escape reality and thus maintain innocence.

While these qualities are glorified, however, they are also portrayed as unsustainable traits; innocence is a charming but passing phase of childhood and it is only a matter of time before the child’s imagination is tempered with adult rationality and realism, resulting in a “bankrupt imagination” (184). Nodelman’s definition of the genre highlights the unsustainability of these traits, as children’s literature “tends to be utopian in that it imagines childhood innocence as utopian, but its plots tend to place child characters in unchildlike situations that deprive them of their innocence” (*The Hidden Adult* 243). It is a distinctive quality of the Golden Age’s texts, however, that place children in “unchildlike situations” and prove that their innocence can be maintained. As Little Lord Fauntleroy has had to endure the death of his father and

become heir to a great fortune, he is placed in adult-like circumstances but holds onto his innocence throughout.

Even texts that precede the Golden Age represent this glorification of innocence in the face of adult-like hardship. Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Match-Seller," also known as "The Little Match Girl," for example, is a fairy tale that demonstrates the young girl's maintenance of perfect innocence despite poverty and death by hypothermia. His young protagonist, the "little match girl," is described as faultlessly innocent, as she diligently does her best to sell matches in town. Her innocence is highlighted as she is repeatedly described as the "poor little girl" (Andersen 551), "poor little child" (551), or "poor little one" (551), evoking the utmost pity for this "little" girl's undeserved impoverished circumstances; her lower class "poor" status almost becomes a part of her implied innocence. The little match girl's innocence is further exemplified as she exhibits a powerful imagination when she begins to freeze, imagining feasts and Christmas trees. As she encounters the most painful part of her life experience, the little girl's youthful, innocent qualities become amplified as they see her through her hardship. Although the little girl's visions of feasts and Christmas trees might be written off by the adult reader as hallucinations, the child reader is meant to perceive these visions as manifestations of the child's fantastic imagination, which helps her miraculously escape her painful, innocent life. While the story ends with the image of the girl's corpse with a smile on her face and her soul in blissful heaven with her grandmother, it sends a particularly Christian message that the innocent, imaginative child is also sinless and has a glorious eternity in heaven to happily anticipate. Despite this Christian influence, it is

clearly the little girl's innocent imagination that is glorified as the story's last words are: "no one imagined what beautiful things she had seen" (554).

While not all children's literature is Christian, its glorification of the child's innocence especially in death permeates the texts of the genre's Golden Age. Death in children's literature is often not a punishment but a reward for innocence – for being too innocent for this world. Like Andersen, Louisa May Alcott adopts this approach to innocence in her novel, *Little Women* (1880), through the character of Beth. Beth is a cherubic child, described from the very beginning of the novel as otherworldly or existing "in a happy world of her own" (7). The narrator describes her as "a rosy, smooth-haired, bright-eyed girl of thirteen, with a shy manner, a timid voice, and a peaceful expression which was seldom disturbed" (6). She is nicknamed "Little Miss Tranquility" (6) by her father and only leaves the house "to meet the few whom she trusted and loved" (7). As the shyest, kindest, and least experienced of the March sisters, Beth remains tied to the domestic sphere of her family, a world in which she can maintain the untainted innocence of a "little woman" (12). This innocence, however, cannot be maintained in the real world as upon visiting the poor Hummel family, Beth contracts scarlet fever and dies a young death. In this way, Beth's innocence will always be glorified since she lives on in the memories of her loved ones as an innocent child forever; though the child has not done so, the child's innocence achieves immortality.

These confrontations between the innocent and death culminate in J. M. Barrie's novel, *Peter Pan and Wendy* (1911), where the innocent live in an imaginary world where "ignorance is bliss" and death is not an enemy but an ally in fighting off

the ultimate threat to innocence – the adult, who symbolizes the act of growing up. As the leader of the imaginary Neverland, Peter Pan is the epitome of the ignorant, innocent, and imaginative child – he is the little boy who will never grow up as he asserts, “I want always to be a little boy and to have fun” (Barrie 22). As such, Peter’s ignorance is pervasive. He lacks knowledge of books, as he does not “know A from Z” (27), and knowledge of social norms such as kissing, as Wendy has to teach him what a “kiss” is, successfully tricking him into believing it is a thimble. Peter does not even know his own age and makes many assertions about mothers and the world that the Darling children come from despite the fact that “of course, he knew nothing whatever about his mother” (99). He cannot even distinguish between his imagination and reality as the narrator comments on the Lost Boys’ and Peter’s game of doctor saying, “the difference between him and the other boys...was that they knew it was make-believe, while to him make-believe and true were exactly the same thing” (45). Unlike the primers that sought to teach children out of their ignorant states of being, Barrie’s novel does no such thing. Although Wendy serves as the Lost Boys’ teacher, Peter refuses to learn, preferring instead to remain in his state of ignorance, perhaps for fear of knowledge’s power to make children “grow up.”

Part of Peter’s rigid ignorance also contributes to his innocent identity. Like *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, his innocence is particularly expressed through his interactions with a mother figure. Peter successfully charms Wendy with his desire for a doting mother who will take care of him and his Lost Boys, someone who will tell them bedtime stories, cook their dinner, and tuck them into bed. His desires are so innocent that he does not even have a clue that sexuality exists despite the fact

that both Wendy and Tinker Bell seem to harbor and hint at romantic feelings for him. Though Peter has endured many more experiences than the average boy that would suggest he is less innocent than he seems, as he has killed countless pirates and battled many “redskins” (63), all of these experiences have been entirely imaginary because Neverland is a fictitious place composed of the imaginations of all children. Thus, Peter’s “experiences” serve to demonstrate his impressive imagination as another extension of his youthful identity.

In this way, Peter Pan is the ultimate innocent and imaginative “little” boy whose assertion of his identity over all of Neverland where “growing up...is against the rules” (35), demonstrates how children’s literature seeks to maintain the child’s innocent identity. While for Andersen’s little match girl and Alcott’s Beth, death is a seeming reward for innocence that preserves it eternally, death for Peter also serves a unique and positive role in helping him uphold his littleness though Peter himself does not have to die in the process. Peter’s arch nemesis is the adult Captain Hook, who embodies everything in the adult that Peter despises such as propriety, manners, and showing “good form” (93) even in battle, but it is Hook’s fear of death that is his great weakness. Part of this fear stems from the fact that Hook is an adult and thus realizes that death is a scary reality he will have to face much sooner than Peter does. Peter, for example, thinks death will simply be another “awfully big adventure” (61), representing a particularly innocent and ignorant child’s perspective on death. But Hook is particularly obsessed and scared of death not just because of his adult identity but also because death is constantly following him. Ever since an accident where a crocodile ate Hook’s hand with his watch still attached to it, there has been a

hungry ticking crocodile hunting him down wherever he goes, hoping to eat the rest of him. Thus, Peter is able to make the crocodile his ally in fighting off Hook, and the threat of the adult or of “growing up” that he represents, once and for all. When Peter discovers that the crocodile’s ticking, which serves as a warning to Hook that death is near, has stopped, the clever little boy impersonates the ticking sound to distract Hook, leading the crocodile to a sneak attack that kills the pirate.

While the ticking watch symbolizes the passage of time and the crocodile represents the inevitable death that comes with it, the young, ignorant, and innocent Peter remains free from fear of it, which is what allows him to fight Hook so bravely. Unlike Beth or the little match girl, whose innocence prevents them from imagining futures for themselves in this world, Peter cannot imagine his own death as long as he stays in Neverland. Barrie’s novel rejects the Christian bent in children’s literature that says the innocent child is destined for heaven, by instead sending children on a perpetual imaginary journey to Neverland, where their youth and innocence are forever preserved in the imaginations of “little” children.

Conclusion

Peter Pan and Wendy is a text about the child’s identity and as Peter’s little boy identity reigns supreme over all of Neverland, so do his ignorance, innocence, and ultimately, his youth. While early children’s literature, fairy tales, and books of the genre’s Golden Age define the child’s youth in different ways, at times seeking to change it and other times seeking to preserve it, they ultimately show that children’s “little” identities are inextricably tied to their youth. Thus, just as young age is forever transient, so are their identities.

In contrast to children's small size, their youth addresses a very different part of their identity, precisely because it deals with the child's mental state of being in and perceiving the world. Though some children may remain physically small relative to others as they grow up, and on a basic human level, they will always be small in relation to the much bigger world, the child's youthful mentality will inevitably be erased in everyone. Even the children's literature that seeks to preserve the child's innocence points especially to this anxiety as it realizes the need to maintain that which will soon be lost. Since there is no definitive way for adult writers to know what thoughts occur in the child's youthful mind, their texts inevitably take on a didactic or idolizing tone, either seeking to change or lamenting the change of the child's young mind. As Maria Tatar notes about Barrie's novel,

By refusing to grow up, Peter Pan incarnates a fantasy of immortality, the dream of being able to remain a child in an eternal present, even at the price of perpetual vulnerability. That dream is in many ways an adult fantasy. Given the powerlessness of children, is it any wonder that their fantasies often turn on growing up and finally being in charge? (*Enchanted Hunters* 120)

As Peter Pan's story is in the hands of adult nostalgia, the child's identity in the genre is and always has been in the hands of the "adult fantasy." Whether the adult desires children to find a sense of personhood in their littleness, becoming more independent or even growing up, to overcome their littleness by gaining knowledge and experience, or to serve as a permanent reminder of the innocence the adult has lost, the definition of the child is always dependent on how the adult perceives it.

That is not to say, however, that children do not find power in part of their “little” identity, and that power lays in their imagination.

CHAPTER THREE

“You’re Nothing But a Pack of Cards!”: Imagination as the Power of the “Little”

While the child’s size and age clearly define children’s littleness, the child’s imagination – the manifestation of the child’s mind – plays a unique role in the child’s “little” identity, especially in children’s literature. Imagination is used to both define children’s littleness, as the defining quality of the “little” one’s mind, and to defy littleness, as it encourages the young mind to escape a world where littleness denotes powerlessness. Like Sara Crewe in *A Little Princess* (1905), children are encouraged to break free from the littleness that leaves them powerless over their reality. Like Alice in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), children are encouraged to affirm their own “little” identities by exploring their imaginations, envisioning worlds where the powerless are powerful, identifying with other “others” such as dolls that are friends and animals that are tea party companions, and in doing so, forming an empowered sense of their “little” identity. Still other child characters use their imagination as a way of exercising power over the adult, denying the powerlessness of littleness like Roald Dahl’s Matilda with her telekinesis, or the *Polar Express*’s little boy’s ability to hear a bell that his parents cannot, or Harold’s ability to create an entire world all his own by simply drawing it with his purple crayon. As children’s imaginations allow them to change their relationship to their own littleness and thus, to the adult who defines this littleness, it is the child’s imagination to which adults ascribe unquestioned power.

Whether children truly possess a greater capacity to imagine than adults do is unknowable, but children’s literature is especially certain that imagination is the

power that children possess and adults lack. Maria Tatar points to this phenomenon when she says, “Adults may still have the capacity for wonder, but you would hardly know it from reading contemporary children’s literature, which so often sings anthems to the imaginative capacities of the young” (*Enchanted Hunters* 182). This is true of not only contemporary children’s literature like *Matilda* but also that of the Golden Age of children’s literature, such as *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* where Wonderland is an entire world constructed by the child’s imagination, or *A Little Princess* where Sara Crewe’s imaginative storytelling baffles the oppressive Miss Minchin. By examining the role of children’s imagination in children’s literature, the genre reveals how children come to realize their own power both because of and despite their “little” identities.

Imagination as Escape

Throughout the genre, children’s extraordinary imaginations are used to escape a harsh reality where their “little” identity represents disadvantage, lack of power, and even pain and suffering. Francis Hodgson Burnett’s *A Little Princess* (1905) exemplifies this as her seven-year-old protagonist, Sara Crewe, uses her imagination to escape the everyday reality in which she has attained ultimate inferiority. Sara’s story begins by depicting her as the epitome of littleness as Burnett writes,

She was such a little girl that one did not expect to see such a look on her small face. It would have been an old look for a child of twelve, and Sara Crewe was only seven. The fact was, however, that she was always dreaming and thinking odd things, and could not herself remember any time when she

had not been thinking things about grown-up people and the world they belonged to. She felt she had lived a long, long time.” (7)

Sara is physically small, young, and imaginative – a true “little girl” – and yet, it is her imagination as a quality of littleness that allows her to transcend that identity, to even be “grown-up” as she imagines herself a part of that world.

Initially, however, Sara’s imagination is the sole quality that ties her to her childhood. When she enters Miss Minchin’s Select Seminary for Young Ladies, she is treated like an adult, “more as if she were a distinguished guest at the establishment than as if she were a mere little girl” (31). Sara’s father, Captain Crewe, extolls her mature intelligence, describing her desire for “grown-up books – great, big, fat ones” (12) and insists on her having the utmost privileges as a “parlour-boarder” (11) at the school with “a pretty bedroom and sitting-room of her own; she was to have a pony and a carriage, and a maid” (11). Her father even buys her a “wardrobe much too grand for a child of seven” (13). In essence, Sara is to live with all the privileges of an adult, afforded to her by her own adult-like qualities and her adult father’s advocacy and wealth.

Sara’s imagination, then, is the reminder of her little girl identity, as her conversion into a doting and inventive “little” child when Captain Crewe buys her a doll recalls her innocence and youth. Upon finding the perfect “Emily” doll, Sara insists on introducing her to Captain Crewe, imagining that Emily can recognize and hear her. Like many little children do with their dolls, Sara is convinced that Emily will become her “intimate friend” (31), revealing her desire for “little” companionship. In contrast to descriptions of Sara’s maturity, when Emily is taken to

get a “wardrobe as grand as Sara’s own” (14), the reader is reminded that Sara, too, is being dressed up in adult-like clothes as if she were a doll – she is not a true adult but rather a little child pretending to be one.

As a representation of Sara’s imaginative capacities, Emily especially reminds Captain Crewe of Sara’s child-like littleness. As he gazes upon his sleeping daughter who is cradling her doll that looks like a “real child” (15), the loving father is reminded of his own “real child” and how much he will miss his “little Sara” (15). He cannot help but think of Sara in “little” terms, reminding Miss Minchin that Sara is “a sensible little thing” (15). As he enters Sara’s “little sitting-room” (16) to say goodbye, his last words to his daughter are to call her “little Sara” (16). Through the character of Emily and Sara’s belief in her doll’s aliveness, Burnett demonstrates how Sara is “a child full of imaginings and whimsical thoughts” (18); she has an extraordinary capacity to imagine. But her imagination serves as more than just a reminder of her littleness as Sara uses Emily to deal with her father’s departure, hoping that “pretending that Emily was alive and really heard and understood” would bring her “a great deal of comfort” (18). In this way, Sara’s imagination evolves from a reminder of her littleness to a way of dealing with and escaping from her reality.

As Sara’s reality becomes one where her littleness represents her inferiority and powerlessness rather than her charming “little” childlike qualities, the little girl must resort to employing the only empowering aspect of her littleness she has left: her imagination. After the death of her father, Sara is left as an impoverished little girl without her father’s adult protection, advocacy, and wealth. She quickly descends the social and class ladder to the status of orphan, “beggar” (69), and lower class; she is

“little” as in “belittled”; she is powerless. As a small, young child, Sara immediately falls under the power of the oppressive adult, Miss Minchin, who makes her the school’s scullery-maid and it is only through her imagination that Sara finds an escape from this new life of drudgery where her life is now defined by adult “work rather than play.”

Sara first finds imaginative power by telling stories to her peers, where she “forgot that she was talking to listening children; she saw and lived with the fairy folk, or the kings and queens and beautiful ladies, whose adventures she was narrating” (39). Through story telling, she mentally transports herself to another world and escapes her unhappy reality. As she discovers the power of her own mind, Sara begins to tell herself stories to help her cope with her reality, particularly the story that she is truly a princess. It is this story that allows her to transcend Miss Minchin’s abuse.

Sara’s imaginative power over Miss Minchin is particularly demonstrated in the scene in the schoolroom when she is cleaning up during lessons. While she cleans, she dwells in her mind’s imagination, contemplating what Miss Minchin would do if she found out Sara “was a princess – a real one!” (109). The thought of Miss Minchin’s reaction is so funny to her that Sara laughs out loud during class. Miss Minchin immediately snaps at her, demanding an explanation to the laugh and it takes “Sara a few seconds to control herself sufficiently to remember that she was a princess” before she replies, “I was thinking” (110). Miss Minchin demands an apology and Sara staunchly replies, “I will beg your pardon for laughing, if it was rude...but I won’t beg your pardon for thinking” (110). Sara is clearly unapologetic

about her imagination, the one source of her power and escape. When Miss Minchin asks what she was thinking about, Sara explains her daydream of the “imagined future so clearly” (111) that even Miss Minchin begins to think she is telling the truth that she must be a real princess after all. The reversed power dynamic between the little child and the adult is summed up in Miss Minchin’s reaction: “It almost seemed for the moment to her narrow, unimaginative mind that there must be some real power hidden behind this candid daring” (111). The imagination clearly proves to be the power that the child has over the “unimaginative” adult. As Sara leaves the room and Miss Minchin is left “struggling with her rage” (111), it is clear that she has won the battle and proven that her imagination is indeed “the greatest power Sara possessed” (38).

Sara’s imagination is so powerful that some of what she imagines even changes and improves her reality. The act of exercising her imagination in itself allows her to improve her situation. From the very beginning of her time at the boarding school, Sara’s stories “gained her even more followers than her luxuries and the fact that she was ‘the show pupil’” (38), and these “followers” soon turned into friends. Sara’s wealth and intelligence – those aspects that made her different, “adult,” superior to the other little girls – are forgotten as she embraces her child’s imagination and enchants her peers who now want her to be their leader.

Her imagined identity as a princess also becomes her reality. After she makes friends with Ram Dass, the Indian servant next door, he decorates Sara’s room while she is asleep, dreaming about a warm room, so that when she awakens, she thinks she is only imagining that her room has changed. Sara says to herself, “If I can only

keep on thinking it...I don't care! I don't care!" (150). She believes so strongly in the powers of her imagination that she does not realize it has been made a reality. With her room restored to her former upper class decoration like when she was a parlour-boarder, Becky declares her to be "Princess Sara" (150). Shortly after, her father's old business partner finds her and gives her the fortune she has unexpectedly inherited which returns her to her upper class, princess status. She is pulled out of belittlement and the power of her imagination is validated as she dons fine clothes again and everyone agrees, "It was Princess Sara indeed" (162). By escaping her reality through her imagination, Sara is even able to change it, demonstrating Burnett's and therefore the adult's utmost belief in, and even fear of, the child's imaginative power.

Imagination as Identity Formation

As imagination is used to escape the powerlessness of the "little" identity, it can be used to affirm the child's identity, too. Sara Crewe, for example, finds empowerment by identifying with the powerless "other" and thus comes to terms with her own identity even as it changes throughout her story. When Sara is still an upper class, pampered little girl, she identifies with her doll, Emily. Just as Sara's life is ruled by adults, whether it is her loving father or the vindictive Miss Minchin, Emily represents a miniature version of the small, upper class little girl lacking autonomy and control over her life. In this way, Emily is an "other" who mirrors and affirms Sara's identity, allowing Sara to easily identify with her. After Sara is lowered to the status of scullery-maid, however, she befriends a rat that she names Melchisedec. Since Melchisedec is a hated pest who lives in the attic, he mirrors Sara's own state of decrepitude as she has become a hated attic dweller herself,

oppressed by Miss Minchin. Like she does with Emily, Sara readily identifies with the rat and has long conversations with him. Both Emily and Melchisedec represent voiceless, marginalized beings with whom Sara can identify. By imagining they are her friends and allies, Sara's imagination allows her to feel empowered in her "little" identity, whether her littleness implies simply her small size and youth, or powerlessness.

Another little girl who imagines herself in a world of "others" is Alice, from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), who takes a journey through her vivid imagination and in doing so, affirms her "little girl" identity. Since all of Alice's adventures occur in a dream she has on a sunny, summer's afternoon, every encounter in Wonderland is a creation of her own imagination. As she journeys through this newfound world, discovering the limits and powers of her "little" identity, physically, emotionally, and socially, Alice is given the autonomy to explore, which she would not have been given due to her littleness in the real world. Thus, the imagination allows her to simultaneously reject the limitations of her littleness and come to accept it, claiming it as an essential part of herself.

Alice learns to let her littleness define her first by using her imagination to grapple with her otherness, the disempowering quality of the "little" child's identity. As she journeys down the rabbit-hole, entering Wonderland where hierarchies of power are turned upside-down, she learns to accept the absurd, the "queer" (81), and the "other," encountering all sorts of "others" along the way. Her journey first begins with her following the very rare White Rabbit who can talk – a distinct "other" – down the rabbit-hole where she is immediately confronted with an identity crisis.

This crisis suggests that Alice must first confront her otherness in order to come to terms with the rest of her “little” identity. As Alice drinks a potion that makes her shrink in size and then eats a cake that makes her grow very big, the girl’s size shifting hints at her internal struggle with her little identity as she very physically attempts to fit into a world that is not made for her. This struggle is the impetus for an identity crisis as she cries a pool of tears and afterwards exclaims to herself,

Dear, dear! How queer everything is to-day! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I’ve been changed in the night? Let me think: *was I* the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I’m not the same, the next question is ‘Who in the world am I?’ Ah, *that’s* the great puzzle! (47)

While Alice calms herself down and decides that she will stay in Wonderland until she has become the person she wants to be – herself, “little Alice” (130) – the fact that this crisis occurs right at the beginning of her adventures reveals that Alice’s struggle to realize her own identity is indeed “the great puzzle” of her journey.

Though Alice’s “little girl” identity makes her an “other” in the world outside of the rabbit-hole, just as all children are inherently “others” in the real world, inside the rabbit-hole, she is also othered because her “little girl” identity means she is an outcast in comparison to the strange creatures she encounters there. In order to achieve affirmation of her own identity, she must come to terms not only with the creatures’ otherness, but more importantly, her own in this strange world of her imagination, which she does by learning how to interact with these bizarre creatures.

Unfortunately, Alice's first interactions with "others" do not go well as she is immediately rejected by them – the White Rabbit runs away from her and the Mouse seeks to swim away as fast as he can as soon as Alice tries to start a conversation with him. Her rejection by the "other," however, is also an indicator of her attraction to and desire to actively identify with it. She never would have come to Wonderland, for example, if she had not been attracted to the strange rabbit who pulls "a watch out of his waistcoat-pocket" (38). Her attempt at starting friendly conversation with the Mouse, despite its initial failure, demonstrates her desire to relate to him, suggesting that perhaps because of her "little" identity and the otherness it engenders, Alice can understand the tiny rodent's perspective. She even apologizes profusely for initially misunderstanding its perspective when she asks it about cats and dogs, acknowledging that she has "offended it" (51). While she does not at first know how to interact with them, Alice clearly believes she can identify with them, which she succeeds in doing when she finally establishes her identity as one of them.

When Alice meets a whole group of "others" consisting of a Duck, Dodo, Lory and Eaglet, the addition of the birds to the "queer-looking party" (52) provides the little girl with an opportunity to fit in, as "after a few minutes it seemed quite natural to Alice to find herself talking familiarly with them, as if she had known them all her life" (52). Like many "others" must do in the real world, Alice realizes her ostracized position and learns to assimilate to this strange culture by participating in their nonsense-talk, "Caucus-race" (53), and even charming them by contributing comfits as prizes for everyone. Although she thinks "the whole thing very

absurd...she [does] not dare to laugh” (54) because she has finally come to accept the otherness of her identity and at least partially find a place for herself in Wonderland.

Despite this acceptance of part of her identity, Alice’s journey forces her to confront many other aspects of her “little” identity, which the other creatures of Wonderland help her to do. The next creature she meets is a large blue Caterpillar smoking a hookah on a mushroom who forces her to confront her youth. When Alice first happens upon the Caterpillar, his initial question to her requires her to explain her identity, asking, “Who are *you*?” (66). Alice shyly responds, “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” (66). While she no longer feels so out of place that she is compelled to cry, Alice’s journey through her imagination to find her identity is still far from over. The little girl’s response to the Caterpillar both hints at her crisis of identity and the universal condition of children, who grow so quickly when they are young that they appear to be constantly changing – the young identity is a fluid identity. The Caterpillar continues to challenge Alice to assert her identity as they engage in circular conversation, ending with the Caterpillar asking who Alice is again. Though she still does not have an answer, the Caterpillar perhaps realizes that she is still too young to know who she is and so he makes her recite a parody of Robert Southey’s “The Old Man’s Comforts and How He Gained Them” in which an old and young man talk about the maladies of old age. In his own confusing way, the Caterpillar forces Alice to confront her young identity and question whether she wants to grow up. When he asks her what size she would like to be, she claims “a *little* larger” (68), revealing a desire to grow up, even if just a

“little” bit. Through her interactions with the Caterpillar, Alice unveils a longing to escape her state of littleness and of not knowing who she is, a predicament she seems to think she can only solve by growing up.

While the Caterpillar helps Alice deal with her youthful identity, he also offers her the advice of eating the mushroom to make her shrink or grow, which causes her to have another crisis of physical identity. When Alice eats the mushroom, her neck grows so long that a Pigeon is convinced she is a serpent. Just as children become lanky and awkward when they grow, Alice’s lankiness causes her to almost lose her human identity. When the Pigeon asks “what” she is, rather than “who” she is, however, Alice responds, “I’m a little girl” (71). Though moments before she had no answer to the Caterpillar’s similar question, confronted by the Pigeon who is not convinced of her identity, Alice is able to claim it. Though she is still “rather doubtful” (71), her assertion of self gives her a sense of place and power in Wonderland, as evidenced by the fact that immediately after, she is able to nibble the mushroom bits carefully and restore herself “down to her usual height” (72). Alice is now able to control her own growth, harnessing Wonderland’s magic to her own advantage and finding power in her new sense of identity.

Though Alice is newly confident in her “little girl” identity, the inevitable fact that she will have to grow up looms over her as the limits to how much she wants to grow up are tested in the kitchen of the Duchess. While the Duchess is cooking a meal, she quickly hands off a nursing baby to Alice upon her arrival saying, “You may nurse it a bit, if you like!” (77). Alice is abruptly confronted with the responsibilities of motherhood, which seems to be Wonderland’s way of testing just

how much she is willing to grow up at this point in time. Just when Alice is contemplating the real responsibilities of caring for the baby, asking herself what many a new mother has probably asked in a different context, “Now, what am I to do with this creature, when I get it home?” (78), the baby turns into a pig and runs away. Wonderland’s test of motherhood clearly proves Alice to be unready, suggesting that she still feels rooted in her “little girl” identity.

Having defined her own otherness and her desire to grow up, though not too much, Alice is presented with the opportunity to assert her identity in a social context at a Tea-Party with the Mad Hatter, the March Hare, and the Dormouse. Amongst these characters, Alice exudes confidence, demonstrating her newfound comfort in her sense of identity. From the very beginning of her interactions with them, she does not hesitate to assert herself as when the Mad Hatter, March Hare and Dormouse all exclaim that there is no room for her at the table, she retorts, “There’s *plenty* of room!” (83). Although timid Alice at the beginning of her adventures would have cried a pool of tears, this Alice, who has undergone all sorts of changes in identity, powerfully asserts herself socially and is ready to critique Wonderland’s social etiquette, which is not up to her standards. The young girl promotes her own social standards instead as she tells the March Hare that he is not “very civil” (83) and the Mad Hatter that he is being “very rude” (83), taking on an almost parental role in reprimanding their manners. The fact that she later leaves the Tea-Party in disgust, however, confirms the fact that she is still not ready for motherhood.

In addition to her reproofing remarks, Alice also demonstrates the ability to function as a social peer to her Tea-Party companions. She has learned how to claim

her place in the riddle telling and nonsensical conversations of Wonderland, interjecting in the middle of the Dormouse's story to ask the clarifying questions a child would ask of their parent telling a story, and that reveal the Dormouse's foolishness. While Alice never truly understands the riddles or stories, she is unperturbed by the nonsense that surrounds her. When she decides to leave the Tea-Party, it is not because she is overwhelmed by the absurdity but rather because she hates their rudeness and walks off "in great disgust" (90) – it is her decision to do so as her own autonomous person. Alice has developed enough sense of self to assert her own opinions in social contexts, to work within the nonsensical social system of Wonderland, and to take herself out of situations that disgust her rather than cry about them as she might have at the beginning of her time in Wonderland; she is truly a changed "little girl."

The Tea-Party proves that Alice has found her own identity and is able to assert it, but she must further prove the power of this identity when she confronts the top of Wonderland's hierarchy at the Queen's Croquet-Ground. As the Queen of Hearts challenges her to a game of croquet, Alice must demonstrate that she has not only learned to play by the rules of Wonderland but she has the power to subvert them, too. From the Queen's first arrival, Alice holds her ground while everyone else falls flat on their faces out of respect for the Queen, refusing to acknowledge the Queen's power. Despite the fact that she is a "little girl" (71), Alice realizes that the Queen's party is "only a pack of cards" (96) and therefore displays confidence in her own identity in the face of power. She must further affirm her identity when confronted by the Queen who asks, "Who is this?" (96) and "What's your name,

child?” (96). In doing so, the Queen acknowledges Alice’s presence and thus recognizes her identity as a “child,” affirming Alice’s sense of self as a “little girl” (71) and someone worthy of being acknowledged by the power in charge. Alice continues to challenge the authority of the Queen as when the Queen shouts “Off with her head!” (96), Alice replies, “Nonsense!” (97), silencing the monarch. The little girl’s ability to name the ruler of Wonderland’s actions as “nonsense” reveals how she has figured out how to take control in this imaginary and nonsensical world by calling it out for what it is – “nonsense!” In doing so, Alice is truly rejecting the lack of sense of her own imagination, having gone down the rabbithole and found herself, she is ready to move on. As her identity protects her since the King exclaims, “she is only a child!” (97) when the Queen threatens to behead her, she realizes there is power in it and the creatures of Wonderland begin to realize it, too. When she endures her last Wonderland adventure at a court trial, it is clear that the power of her identity has been recognized as the king makes a rule saying, “Rule Forty-two. *All persons more than a mile high to leave the court.*” (125). As Alice has unintentionally been growing again, as little girls are prone to do, the rule is clearly written for her. Luckily, once she “grown to her full size” (128), growing sufficiently into her normal self, she uses her newfound empowerment to call out the falsity of Wonderland’s ruling class exclaiming, “You’re nothing but a pack of cards!” (128). It is this assertion of truth that demonstrates her evolution from a lost little girl to an empowered one who is ready to assert herself not only in her own imagination but in the real world, too, as this final act jolts her out of Wonderland and wakes her from her dream, returning her to her real self of Alice the imaginative child.

It is the experience her imagination affords her that does not make her grow up as fairy tales hope to do for children, but rather become more sure of her own identity as a “little girl,” and this reveals the true power of her imagination. Through her journey in Wonderland, Alice confronts her own lack of identity, her sense of otherness, her ever-changing growth as a child, and ultimately learns to stand up to authority. In this process of finding herself by exploring the depths of her imagination, Alice learns to embrace littleness when she needs to and escape it at other times, inevitably losing some of her littleness as she gains experience and grows up, but also holding onto it by growing down when she is not ready to commit to “grown-up” responsibilities. And it is only once Alice is able to return to her “full size” (128) that she finds herself to be right where she started, at her older sister’s side as “little Alice” (130).

Imagination as the Child’s Power over the Adult

While Sara Crewe demonstrates her ability to find power through imaginatively escaping her reality and the limits of her littleness, and Alice finds power in her imagination by accepting her own “little” identity, neither text overtly addresses the child’s imagination as the child’s power. Contemporary novels, however, are more explicit in calling this power by its name. Roald Dahl’s 1988 *Matilda*, for example, features a story very similar to that of Sara Crewe but more overt in its naming of Matilda’s imaginative powers. Matilda Wormwood is a young, “very small” (61) and thus very “little” girl who, like Sara, is extremely overeducated and too intelligent for her grade in school. She is ruled over by the Headmistress, Miss Trunchbull, whose oppressive leadership style is a hyperbolic version of Miss

Minchin's and she especially "hates very small children" (61). As Matilda is both very small and very young, her mind's powers are severely underestimated because of this littleness. But like Sara Crewe, she uses stories to escape her reality though instead of making her own, she dwells in the world of books, travelling "all over the world while sitting in her little room in an English village" (Dahl 16). Though Matilda's imagination is less rooted in her creativity like Sara's and stems more from the incredible capacities of her mind, she also succeeds in making what she imagines become a reality despite her littleness. After Miss Trunchbull wrongly accuses her of putting a newt in her water glass, the furious little Matilda so forcefully imagines the water glass tipping over that she makes it happen just by thinking it. She claims that as she tipped the cup, she was feeling "millions of invisible little arms and hands...reaching out from her eyes, feeling the power that was flashing straight from the two little black dots in the very centres of her eyeballs" (92). Her mind's ability to imagine something and make it come true is the power of her imagination and the text directly acknowledges it as the narrator describes "a sense of power was brewing" (92), "with the power of her eyes alone she had compelled a glass of water to tip" (93), "some sort of power came out" (96), and "it had given her a sense of power that was almost ethereal" (119). Unlike Burnett and Carroll, whose descriptions of their protagonists' imaginations merely imply power, Dahl makes certain that Matilda's imaginative capacities are construed to be just what they are – her "power" that allows her to overcome the limitations of her littleness in the real world.

As a contemporary of *Matilda*, Chris Van Allsburg's picture book, *Polar Express* (1985), is another clear testament to the glorification of the imagination as the little child's power. While Van Allsburg does not directly label the child's imagination as "power," he uses the child's ability to believe in order to portray such imaginative powers as distinctly belonging to the child. Dahl may emphasize the power in this imagination but Van Allsburg emphasizes the fact that it is the child's power. The book begins with the materialization of the child's imagination as the little boy protagonist boards a magical train called the "Polar Express" that takes him to see Santa Claus. Whether the boy actually goes to the North Pole, a trip that due to his littleness seems very unlikely, or solely imagines the experience remains unclear, but regardless, his ability to see and board the train reflects his strong belief in Santa. Since belief, especially for the child, is a symptom of the imagination, as people must be able to imagine that what they believe in is true, the boy demonstrates his unique capacity to imagine through his experience on the Polar Express. Though once he is there, Santa gives the boy a bell from a reindeer's harness that he can hear tinkling beautifully, once the boy returns home, the reality of his experience is questioned as he loses the bell and it appears as a Christmas gift under his tree. It would seem that the boy simply dreamed or imagined his experience in the North Pole except for the fact that only he and his young sister can hear the bell's tinkling while their parents cannot. This implies that the boy's imaginative ability to believe in Santa truly did bring him to the North Pole. The story ends with the voice of the little boy grown up, saying,

“At one time, most of my friends could hear the bell, but as years passed, it fell silent for all of them. Even Sarah found one Christmas that she could no longer hear its sweet sound. Though I’ve grown old, the bell still rings for me, as it does for all who truly believe.” (32)

Thus, he laments that with the loss of littleness comes the loss of the ability to believe and therefore the lost capacity to imagine. It is only because he has held onto his childlike ability to believe that the no longer “little boy” still does. Van Allsburg’s text implies that this belief in Santa, a character deemed imaginary by adults, is a product of the little child’s ability to believe and imagine. There is a reason that Peter Pan calls on the children in their nurseries rather than their parents to clap as a sign of their belief in Tinker Bell so that she comes back to life. Thus it is that little children, by imagining something so powerfully in the way of Sara Crewe or Matilda, are able to make it their reality, or that in which they can believe.

If children’s imaginations give them the power to escape the limitations of their littleness, accept their littleness as a part of themselves, and even influence their own realities to become that which their little minds wish them to be, they also give little children the power to create, as Crockett Johnson’s picture book *Harold and the Purple Crayon* (1955) demonstrates. Harold is an empowered little boy who decides that he wants to go for a walk before bedtime but lacks all the means to do so and thus draws everything he needs with his purple crayon. He represents the adult fantasy of the entirely self-sufficient child, but he also represents the ultimate “little” imaginative child, whose very smallness permits him to draw an entire Harold-sized world for himself. As he journeys through this world, Harold draws what he imagines

and needs – realizing he needs a moonlit path, he draws a moon and sidewalk; when he wants apples, he draws an apple tree; when he wants adventure, he draws a dragon; when he craves authority to tell him where to go, he draws a policeman. Thus, Harold never desires a real adult along his journey, since even those he can draw. The little boy's imagination, then, truly becomes his power despite his littleness or perhaps because of it, as it allows him to create a world where the adult is unnecessary and the little child reigns supreme.

Conclusion

As Harold's story reveals, adults perceive the child's imagination to be their ultimate source of power because it is what truly threatens the adult's own power over the child; it allows children to envision worlds where the adult is not longer needed or even present. By changing children's relationship to their own littleness, children's literature believes that their imagination has the ability to empower. This may manifest by children creating imaginary friends who often share their sense of otherness and thus improve their reality, or by embarking on journeys through their own imaginations to find and accept their own "little" identities, or even by envisioning entire imaginary worlds where the "little" are in power. In any case, children's imaginations allow them to redefine their littleness on their own terms, not in relation to the "big" adult, but rather in relation to who they want to be, whether it is a little princess or simply a "little girl" (Carroll 71).

FINAL CONCLUSION

While adults acknowledge that “childhood is an age of the imagination” (Lerer 318), children’s literature, in its glorification of that imagination, proves that children are not, in fact, the only imaginative beings. Though imagination may be the power of the little child, the stories that convey this power are written, created, and imagined by adults themselves. It is Burnett, for example, who gives reality to Sara’s imagination just as Wonderland is not a creation of Alice, but of the adult Lewis Carroll. By depicting the adult’s imagination of the child’s imagination, the genre points to the role of the adult behind not only children’s literature, but definitions of the child, in general. Paula Fass’s words never ring more true: “children’s lives begin with adult definitions” (*Children of a New World* 201).

Thus, at its core, the “little” is an adult construct. Under the guise of children’s literature, the adult seeks to define the child, both attempting to convey who the child is believed to be and who the child should be, though always on adult terms. As Jacqueline Rose argues, “If children’s fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp” (Rose 2).

This definition of the child, however, is not uniform but deeply varied: to be “little” means children are physically small, weak, and vulnerable, but it also means they are resourceful; it implies that they are young, ignorant, and inexperienced, but also highly and uniquely imaginative; their littleness is both a limitation to and a source of their personhood, a signifier of their powerlessness and their power all at

the same time. Thus, in defining the child's identity, the adult hopes to empower children via their literature both despite and because of their littleness.

But with this desire to empower the child, comes a fear of the child's power. As children inherently represent hope for the future, with their fresh perspective on the world implying an ability to imagine a different and better future, adults are left with the anxiety that this future does not include them. As *Harold and the Purple Crayon* demonstrates, the fully empowered "little" child is an imaginative one, and that imagination may or may not include a vision of the adult. This possibility of being superfluous to the child rattles the adult, who is accustomed to being essential to the child's survival, at least in the real world. Though they may not explicitly state it, the adult's own definition is dependent on that of the child, as without the child, there could be no adult.

Perhaps for this very reason, the adult defines children as "little," a word that is forever linked to its opposite – the "big" – in an effort to bind the child to the adult. As Perry Nodelman says, "we belittle childhood" (86), not because we hope to take away the power of the child's identity, but because we hope to forever link it to ourselves. If children are always "little," then, there is a part of them that always needs us, even when we free them to explore the depths of their own imaginations independently because, like Alice in her Wonderland, they will always come back to us in the real world.

While children's littleness represents adults' anxieties of irrelevancy to the child's life and the consequent threat of losing a part of their own identity, this anxiety is also indicative of a deeper fear of the child's littleness. Of course, the adult

does not desire to possess many facets of children's littleness, namely, their small, weak, vulnerable, and ignorant qualities. Even the adult's glorification of the child's innocence and imagination, which makes the adult appear envious of these qualities, is truly just a manifestation of nostalgia that allows them to maintain a safe temporal distance from truly possessing the child's littleness, knowing they can never return to their childhood state of being. There is, however, a way in which the adult again attains a kind of littleness, and that is through the process of aging.

As adults become elderly, they inevitably shrink, becoming weaker and more vulnerable to being taken advantage of by the younger adult world. They regain their ignorance, as memories fail and they forget the knowledge and experience gained over the course of a lifetime. They may even seem more innocent in this ignorance, viewing the world once again with a forgetful childlike wonder. As the character of Wendy, for example, ages by the end of Barrie's novel, the narrator describes her saying, "as you look at Wendy you may see her hair becoming white, and her figure little again, for all this happened long ago" (108). The little Wendy has become "little again," thus demonstrating how to age is to return to the state of the "little."

But while children's littleness possesses charming qualities that endear the adult to them, the adult's littleness does not come with such social benefits. The elderly, particularly in American society, are relegated to nursing homes where their physical weaknesses and emotional dependencies are cared for not by a loving parent but by a nurse. Though the elderly share a similar otherness with the child, they are far less loved and far more ostracized. Aging adults, then, are both the Captain Hook of *Peter Pan and Wendy*, fearful of the death that is their constant crocodile

companion, perpetually ticking away, and they are the child, Peter, deeply fearful of growing old and returning to a state of littleness, this time without the comfort of the child's Neverland. Thus, by defining children as "little" in their literature, adults seek to clarify that this littleness is just as much the child's identity as it is *not* their own.

But this does not have to be the ending to our story. As Professor Margot Weiss once said in a lecture on Disability Studies, "Disability is the identity that we will all share if we live long enough." I would like to offer a slight modification to her statement: "Littleness is the identity that we will all share if we live long enough." In fact, it already is the identity we have all shared. Perhaps the power of the little, then, lies in its commonality; this identity that seems so "other" to us is, in fact, already a part of who we are and will be again. Thus, in the way that we love our little children who represent our past "little" selves, perhaps we should also have greater love for the elderly who represent our future "little" selves, as little did we know, we are all bound for littleness soon enough.

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