

On Some Complexities of Beatrix Potter

We are familiar, as readers and critics of fiction, with attempts—by no means always foredoomed to failure or triviality—to apply psychology techniques to the exegesis of novels or short stories. But another area where useful work can be done in psychoanalysis and the creative imagination is in significant forms of minor literature, such as children's bedtime tales. This is true of the fiction of Beatrix Potter, the complexities of whose tales for children merit attentive scrutiny. I appreciate that it is fashionable to read the most unavowable fantasies into the writings of such pillars of the Victorian nursery as Lewis Carroll or Charles Kingsley; but it is not mere modishness which leads me to subject Beatrix Potter to brief examination. My interest in her was aroused naturally, through the act of reading her books aloud to my small daughter, no mean literary critic herself; her questions led me to ask myself others. The present note is an attempt to answer them, to my own satisfaction if not to hers.

Most of the Potter stories are relatively straightforward moral tales. *Peter Rabbit*, the best known and probably the best loved (though not the most perfect from a formal point of view—there is a tedious passage in the middle featuring a cat and a fishpond which discerning parents silently skip) tells what happens to a naughty boy who disobeys his mother and gets into scrapes that nearly prove fatal. Squirrel Nutkin, in another book, loses his bushy tail when his cheeky impertinence finally arouses a sleepy old owl to fury. In *The Tale of Two Bad Mice* havoc is wrought in the nursery, greatly to the chagrin of the dolls whose house is wrecked, when mice vent their fury at finding that the fish and meat dishes they covet are molded in plaster. Finally another character, Jemima Puddle-Duck, is saved by a hair's breadth from becoming the dinner of a most Aesopian fox whom she out of naivety and vanity entrusts herself to. I said these stories are relatively straightforward: but the modern parent cannot fail to notice with some concern the streak of sadism which runs through all four examples. Peter nearly gets made into rabbit pie as his father had been; Jemima is rescued from a fate worse than death by the timely intervention of a collie dog; Nutkin is permanently maimed; and although the two mice make amends for their acts of wilful damage the memory of these is not so easily erased.

Sadistic impulses are commonplace in Victorian writing for children, of course, since bogey-men of various kinds were recruited to terrify infants into a semblance at least of good conduct with a nonchalance post-Freudian parents blanch at. In reaction to the cheerful mental cruelty of our great-grandmothers we have probably become too squeamish, but it is surely not timorousness which deters the modern paterfamilias from reading *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* to his offspring; he cannot fail to tremble himself at this story of a rebellious kitten who is nearly made into a roly-poly pudding by a rat. If this did not give Miss Potter's little friends nightmares children must have been made of rather stern stuff in those days.

Some of her stories were of course much kinder; but they are no less revelatory of late Victorian attitudes. *The Tale of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle* tells us a good deal about middle-class views on caste and especially about the manner in which children were indoctrinated with regard to the lower orders in general and to house servants in particular. Mrs Tiggy-Winkle is a hedgehog who takes in other animals' washing; she is, as she says herself, "an excellent clear-

starcher.”¹ A little girl called Lucy comes into contact with her when she (Lucy) goes in search of the pocket handkerchiefs she has lost; it turns out that the washerwoman has gathered them up and intends returning them, beautifully washed and ironed, in a bundle “fastened with a silver safety-pin” (p. 49). Her extremely deferential attitude to her “betters,” even a minor like Lucy, is revealed in her constant use of the apologetic phrase “oh, yes, if you please’m,” “m” being servants’ shorthand for “madam.” And although class accents are normally difficult to render in printed dialogue, Beatrix Potter manages to suggest merely by the words she puts into the mouth of Lucy and Mrs Tiggy-Winkle that the former has an upper-class and the latter a working-class accent. Particularly revealing in this perspective are the narrator’s closing words, ostensibly intended to convince the skeptical child who will say that Lucy had fallen asleep and dreamt the whole episode. “Besides”—concludes this narrator—“I am very well acquainted with dear Mrs Tiggy-Winkle!” (p. 59). That “dear” is awfully patronizing, but quite unconsciously so on the author’s part. She could have been no more aware of this than she could have realized that she was manipulating her young readers’ attitudes by pointing out that “Mrs Tiggy-Winkle’s hand, holding the tea-cup, was very very brown, and very very wrinkly with the soap-suds” (p. 46). There is no *overt* snobbery here; Miss Potter was far too well-bred for that. Her classconsciousness was unconscious (and I am not here being willfully paradoxical). Her hedgehog has “*hair-pins* sticking wrong end out” (italics in the text, p. 46): behind the gentle humor of this allusion to the little creature’s prickles lies the fact, which no child would have failed to note, that to wear one’s hair pinned in that manner was unmistakably plebeian.

This innocent tale, thus, is not as innocent as it appears. It reinforces social attitudes in as emphatic a manner as the moral fables inculcate obedience and deference for one’s elders by demonstrating the fearful dangers in store for those who are deficient in these virtues. Like Simenon’s thrillers, Potter’s stories are all the more effective on the subliminal level for being such well-crafted narratives on the formal level. For they are certainly that, as well as being witty and linguistically sophisticated, fulfilling effortlessly that cardinal prerequisite of all truly effective writing for children: not to condescend. Infants are no less intelligent than adults, they simply know fewer things. Beatrix Potter understood this perfectly well, which is why we go on reading her books to our children even though we are only too aware how absolute was her involvement in the sadistic and class-conscious thinking of her times.

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NOTES

¹*The Tale of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle* (London: Frederick Warne, n.d.), p. 25. All page references are to this edition.