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Distended Youth: Arrested Development in the Victorian Novel

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in English

by

Tyler Michael Dean

Dissertation Committee:  
Professor Jami Bartlett, Chair  
Professor Jayne Lewis  
Professor Andrea Henderson

2014



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
CURRICULUM VITAE	iv
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION	viii
INTRODUCTION	1
Part I: Conceptions of the Child	4
Part II: Gothicization	17
CHAPTER 1: Gay, Innocent, and Heartless: The Impossibility of Peter Pan	26
Part I: Peter, the Boy Who Couldn't Grow Up	33
Part II: Wendy Moira Angela Darling, Ever So Much More than Twenty	55
Part III: Hook, Not Entirely Unheroic	68
Part IV: Reconciliation and Transition	75
CHAPTER 2: Vulgar Gratitude: Bleak House, Harold Skimpole and Endless(ly Productive) Childhood	80
Part I: The Victorian Child in a Romantic World	84
Part II: "Not By the Usual Road of Years, Cares or Experiences"	88
Part III: Skimpole as Vampire, Villain, and Hero	101
CHAPTER 3: The Banshee in the Bildungsroman: Asymptotic Adulthood in Brontë's Vilette	130
Part I: The Tragic Tale of Lucy-Pure-As-Snow(e)	132
Part II: A Tale of Two Cities	156
CHAPTER 4: Exhuming Youth: Second Childhood in Eliot's Scenes of Clerical Life	170
Part I: Wicked Thoughts: Caterina Sarti and the Murderous Child	173
Section 1: Gothic Ornamentation	174
Section 2: Miss Sarti's Love Story	177
Part II: Peering Through the Sundered Mirror: Janet's Repentance and the Childless Restoration	185
Section 1: The Veil of Adolescence	187
Section 2: Second Childhood and Gothic Rebirth	
Part III: Growing Pains	198
WORKS CITED	214

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### DISSERTATION

*Distended Youth: Arrested Development in the Victorian Novel* examines the figure of the eternal child, the childlike adult and other aberrant permutations of the figure who has neither fully exited childhood nor entered adulthood, and the ways in which such figures are made Gothic as an expression of a peculiarly Victorian anxiety surrounding the oft elided or adumbrated transition from innocent and generative childhood to corrupt and destructive adult. It uses Dickens's *Bleak House*, Brontë's *Villette*, Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* and Barrie's *Peter and Wendy* as texts where childhood goes awry, and is either unnaturally extended, or else returned to after a period as an adult. In tracking an increasingly paranoid literary desire to protect and preserve childhood, both real and in fiction, the dissertation seeks to show the genesis and evolution of this Gothic intervention, and prove that such tracts, rather than being odd detours in the novel, are powerful expressions of social instability at the heart of a staple of Victorian culture.

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Distended Youth: Arrested Development in the Victorian Novel

By

Tyler Michael Dean

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Irvine, 2014

Professor Jami Bartlett, Chair

*Distended Youth: Arrested Development in the Victorian Novel* examines the figure of the eternal child, the childlike adult, and other aberrant permutations of the figure who has neither fully exited childhood nor entered adulthood, and the ways in which such figures are made Gothic as an expression of a peculiarly Victorian anxiety surrounding the oft elided or adumbrated transition from innocent and generative childhood to corrupt and destructive adult. It uses Barrie's *Peter and Wendy*, Dickens's *Bleak House*, Brontë's *Villette*, and Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* as texts where childhood goes awry, and is either unnaturally extended, or else returned to after a period as an adult. In tracking an increasingly paranoid literary desire to protect and preserve childhood, both real and in fiction, the dissertation seeks to show the genesis and evolution of this Gothic intervention, and prove that such tracts, rather than being odd detours in the novel, are powerful expressions of social instability at the heart of a staple of Victorian culture.

Ultimately, the dissertation employs the temporal schema that Paul Ricoeur sets up in *Time and Narrative* (1992) in order to justify the use of this Gothicized temporality not as a flight of incongruous fancy, but as necessary formal underpinnings of a literary body that is

anxiously concerned with childhood's *telos* and the impossibility of delaying social responsibility and adult interactions. It opens up a reading of the Victorian Gothic that is more concerned with arrested narrative development and stasis than with the dominant association of queerness, and it allows the conception of Victorian childhood to better blend the then-popular vision of moral binary between adulthood and childhood with the anachronistic understanding of a transitional epoch of adolescence. Neither able to fully embrace the unabashed erotic love set forth by scholars like James Kincaid, nor fully closeted in an epistemological prison, the representation of children at the end of childhood becomes a project, in the literature of the time, that insinuates the conditions of possibility for adulthood, but refuses to name them outright in the hopes that some children may, inadvertently, never meet them.

## SHADOWY PASSAGES: AN INTRODUCTION

This project is concerned with the 19<sup>th</sup> century social phenomenon in which children are deemed innocent and capable of restoring adults to purity, thus rendering their entry into adolescence and adulthood a lamentable event. Specifically, it investigates the ways in which the temporal aspects of the novels examined are Gothicized and used to adumbrate the ill-defined developmental period between childhood and adulthood in Victorian and Edwardian literature. It uses Peter Coveney's concept of a Victorian "child cult:" the Victorian social trend of beatifying the child as a profoundly, intrinsically innocent being in need of praise and protection. It sees this protection of children's innocence as an extension of the adult Victorian's desire to be retroactively purified. Furthermore, this Gothicized element in novels that are otherwise categorized under the auspices of social realism, *bildungsroman* and children's fantasy are ways of indefinitely prolonging childhood by uncoupling it from actual temporal progression and binding it to social ritual markers—marriage and professionalization. In doing so, this malignant temporality makes childhood less a stage of life that must end and more of a condition that one can choose to extend indefinitely, remaining a child forever and satisfying the aims of the child cult. The Gothic focus on the interchangeability of roles, and, critically, the entrapped or buried temporality of maturation, links the four texts of this dissertation -- J. M. Barrie's *Peter and Wendy* (1911), Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1854), Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), and George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858) -- in a chain of Victorian and early Edwardian reactions to eternal childhood.

The first chapter, "The Impossibilities of Peter Pan," lays out the foundational arguments for this kind of Gothicized childhood through the most famous eternal child of Western

literature. In examining the novella, *Peter and Wendy*—a text that features child abduction, a menacing fairyland, and a maiden-stealing, moustache twirling villain and yet somehow does not read as Gothic—the chapter addresses Peter Pan’s shift from petty Gothic villain to tragic Gothic hero, both master of and outcast from the experiences of childhood. It ultimately argues that his bifurcated identity is a panacea for the disease of desiring eternal childhood, put in place by Barrie. On the one hand, he fantasizes about a childhood without end, and on the other, he reminds the reader that it is mere fantasy. While *Peter and Wendy* (and the play that preceded it, *Peter Pan*) is typically read as the apotheosis of the Victorian fantasy of eternal childhood, the chapter seeks to redefine it as a sobering restorative: acknowledging its importance as it argues that it is best left behind.

The second chapter, entitled “Vulgar Gratitude: *Bleak House*, Harold Skimpole and Endless(ly Productive) Childhood,” expands upon the lessons of the first chapter. Where Peter Pan is a juvenescent figure whose liminal status makes him both villain and tragic hero, Harold Skimpole, an adult successfully masquerading as a child in Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House*, is both a figure of eternal childhood and an economy unto himself who undermines the novel’s premise that work is a bad system but an unavoidable one. In placing Harold Skimpole in the role of Gothic villain, rather than recipient of undue charity, the chapter asserts that he stands outside the paradigm of work, manipulating adults into acts of self-harm and cruelty that are part and parcel of the roles of work, while never entering into those roles himself. Ultimately, the chapter claims that *Bleak House* is a novel that depends upon the fantasy of eternal childhood in order to see a way out of the cycles of industry and commerce that doom most of its characters.

The third chapter applies the arrested development of this Gothicized childhood to genre. In “The Banshee in the *Bildungsroman*: Gothicized Growing Pains in Brontë’s *Villette*,” the

novel is framed as a failed *bildungsroman* whose failure stems from the inability of the protagonist to fully enter adulthood. It uses the space of the *pensionnat* at the novel's center as a space where maturation is first retarded then arrested completely. This physical space (a space for education) would seem to be the perfect place for a *Bildungsroman* to take place. However, the chapter posits that the *pensionnat*, rendered with an overlay of Gothic tropes and atmosphere, is involved with the fantasy of eternal childhood, proposing that children develop while keeping them away from the experiences that would trigger the start of their adult lives. The chapter simultaneously interrogates the relationship between protagonist Lucy Snowe and her foil, Ginevra Fanshawe, as two versions of the Gothic heroine. While the former remains safe in the walls of the *pensionnat*, refusing to take part in the dangerous, Gothic city of Vilette—leading to her downfall and inability to escape a juvenescent identity—the latter engages fully, eventually using the Gothic tropes provided by the city to reach maturation. On the one hand, the novel uses a Gothic overlay to destabilize the *Bildungsroman*, accounting for one of the most bizarrely truncated and unsatisfying endings of nineteenth century fiction. On the other, it gives us a proactive heroine, usually victimized in Gothic novels, who successfully leaves childhood because she makes a Gothic intervention of her own.

The fourth and final chapter, “Exhuming Youth: Second Childhood in Eliot’s *Scenes of Clerical Life*” looks to the author’s 1858 collection of three novellas as a primer on the redemptive possibility of a second childhood that can only be accessed after a transition into adulthood. The chapter sets up the Gothic tale “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story” as a window into a childhood where the traditional notions of inherent innocence are challenged, then expands that understanding to the possibility of an adulthood purified without time spent among children in the final story, “Janet’s Repentance.” In the case of the former story, childhood is rendered

Gothic, not through the threat of on-coming adulthood, but as an intrinsic quality of the stage of life. The latter story looks to Janet Dempster as a model for the longed-for return to childhood, which is figured as possible only after a lapsarian transition to adulthood has been achieved. The collection destabilizes the notion that proximity to childhood is the only route to innocence and, in doing so, undermines the promise of eternal childhood by embracing the Gothic rather than rejecting it.

Ultimately, the dissertation employs the temporal schema that Paul Ricoeur sets up in *Time and Narrative* (1992) in order to justify the use of this Gothicized temporality not as a flight of incongruous fancy, but as necessary formal underpinnings of a literary body that is anxiously concerned with childhood's *telos* and the impossibility of delaying social responsibility and adult interactions. It opens up a reading of the Victorian Gothic that is more concerned with arrested narrative development and stasis than with the dominant association of queerness, and it allows the conception of Victorian childhood to better blend the then-popular vision of moral binary between adulthood and childhood with the anachronistic understanding of a transitional epoch of adolescence. Neither able to fully embrace the unabashed erotic love set forth by scholars like James Kincaid, nor fully closeted in an epistemological prison, the representation of children at the end of childhood becomes a project, in the literature of the time, that insinuates the conditions of possibility for adulthood, but refuses to name them outright in the hopes that some children may, inadvertently, never meet them.

### *Part I: Conceptions of the Child*

*The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James' 1899 novella, might as well be termed "the text that launched a thousand articles." It is worthy of an archive unto itself, as one of the most analyzed,

deconstructed, and appropriated entries in the history of Western literature, spawning a myriad of film adaptations, revisions, parodies, and an opera. Though James' labyrinthine prose and famously unreliable narrator play large roles in the critical and artistic longevity of the text, quite a bit of its infamy boils down to its lurid subject matter: the intersection of children and the Gothic.

The novella itself plays out this point: the narrator of the frame story opens with an account of the reactions of the attendees of a Christmas party who are attempting to outdo one another with macabre and haunting tales. The guest who tells the story that forms the bulk of the novella claims that his ghostly tale is “beyond everything [...] for sheer dreadful dreadfulness, for general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain” (21). This idea of “sheer dreadfulness” refers to the aforementioned intersection. After all, the story is being compared to the unheard yarn of another guest, who tells a tale that the partygoers agree is “gruesome [in large part because the ghostly] visitation had fallen on a child” (22). Douglas, whose tale the guests await, initiates a call and response: “if one child presents a turn of the screw, then what do you say to two children?” Well, they say, “it gives two turns!” (22). So the dreadfulness of this tale is doubly determined. Not only is it “beyond everything,” but the torturous stakes are heightened by not one, but two turns of the screw.

That we should find a ghost story especially dreadful—full of “uncanny ugliness and horror and pain”—because it involves children is easily taken for granted. Across the last two centuries, our culture has revered children. It figures them as in need of special protection and takes transgressions against them seriously, often suspending the burden of proof (whether legally or in its citizens' hearts and minds) so as to be completely sure that children do not come to harm. One place scholars repeatedly look to when attempting to discuss the origins of this



cultural monolith is the Victorian era. The relationship between Victorians and children is well documented. Phillippe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood* claims that the child is *the* central figure of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most sociological critics agree with the idea that our modern, Western conception of childhood—a sacred stage of life, altogether dissimilar to adulthood—was an invention of the Victorians, and whether or not we can easily assemble a clear and distinct timeline for the social understanding of childhood, it is not hard to understand that the concept of childhood was a powerful nineteenth century idea that has spawned no small amount of critical analysis.

A discussion of children who are naturally pure will, of course, raise questions of the role of the Romantic conception of the child. I speak of childhood as a Victorian phenomenon: what then of Rousseau or Wordsworth? The main difference is one of contiguity. In Book I of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, he describes how, after stealing a skiff, he notes:

[...] A rocky Steep uprose  
Above the Cavern of the Willow tree  
And now, as suited one who proudly rowed  
With his best skill, I fixed a steady view  
Upon the top of that same craggy ridge  
.....  
I struck and struck again,  
And, growing still in stature, the huge Cliff  
Rose up between me and the stars, and still,  
With measured motion, like a living thing,  
Strode after me. (394-98, 408-12)

The description of a child-like confusion and horror at mistaking the crag, which appears to move relative to his rowing, for a monstrous, living thing that pursues him, is an event or memory that both Victorians and Romantics would take for a child-like fancy, albeit a distressing one. Where the Romantic concept of childhood differs is a few lines down when Wordsworth explains that “for many days, my Brain/ Worked with a dim and undetermined sense/ Of unknown modes of being” (418-20). That Wordsworth takes the experience of a childhood misconception and shapes it into new, heretofore “unknown modes of being” shows a temporal contiguity between adult and child, happening in sequence as the child learns from his experiences. Compare that notion with Coveney’s assertion that the Victorian child cult “serves, not to integrate childhood and adult experience, but to create a barrier of nostalgia and regret between childhood and the potential nostalgia of adult life. The child, indeed, becomes an escape from the pressures of adult adjustment, a means of regression towards the irresponsibility of youth, childhood, infancy” (Coveney 240-41). From the Victorian viewpoint, the child is a creature altogether dissimilar from the adult. That “barrier of nostalgia and regret” does not see the connection between the boy-Wordsworth in the boat, the maturing-Wordsworth that meditates on unknown modes of being, and the adult-Wordsworth who can reflect on that relationship between the first two in poem form. There is, for the Victorian, as Coveney describes him, only the feckless and naïve child, who believes that mountains might stalk him, and the melancholy adult who does not but might wish he did.

This naïve creature is simultaneously vulnerable—too pure for an ultimately fallen world—and also, somehow, a bastion of strength; the innocence of the child after all can melt the hearts of stone-faced adults and provide profound, simplistic truths, uncorrupted by adult ulterior motive. Such children are perfectly uncivilized and naïve without being objectionable or

unrefined. Says Lewis Carroll of the children of Sir Noel Paton: they are “most complete ‘children of nature.’ They are [...] something like South Sea Islanders with the instinct of gentlemen and ladies: no “manners,” but simple, natural politeness. I can’t quite describe it, but it charmed me very much, as being thoroughly ‘real’” (165-66). Carroll’s insistence that there should be a “real” child who, to quote Rosella Mallardi, possesses a “‘natural’ kindness, a spontaneous politeness, free from affected manners,” (55) gets at the heart of the purpose of the child cult. Children in their ideal (oddly termed “real” by Carroll) state exist outside of the paradigm of Victorian civility. They have nothing of the adult world’s affectations, or outright perfidy—cloaked in meaningless manners— yet they somehow match the adult sensibilities that manners help to create. The child is delightful to adults without trying. Carroll elucidates further in an excerpt from a letter to his sister: “Next to what conversing with an angel might be—for it is hard to imagine it, comes, I think, the privilege of having a real child’s thought uttered to one. I have known some few real children (you have, too, I am sure), and their friendship is a blessing and a help in life” (1:607). This latter characterization— the child whose purity empowers them— forms the second major tenet of the Victorian child cult: the belief that children can restore purity to willing adults. Claudia Nelson, in her broad recap of childhood for the *Victorian Guide to Literature and Culture*, puts it most succinctly: “the man who forms loving bonds with children is establishing for himself an emotional life centered on innocence, purifying his own existence retroactively” (80). This turns the child into a something of a commodity for adult consumption and serves as the jumping-off point for the central fascination of this dissertation: if children are not only intrinsically innocent, but so pure and sacred that they can restore purity to adults who spend time with them, how precisely is this innocence lost? What is the event that effectively ends childhood by making children no longer able to restore an adult’s lost purity?

This dissertation does not seek a novel answer to the question. Victorians provide a blanket demonization of sex and work as the culprits and, seeing as the texts analyzed herein are written in keeping with that idea, there is no need to suggest another source of corrupting influence. What is sought in the following chapters is an understanding not of when the corruption occurs, but of how this indefinite “when” destabilizes conventions of narrative and genre, and how such instability recapitulates the anxiety felt by Victorians on the subject of childhood’s end.

What we, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, refer to as “adolescence” is less available as a distinct stage of life to Victorians. While the onset of puberty slowly and undeniably transformed the child’s body into that of an adult, the corrupting influences of sex and work are social, not physical. An adolescent child is capable of reproductive sex, but is not expected to engage in it outside of marriage, which might come five to fifteen years after puberty. Likewise, while the mental and physical development of adolescents might make them capable of adult work, the process of apprenticeship and professionalization (for the middle and upper classes) also creates a gap between puberty and adulthood. It wasn’t until 1904 that G. Stanley Hall’s two-volume treatise, *Adolescence*, would both make popular use of the term and usher in an era of psychoanalytic criticism regarding the transition out of childhood. What passed for consideration of the adolescent in the decades previous was largely concerned with the pessimistic degeneration theory pushed at the *fin-de-siecle* by Max Nordau and Ray Lankester—a concept of the adolescent that largely attempted to account for urban youth and the criminal poor. This left a gap in popular understanding. The child was pure and innocent, the adult corrupt and knowledgeable, and what came between was largely unexamined—the small bit of discussion

that did occur focused almost entirely on a pessimistic view of the lower classes, leaving middle and upper class adolescence almost completely untouched.<sup>1</sup>

The result is an indistinct stage of life with only the most idiosyncratic of characterizations. Not only are the valences of this transitional period nebulous, but the actual boundaries are as well. Entry into it is physical but exit from it is social. For the un-working man, or the unmarried woman, it is unclear if this adumbrated epoch even has a terminus. Victorians do not have a term for it. To say that this epoch is merely a pre-figuring of adolescence does not account for the variable end of the stage that might be in one's mid-to-late twenties, long after eighteen, the modern age of majority that defines its endpoint for much of the Western world. To call it something else—like our current *mot juste*, young adulthood—implies that there is a consistent set of characteristics that it embodies.<sup>2</sup> Instead Victorians have a stage of life that is characterized, more often than not, by a lack of distinct characterization. It is an often lengthy, nebulous labyrinth: not multifarious as much as murky. The road out of childhood is a shadowy passage—one that begins with innocence and ends in corruption. The Victorian authors of such fictions (as well as, to a certain extent, the critics who have written on such fictions) have no way of properly accounting for how or when the corruption takes place. This

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<sup>1</sup> And it is with the middle and upper classes that this dissertation is largely concerned. From the point of view of the Victorian fiction writer, children of the lower classes are no less deserving of the sympathy of the reader, but they are lost causes, doomed by circumstances of birth to be unprotected and die young—their restorative innocence untapped. Even Dickens, the great champion of fictional children, has no trouble killing off his poor children by way of exemplifying the inability of the lower class to provide proper care. His urchins that do survive (read: Pip, *Oliver Twist* et al) find themselves to be products of the middle and genteel classes, already possessing the rights of protection due them at birth.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, many of the neither-child-nor-adult characters that will be discussed throughout this dissertation are coded as exceptional or somehow “special” in much the same way as the teen heroes and heroines of what publishers deem “young adult literature” are. Were these novels and novellas not shelved as “Classics,” it is not much of a stretch to think that might appear on the “Young Adult” shelves alongside Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* (2005) and Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* (2008).

dissertation will track this inability to see a contiguous narrative, where the progressions into and out of childhood are properly accounted for.

That indefinite, anxious un-characterization is, no doubt, a part of the reason for so much being written on the end of childhood by modern critics, and the reason for much of that criticism suggesting something sinister. The most obvious and, for our purposes, most important body of criticism on this topic is, of course, James Kincaid and his followers. His 1994 opus, *Child Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*, and the myriad books and articles which took up his assertion that the Victorian child cult is fundamentally an eroticized set of beliefs, treat upon this stage of life insofar as they blur the line, in the Victorian psyche, between the (sexually) innocent child and the (sexually) corrupt adult. Kincaid's observations on the fetishization of the child are invaluable, but equally useful is his intimate, uncomfortable prose style, where he implicates the reader as an active participant in the culture of pedophilia. With such observations as "Our culture does not want to mislay the tie between spanking and desire, just as it does not want to acknowledge it. Past generations were often more candid about the arousals of child-beating" (255) and chapter and section titles that include "The Budding Body," "Sex and Its Uses," and "Reading, Watching, Loving the Child," the book delights in lurid insinuations of the author's, project's, and reader's pedophilia—forcing a disgusted reaction and inviting claims of protesting too much. This matters here insofar as it still reads as deeply distressing. If anything, in this century, the fear of the corruption of the child has reinforced the fact that, though we now believe children to be vulnerable in a way that Victorians did not, the anxiety-ridden cultural importance of children has not wavered.

The most interesting point in Kincaid's understanding of the relationship between adult and child is that it is predicated on temporality as it relates to play:

[Wondrous children] keep us on our toes, sprinting after them and never getting close, seldom catching more than a glimpse. [...] They] demand to be loved on their terms entirely, and they are not easy terms. Such love must be complete, unquestioning and entirely its own reward. No love if given in return [...] supremely indifferent to the adult's feelings and desires. They have their own needs, to which one can, now and then, minister. [...] One can hope to sneak a peak—[...] but even these are rare moments, no one can violate the "Do Not Disturb" signs. (275)

Kincaid sees the adult desire to commune with childhood as a kind of erotic predation—albeit one where the kill and feast are unavailable. The restorative power of the child becomes not a boon granted by a lovely, altruistic innocent, but a prize snatched from an unwilling victim. Yet in the example given, though the child is being pursued by a "child-lover," it is the adult who must endlessly run after it, wasting their own precious time in the pursuit of elusive sustenance. It is a cruel parody of symbiosis wherein the child benefits from adult ministrations and the adult feeds off only the most meager scraps of affection. This, naturally, leads Kincaid to state, "that we are unable to close the distance may seem melancholy to a few. But the true child-lovers know the pleasures of these failures [...] They] can be invited back to play this game only if [they] lose it" (277). The perpetuation of the predatory/parasitic game seems to fit with the idea that eternal childhood is a desire only for the adult. Kincaid is speaking for an adult who wants nothing more than for children to remain children in order for adulthood to be prolonged and pleasurable. Kincaid's adult is a hedonist and children are delicacies to be devoured.

It is on this point that this dissertation offers a supplement to Kincaid. Rather than see the endless cycle of attempting to catch the child as monstrously good fun, these pages admit that

there are also many drawbacks, both dangerous and melancholic, surrounding the prolongation of childhood. Kincaid is most willing to make arguments about adult pleasure with regard to fictional children (specifically Alice and Peter Pan) who can, indeed, be revisited endlessly. No fictional child will ever grow up upon a second reading. But there are works of Victorian fiction that provide us with children who are not means of adult entertainment—rather they are sources of concern. The aforementioned *The Turn of the Screw* rests quite a bit of its dramatic tension on Richard Locke’s assertion that “‘What do the children know?’ is an obsessive question repeated throughout the story” (184). This fear becomes totemized in a letter: an account by Miles’ headmaster detailing why the child has been expelled from his boarding school. We are told only that the headmaster believes him to be “an injury to the others [...] to his poor little innocent mates” (James 34). The Governess obsesses over the contents of the letter, conflating Miles’ transgressions at school with his understanding of the manor in which they reside being haunted. During the climax of the novella, Miles first steals then burns the letter and the cause of his expulsion is teased: he “said things” to the boys “he liked” (James 118). While the actual transgressions detailed therein are never rendered fully explicit, we know they were “too bad” to be contained in the text of the letter and that they had an infectious effect on his classmates, wherein the other boys “must have repeated them to those *they* liked” (119). In the fashion of the 19<sup>th</sup> ghost story, where the spirit is rarely able to do more than appear frightening, the revelation does not point to a physical violation (like the deceased and now ghostly valet Quint’s assumed rape of Miles), but a verbal one. The bad things that are shared with the classmates Miles especially likes are words, suggestive of sexual conduct, perhaps, but not themselves sex acts. The Governess’ concern over Quint’s being “too free with my boy” (James 53) is not focused on how Miles has adjusted after being raped by his Uncle’s servant, but rather on whether or not



Miles knows the ghost is stalking him, and whether or not he knows that his sexual peccadillos with his schoolmates are done from the position of adult sexuality.

Essentially, the Governess' fears are whether Miles is an innocent child (albeit a naughty one) or a corrupt adult, full of adult sexual knowledge, in the guise and body of a child. His decade of life is not a guarantee of his being a child. While the supposition is never that Miles is a vampire or some other species of eternally youthful monster, the inability to define the end of childhood allows a physical child to be an adult just as easily as it allows a physical adult to yet be a child. Lewis Carroll believes that the effortlessly pleasing, utterly ignorant child to be "real," and thereby delightful, but James gives us a reason to doubt the veracity of the child who caters so explicitly to the naughtiness that Kincaid says the child-lover best desires.

James Miles may be a fictional child, like Peter and Alice, but *The Turn of the Screw* is concerned with the inevitability of the child's corruption and maturation. And it is in these ruminations on the inevitability of growing up that the melancholy of Kincaid's faithless reader comes to the forefront. He even references the pitfalls of such a gloomy outlook, saying:

As we are sliding down towards the child, the child is roaring past us in the opposite direction, growing up. Nothing contributes more clearly to the child's fluid status than this sense of being in motion—and in the wrong direction. [...]  
We generally read their play in the most depressing way and often impose the view of childhood that most alarms us: That it is nothing more than schooling for adulthood. (277)

This dissertation works to bring to light the anxious desperation of adults who see children escaping adult clutches and running "in the wrong direction." The desire to arrest development (and thereby make the child an endless source of renewed innocence) by "catching" is one that

can be titillated but not satiated by the act of reading. The fictional child represents the seed of an idea—an impossible dream—of a childhood without end, but no practical, practicable instructions on how to enact it. Caught between the desire to halt the emotional, social and physical development of children and the knowledge that such a project is impossible, the Victorian child cult seeks to obfuscate the mechanism by which corrupt adulthood is achieved and keep its adherents from the second part of the conundrum, since it cannot slake the first.

Critics have spoken about the distance between the regretful adult and rambunctious child, combined with the epistemological black hole that is created in the willful forgetting of when childhood ends, as a kind of queerness—a closeted system of knowledge where understanding the boundaries destroys the benefits of the relationship. Catherine Robson's *Men in Wonderland: The Forgotten Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman* contributes to the morass of this stage of life by suggesting that the queerness of childhood develops out of the inherent femininity of boyhood and manifests in the adult man's desire to construct idolized and reverent relationships with little girls. While queerness is a very useful lens for this stage of life, and one that will be invoked throughout the following chapters, it is not capacious enough to fully describe either the relationship of the no-longer-a-child to the adult or the nebulous space where this figure exists. It is, as previously stated, extremely tempting to think of the elision of childhood's end as a kind of *de facto* "closetedness" on the part of adults. Eve Sedgwick insists in her *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) that closetedness "is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence [...] that accrues particularly by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it" (3). While much of the discussion of the end of childhood is figured as a parallel act of accrued silence, there is no stable interior/exterior division to mark our epistemological limits. The Victorian adult who does not

admit to the end of childhood is no less knowledgeable about how such an end occurs than the adult who does. The performance of society where childhood has no end is understood to be mere performance, but it suggests no unspoken alternative. The Victorian adult's inability to accept the end of childhood is less like a closet and more like an oubliette: one knows one is concealing a truth about the outside world but one has no idea what that outside world consists of. Furthermore, queerness embraces a meditation on otherness, and while children are often deemed "other" in works of criticism pertaining to Victorian children (Kincaid especially draws on this notion), they are not pariahs but paragons. They are the worshipped Other who, rather than representing the sum total of society's unconscionable deviations, are the repositories of those qualities that the social order desires but does not deserve.

In short, the unabashed exuberance of Kincaid's playful eroticism and the melancholy closetedness of the queer reading of adult reflections on maturation are both necessary but incomplete views on the Victorian adult's conception of childhood. While the eternal child is a fantasy and one that occasionally is played out in literature, the fictional but not fantastical child is given an indefinite, murky, and asymptotic trajectory towards adulthood—something that must be approached in the name of social realism, but never fully met. In the case of those Victorian *Bildungsromanen* that cover both childhood and adulthood—say a *David Copperfield*, a *Pendennis*, or a *Jane Eyre*—the actual transition is elided through a narrative jump, or included only as a monotonous series of events that do not psychologically probe the child's desire to grow up. One need only look at *David Copperfield*'s angst-ridden pining for his first love, Miss Larkins. It takes up a mere four pages of the nine hundred page tome and can read either as a pre-sexual schoolboy's dotting admiration, or a young adult's sexual ardor. It betrays neither sentiment in favor of the rote external signs of longing common to both child and adult; Dickens

writes the Copperfield's amorous dudgeon "takes away [his] appetite, and makes [him] wear his newest silk neck-kerchief continually" (278). This kind of bland, clichéd parade of tropes is cursorily put forth as a list, rather than a series of experiences. Compare that to his subsequent, languorous love for Dora (a love that takes place when David is an adult), which spans chapter upon chapter, agonizing over the smallest interaction and drawing out the temporal space of the novel, and one begins to see that the Miss Larkins episode, the only reference to love within that pre-adult space, is conspicuously inconspicuous.

With one exception, the following pages are concerned with those narratives in which the approach of adulthood is a looming inevitability, the desire for a childhood without end is front and center, and a temporal break that lands their protagonists squarely in the adult world is impossible. Unable to neatly skip over the end of childhood, these narratives must approach it with a combination of unwilling acknowledgement and willful obfuscation. What ends up filling up the space of those novels is shadowy. Such novels employ a kind of lingering malignancy: an end to childhood and transition into adulthood that is both indistinctly sinister and sinisterly indistinct. In the next section, the malignant "Gothicization" of temporality, as well as its effect on the child cult's aims, will take center stage.

## *Part II: Gothicization*

J.M. Barrie said of Peter Pan, in his first literary appearance, *The Little White Bird* (1902), that the boy was "betwixt and between" (156). This descriptor might as well apply to all those literary figures who hover at the end of childhood without yet being adults. In refusing to delineate the line between childhood and adulthood, or define a separate epoch between the two (as we do with adolescence in modern American culture), this figure inhabits the space of

unrealizable possibility—of what I deem a kind of lingering malignancy—that extends childhood indefinitely, sometimes with disastrous effects both within the plot and upon the structure of the narrative. This figure often adumbrates adulthood and elongates the possibilities of childhood, seducing the reader into believing that, but for the cruelty of biology, eternal childhood is possible. Thus, the literature that exists does not attend to any sort of clear delineation; adolescence and young adulthood are treated as an extension of childhood—ignoring the burgeoning sexual desire and increased social responsibility that links it with adulthood—regardless of physical maturation.

And that brings us to the inclusion of the Gothic. As a centuries-spanning genre or mode (depending on the critic) it has numerous valences, most of which are not useful to the following pages. Instead of discussing Victorian Gothic novels, this dissertation seeks to employ the method Sharon Marcus refers to as “‘just reading,’ which attends to what texts make manifest on their surface” (3). The texts that are dealt with herein do not fall under the auspices of Gothic novels, but they are overshadowed by a kind of Gothicism. Some employ Gothic tropes, though only for fleeting, fragmentary moments. Others are under the malign pall of a sinister figure that, though it is an eternal child, acts in the manner of a Gothic villain. These are elements that are manifest in the book—Gothic episodes that do not necessarily stand for the aesthetic or formal features of the entire novel or novella. But the texts all share a dread of time and any kind of temporal figurations: a Gothicized temporality that seems to bleed into the novellas most profusely when the figure of the eternal or prolonged child is at the forefront.

Temporal dread, with regards to Victorian children, occasionally even matches up with more familiar Gothic tropes. Vernon Lee’s 1890 anthology, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, is notable, in the history of fictional Victorian children, for the epistolary short story

“Dionea,” wherein an eponymous foundling who washes up on the Italian shore is raised by the people of a small town, unaware that she is an avatar of Venus, and a violent one at that. It would not be hard to include “Dionea” among a collection of Gothic tales. It has the tropes of unspeakable secrets and live burial that Eve Sedgwick imagines to be the cornerstone of the genre. It has the xenophobia and nationalism that Canon Schmitt points to in *Alien Nation: 19<sup>th</sup> Century Gothic Fictions and English Nationality*. It even asks the reader to question whether or not Dionea is really a supernatural being or a monstrously human killer in line with Margaret L Carter’s Gothic rumination, *Specter or Delusion*. But the source of the short story’s dread is entirely temporal: it is simultaneously impossible for the narrator to think of Dionea—the foundling—as an adult or to describe her as a child. In an early letter, said narrator tells Dionea’s benefactor that she “has got the prettiest face of any little girl in Montemirto. She is tall for her age (she is eleven) quite wonderfully well proportioned and extremely strong” (81). This description and many others like it serve to alienate the reader from having a clear sense of Dionea’s physical development. She is described no differently at age eleven than at age twenty (the short story taking place across more than a decade). But while her physical appearance is always strangely adult, she is shown the kind of reverence and forgiveness due a child. On the day of her baptism, the narrator reports that she “kicked and plunged and yelled like twenty little devils, and positively would not let the holy water touch her” (Lee 79). While the audience sees this refusal to allow the holy water to touch her as a sign of her intrinsic, peculiarly pagan evil, the narrator is unconcerned, as are the other townspeople of Montemirto. In fact, throughout the entirety of the story, though it features the ageless Dionea displaying more and more evidence of her terrifying, divine origins, is the continued avowal that, despite her clear complicity in numerous deaths, she is still a child in need of protection. By the end of the story, no one ever

rises to take action against her. The narrator tells us that, despite leaving a bloodbath of ritual sacrifice behind, she simply disappears from the town, with some saying that she has boarded the same phantom ship on which she arrived.

The entire fantasy of a childhood without end is deeply entwined with a relationship to temporal momentum. There is, of course, the literal desire to arrest the development of children either by writing fictional children who refuse to grow up, or by refusing to define when an actual child might exit that stage of life. But there is a long tradition of the narratives that feature these children being slow moving and long, while simultaneously being incongruously misremembered by readers as exciting and action-packed. Explicitly Gothic novels, of course, are far from the only genre that distends time in order to place proper emphasis on the right points of the plot, as any student of Paul Ricoeur could tell you. What the Gothic is especially good at, however, is producing memorable, visceral *tableaux* within a framework that is given over to isolation, boredom, and idleness. One alights upon the more exciting chapters of Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest*—the mad flight from Paris, the prophetic dream where Adelaide is given a warning by a murdered ghost, the arrival of the Marquis de Montalt and his banditos at the Abbey—but rarely thinks upon the novel's final act where the Marquis is defeated by being bogged down in arcane litigation over the inheritance of his estate. Though "Dionea" ends with a lurid description of a gory sacrifice, most of its pages are dedicated to updates on the education and development of Dionea herself, which, though tinged with growing dread, are not, in and of themselves, moments of excitement or transformation. That is because transformation is inimical to the eternal child. In the assessment of the Victorian child cult, it is only the adult who transforms and never into something new—the adult merely regresses to a state of what the child cult might term child-like innocence.

Temporal dread, created in Dionea by an inability to perceive the villainess' age, is often a feature of Gothic texts, though rarely counted among the defining tropes. Indeed it is this inability to properly determine age that fuels Pater's description of La Gioconda:

She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants [...] and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.

The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern philosophy has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life." (98-99)

Pater's portrait of La Gioconda rests upon the phrase "older than the rocks among which she sits." She is ancient, but bears no trace of that age. She is full of limitless experiences, but would appear to be naïve at first glance. She has endured horrors but remains unaffected by them with all being "but as the sound of lyres and flutes." We might look also to the Gothic villain of Walpole and Radcliffe's era: often an old man who somehow gives off the appearance of youth. Take for example, Anne Radcliffe's brief remark upon the villainous Marquis du Montalt in *The Romance of the Forest* (1791): "[The Marquis looked] to be about forty, but, perhaps, the spirit and fire of his countenance made the impression of time upon his features less perceptible" (87). Radcliffe gives the reader an understanding of the age that the Marquis appears to be ("about forty") but complicates the assumption by telling us that the "impression of time upon his



features” is “less perceptible.” For Radcliffe, this creates a villain who might pass for an acceptable match for the hapless (and young) heroine. The Marquis de Montalt is dangerous because he is an old man who pretends to be a young one. Radcliffe assumes that the heroine is more easily seduced by a younger looking man and gives us, in this description, both someone who may attract the attentions of her heroine and be unworthy of them. Furthermore, that impression of time is made less perceptible by some internal quality: “the spirit and fire of his countenance.”

The advanced age of the Marquis (and of a host of other Gothic villains) is important because it implies an impotence that ultimately makes him a bad match for the virginal, fertile Adeline. Theodore (the hero) and the Marquis (the villain) both appear to be equally virile. Adeline appears to have her choice of the two. In reality the old Marquis is a bad match while young virile Theodore is a good one. This also gets reiterated in the more Gothicized portions of the Aesthetic movement; Dorian Gray’s love of Sibyl Vane is what kills her—the same with Dracula when he couples with Lucy or Mina, transforming them into the undead. The sexuality of a Gothic villain, insofar as it is the desire of the impotent to entrap the fertile, keeping them from more reproductively satisfying mates, will never spawn any progeny. It is death, inasmuch as it will not produce new life. Adeline will not be repulsed by the Marquis, just as Mina will not be repulsed by Dracula, because they have cheated the ravages of age, at least in outward appearance.

The villains and monsters of such fictions are those characters that feel the “when” of their existence and succeed in circumventing it. But, like *La Gioconda*, who has lived ten thousand lifetimes and is filled with the knowledge—dreadful and corrupt—of that immense time, they are essentially charlatans. The appearance of youth masks a thoroughly antiquated

mien that the heroes and heroines of the texts ignore at their peril. Essentially, it is the old and corrupt essence that trumps the young and beautiful appearance. The figure of the eternal child is not a charlatan, or at least not one of the same order.

The Victorian child cult insists that a child is intrinsically innocent and that it is impossible to corrupt one, no matter the circumstances or experiences. With the benefit of hindsight, it is much harder to see the same incorruptibility in the face of adult-inspired trauma. The modern audience recoils, for example, at Lewis Carroll's sexually charged photographs of Alice Liddell—taking them as tokens of his alleged pedophilia. But the propensity of the Victorian photographer to place children in sexually evocative positions reaches beyond the uncertain predilections of the Reverend Dodgson. Much like Carroll's account of the "real" children who behave with perfect kindness and gentility despite having no manners, the erotically posed child holds no titillation or inappropriate desire for adults. In fact, what some term the "little adult"<sup>3</sup> motif is so prevalent in Victorian photos, sexualized or no, that it seems to be a kind of illustration in the negative: one delights in these children aping adults precisely because they are utterly foreign to the adult world; their innocence will not be tampered with through play-acting.

The Gothicization of the temporal must be at the center of this project because other formulations of Victorian childhood cannot contain the phenomenon. The Queer the-child-as-Other reading makes its stakes spatial and does not account for temporal dread and the desire to arrest development or stagnate time. The temporal aspects of Kincaid's argument are too energetic. They are caught up in the frolicking, pleasurable romps of an erotic chase. Apropos of this, novels that are explicitly Gothic, Queer, or counted among children's literature do not fit because they have already made up their mind about where the line between childhood and

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<sup>3</sup> Humphries and Mack in their *Centuries of Childhood* have some insight on the subject.

adulthood is. Thus, it is important to note that the texts that are being examined are not ones that neatly fit into the category of “the Gothic tale.” It is the Gothic moments, in novels and novellas that are otherwise not coded as such, that concern us. J.M. Barrie’s *Peter and Wendy* (1912) and Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* (1852-53)—are stories which feature interpolated passages of Gothic imagery in seeming counterpoint to their intended effects: wondrous adventure fantasy in the case of the former, and gritty social realism in the case of the latter. The other two texts—Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853) and George Eliot’s *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857-58)—use the form and tropes of the Gothic tale but insist upon pivoting sharply away from the form’s conventions in the final chapters, to the bewilderment of their readers. These texts are haunted by a figure for eternal youth and temporal dread who acts as a Gothicized ambassador for those formal themes of the genre that do not exist in the novel apart from those characters: isolation, temporal drag, hazy mental states, and bloodless inhumanity. Like Sedgwick’s drop of ink in a glass of water, these individual figures and characters facilitate the Gothicization of these narratives merely by existing within them. They tend to bear too much weight—lingering malignantly as they do on the margins of the story. Many times they are accepted by the reader without a proper mediation on how deeply dischordant they are within the rest of the narrative (as is the case with *Villette*’s Lucy Snowe or the eponymous boy of *Peter and Wendy*). They are often dismissed as engines of plot (as we shall see with *Bleak House*’s Harold Skimpole or Caterina of “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story”). But, in truth, these characters are deeply weird, so much so that they cannot be ignored as the product of an author’s eccentric flight of fancy. They do not move the plot forward so much as cause it to grind to a halt. They are not unobtrusive catalysts of change, but highly visible agents of stagnation that make readers reconsider whether the entire novel they were just reading wasn’t secretly a Gothic horror story all along, while

simultaneously failing most Gothic litmus tests. As a result, all four texts have a common subversion of formal conventions—either through embracing or rejecting Gothicized temporality—that is centered on figures who stand outside normative time.

## Chapter One

### Gay, Innocent, and Heartless: The Impossibility of Peter Pan

J.M. Barrie, in the 1911 novelization of his 1901 play, *Peter Pan*, begins with one of the most terrifying phrases of turn-of-the-century literature: “All children, but one, grow up” (5). This is a troubling sentence, used to various troubling effects in numerous versions of the notoriously multi-media story. Precisely why this phrase is both troubling and troublingly overlooked is at the heart of this chapter. In many ways this Edwardian work of fiction represents both the apotheosis of the Victorian child cult and an ameliorative solution to some of the problems it presents.

This chapter deals with Peter Pan—the character—and others as they are written in the 1911 novella, *Peter and Wendy*. It also, however, treats upon the 1901 play, *Peter Pan*. Additionally it takes into consideration the play and novella’s almost innumerable literary and dramatic descendants. The original play, though still widely performed, has spawned a number of retellings, including no less than fourteen musicals and straight dramatic performances between 1924 and 2011. All these versions boast separate librettos and, in the cases of musicals, separate scores. Then there is the 1953 Disney film and its 2002 sequel, Steven Spielberg’s 1991 sequel *Hook*, a more faithful film adaptation by P.J. Hogan in 2003, an entire slew of Disney-produced, straight to video films starring Tinkerbell in the late 2000’s, the Emmy-winning, early 90’s TV series *Peter Pan and the Pirates*, and at least two biographical films about J.M. Barrie (1978’s *The Lost Boys* and 2004’s Oscar-winning *Finding Neverland*), both of which feature productions of the stage version of Peter Pan and attempt to link Barrie’s personal life to his iconic work of fiction. All this serves to remind us that Peter Pan, both character and text, are eternally youthful: obsessively repeated in popular culture and continually remade for a new

generation. That kind of literary history carries with it a certain weight of explanation and it is, as it turns out, quite difficult to look at *Peter and Wendy* without at least considering the numerous other texts that have spawned from it (a problem that seems to exist in much of the critical body for the text). That caveat in place, this dissertation would not feel complete without a complete exhumation of *Peter and Wendy*.

In many ways, Peter Pan is the ur-figure of this nebulous time—this lingering malignancy—between childhood and adulthood, and the poster boy for the Victorian child cult, though he only appeared after the era had ended. He is a particular kind of undefined figure—namely an eternal child. In not aging, rather than being indistinctly either adult or child, Peter Pan is the fulfillment of the child cult’s fantasy: a perfectly preserved bastion of innocence and purity, who brings delight not only to adults, but also to successive generations of children who are still delighted by him as adults. *Peter and Wendy* seeks to stave off adulthood while being unable to arrest maturation in any of its characters save the eponymous one. Karen Coats, in her 2006 article, quotes Matthew Arnold’s “Lines Written in Kensington Gardens” (itself an inspiration for Barrie’s play), to tell us that Peter, and, indeed, all eternal children in his vein, “[i]n giving up [their] position in life as [...] potential [men, enter...] into the space containing that ‘which men did not make and cannot mar’—not a peaceful place, necessarily, but a place of fullness, a place where one’s own bliss has not been renounced, in Benthamite fashion, for the greater good” (Coats 17). For Coats, the end of childhood is the end of a life free of responsibility. Eternal childhood, as a result, is a compelling fantasy for those wishing to free themselves from the burgeoning narrative of adult city life: a place of ennui and malaise. Or, to quote Eve Sedgwick, “the exact, contingent space of indeterminacy—the place of shifting over time [...] is, in fact, the most fertile space of ideological formation” (*Between Men* 7). The

ideology of the child cult seeks an end in which the child is saved from a life of drudgery and the adult returns to a simple life of ease and pleasure.

James Kincaid, perhaps, puts it best in saying “these are dramas of perpetuation, plays of the elusive maneuverability of the child. That we are unable to close the distance may seem melancholy to a few. But the true child-lovers know the pleasures of these failures [... They] can be invited back to play this game only if [they] lose it [...] These may be very melancholy comedies [they] pay so eagerly to see, but they’ve always drawn capacity crowds” (277). Kincaid’s point is that such melancholy is outweighed by the joyousness of the desire to endlessly try and “catch” the child: to arrest its development before it’s too late. The basic premise here holds true: the melancholy tone that pervades many Gothic texts seems singularly absent from the exuberance that we know from both the play *Peter Pan* and the novella *Peter and Wendy*. And yet, for all of their exuberance, Gothic themes, imagery, and messages lurk in the shadows of these texts: murder, incest, savagery, cruelty. To underscore Kincaid’s own point, the endless perpetuation of failure, the inability for the lost boys or Darling children to remain child-like, constitutes a haunting: the recurrence of a tragic event, reenacted endlessly and to no better conclusion<sup>4</sup>.

The narrative presented in *Peter and Wendy* seeks to problematize the shame-based vision of buried desire that readers have understood Victorian texts to present as Gothic, erotic, and Queer. It is, for example, axiomatic for readers to understand that Basil Hallward’s artistically sublimated love for Dorian Gray must end in his murder and dissolution in an acid bath. The unspoken affection between *Villette*’s Lucy Snowe and Ginevra Fanshawe is bound inextricably to a ruse involving a nun who is buried alive for breaking her vows of chastity. The

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted here that the original definition of “haunt,” according the OED is “to recur.” In a very literal way, we are haunted by Peter Pan, simply by re-watching, rereading, or remaking it.

forbidden sexual fruits of Cristina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" require passage through a secret and otherworldly bazaar. The canon of Victorian literature is rife with examples of queer love being available only in a gothic landscapes or else doomed to end up in sordidness, shame, and scandal.

This novella is, by contrast, stalwart in its refusal to admit adulthood into its pages. It attempts to preserve the themes and tropes of childhood by presenting an elongation of it: a drawn-out affair that attempts to stave off maturation and merely adumbrates adulthood when it must confront it at all. It holds Shaw's adage that it is "a pity youth is wasted on the young" as a statement of melancholy wisdom: children simply do not know how good they have it. Only the adult who misses her own childhood can adequately appreciate its joys. Jaqueline Rose's assertion that the specter of the adult reader is at the core of all children's fiction seems very useful here. In her book, *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, (from which this chapter takes its name), she explains that "[Peter Pan and other children's fiction like it] hangs on an impossibility[...] the impossible relation between adult and child [...which] has the remarkable characteristic of being about something which it hardly ever talks of." (Rose 1). Rose sees a yawning gulf between adult and child, and that gulf is one of intent: the adult writer's intent to define and secure the child who is, of course, merely an adult construct. When she speaks of the "relation" between adult and child, it is the relation of the adult's fantasy of childhood and the actual idiosyncrasies of the imagined child reader. The gulf in this case is a temporal distinction, rather than an intentional one. It is the temporal period between childhood and adulthood. Rose's understanding of that space as shadowy, vague, and somewhat unspeakable (a word that should resonate with those familiar with another of Sedgwick's seminal works, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*) applies rather neatly. Where



Rose discusses the psychoanalytic and linguistic implications of that gap, I want to focus on the formal implications. What does a narrative that lingers in an undefined temporality have to contribute, especially when eternally young characters, themselves undefined, drive the plot?

The desire for this kind of static eternity—existing in a temporal space of unclear boundaries and lingering childhood—is, in fact, the desire of Rose’s phantom adult reader: a reader that wishes to observe, voyeuristically, children who never want to grow up. Barrie’s play and novella are texts for adult consumption, which exist under the winking auspices of being stories for children. The adult that desires eternal childhood may be ashamed, but the figures that are given life by those desires are anything but. The fantasy of childhood without end is given life by the adult who wishes such things on behalf of children who do not necessarily wish it themselves. Youths will squander their childhood so adults must wish it eternal.

The concept of the eternal child is nothing new in the fiction of 19<sup>th</sup> century England. From *Bleak House*’s Harold Skimpole, who continually refers to himself as “but a child” in the adult matters of debt and finance, to Dorian Gray, who, quite literally, remains eternally youthful and childlike at the cost of his moral character, Victorian fiction is full of eternal children—most of them sinister. And yet, for all the suggestion of a dark underworld in which these eternal youths live, the literature seems to create a yearning fantasy wherein eternal children must be viewed as monstrous aberrations because the idea of eternal childhood is so compelling as to tempt the reader into desiring it. Skimpole and Gray function as cautionary tales about the dangers of a seductive mode of being. They are linked with the tropes of the Gothic, and the literature they inhabit takes on a Gothic tone. In fact, they fulfill many of the qualities of an 18<sup>th</sup> century Gothic villain. They are usually old men pretending at youth (witness the un-guessable age of *The Romance of the Forest*’s villainous Marquis) and their desire to entrap and ensnare

the innocent seems to be related to an attempt to gain eternal youth: Dorian murders Basil Hallward in order to keep the secret of his magical portrait safe while Skimpole plots to destroy Richard Carstone, who threatens to use up the generous good will of his benefactor, John Jarndyce.

This monstrosity inherent in eternal childhood is best expressed by Karen McGavock in her essay on Edwardian children's literature. She tells us that "Ultimately, neither the eternal child nor the mature adult gain through existing in their isolated states—they both lose in the end. [This vision of an eternal childhood] is therefore dystopian. The tragedy is that growing old and not growing old both result in losses" (47). McGavock's description of eternal childhood as dystopian is one I am not willing to endorse. Rather, that necessary space between child and adult can be read as a mediating and, perhaps, ultimately ameliorating force. The Gothicized monstrosity is not a lament, rather it is a warning: an object lesson to its devotees about the dangers of the child cult and the need for children to grow up. As a result, *Peter and Wendy* must be the first text of the project.

Peter Pan, both as a character and as a body of work, is beyond collective scrutiny and doubt. We accept it as the purest and most joyous totem of innocent childhood. As Jaqueline Rose states, *Peter and Wendy* is "the ultimate fetish of childhood [...] Its presence in our culture is, in fact, so diffused that we take it for granted. [...] We take it for granted as something that belongs to us and to children." (Rose 6). Both the Mary Martin stage musical and the Disney film position themselves as celebrations of childhood that eschew the darker aspects of both Neverland and Peter Pan himself in favor of an exuberant, pre-sexual romp. In the Disney film, Hook is transformed into a garish fop whose sneering, moustache-twirling bravado replaces the menacing Victorian gentility of the original. As to the Mary Martin production, the choice to cast

Martin, a then middle-aged woman, as the title character, during the decidedly queer-hostile 1950's, effectively destroyed any possibility that the quasi-tragic love story between Peter and Wendy would be acknowledged. The end result is that productions and adaptations of *Peter Pan* are constantly struggling to sanitize some of its more uncomfortable aspects. When we get dark interpretations, it is usually in an outside text: a play on *Peter Pan* as opposed to a direct adaptation. If one looks to the recent spate of child horror film adaptations—Juan Antonio Bayona's 2007 film *El Orfanato*, Troy Nixey's 2010 remake of *Don't Be Afraid of the Dark*, Makinov's *Come out and Play* (2012), even perennial classics like *Village of the Damned* and *Children of the Corn*—all owe some of their scares to the concept of eternal childhood or feral communities of children. This is because the core material—the desire for children to remain eternally youthful—is problematic, unsanitizable and deeply Gothic.

Readers want to live the bright, nostalgic fantasy of these halcyon experiences, but the discordant and unsettling shadow—attached to *Peter Pan* with soap and thread and needle—persists. This is not to say that critics have not remarked upon the darker elements of *Peter and Wendy* directly. David Daiches mentions Peter Pan's "real cruelty [...] revenge [and...] disturbing cunning."<sup>5</sup> But, more often than not, audiences fracture the story into component parts: the unabashed joy of the crowing Peter Pan, who delights adults and children alike, and an errant shadow narrative that only manifests externally, doubting the wisdom of following this figure into Neverland.

It is this underlying tension (between burial and exhumation, secrecy and revelation) that makes *Peter and Wendy* such a ripe subject for Gothic adaptation and horror. In bringing the two narratives together, i.e. reading the Gothicized images and tropes as Gothic rather than merely fantastical, *Peter and Wendy* becomes a narrative that is uneasy with its own fantasy of eternal

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in R.D.S. Jack's *The Road to Neverland* (11-13)

childhood. Bringing the Gothic into Peter Pan, specifically as an outgrowth of a cultural anxiety over children aging, isn't adding an external lens to the narrative. It is putting its component parts back together.

*Part I: Peter, the Boy Who Couldn't Grow Up*

All of the multifarious versions of *Peter and Wendy* present their own set of interpretations, and many of the iconic stage and film adaptations preserve the unabashed joyousness of the original play. By unabashed joyousness, I mean that *Peter Pan* is a play in which children are abducted and taken to a dangerous land where pirates and Indians try to murder them, but we, in the audience, never fret over those details. For many, the core imperative and motivation of the character Peter Pan can be summed up by one of the numbers he sings in the 1953 version of the musical: "I won't grow up." The reader's attraction to Peter is predicated on his strong-willed, youthful defiance. He *won't* grow up. He refuses. In the otherworldly Neverland, that kind of force of will translates into metaphysical reality. He *won't* grow up and so, he *doesn't*. Peter would seem to be success story of the Victorian child cult. He is the stalwart gatekeeper of a secret world created by children and populated only by children and their easily defeated enemies. He is the advocate of the adult that secretly wishes he did not grow up, forcing the world around him to conform to his eternally youthful self-conception. This section deals with the ways in which our conception of Peter Pan is ever so slightly misinformed. Peter Pan is not, as the play's subtitle and numerous recapitulations inform us, "the boy who wouldn't grow up." He is the boy who *couldn't* grow up.

We must here return to the opening line of the novel and the horror it produces: "All children, but one, grow up." The centrality of the line and the promise it holds seem to be a direct

result of its curiously straightforward grammatical structure. The first part of the statement makes perfect sense: all children grow up. It is a straightforward illumination of an unnecessarily obvious statement. Children grow into adults. The passage of time can neither be halted nor slowed. But then, “but one.” The fantastical clause represents the hopes and dreams of the Victorian literary audience that desires the extension of childhood—*Child Loving*’s affable “pedophiles” who love children too much to let them mature. It is phrased as a lingering, clausal extension of a sobering sentence whose placement at the beginning of a story about the fantasy of eternal childhood forces the adult reader to proceed with a kind of skepticism and resulting (Gothic) melancholy. This melancholy is made more explicit in the continuation of the first line:

They know they soon will grow up and the way Wendy knew was this. One day when she was two years old [...] her mother put her hand over her heart and cried, “Oh why can’t you remain like this forever!” This was all that passed between them on the subject but henceforth Wendy knew she must grow up. You always know after you are two. Two is the beginning of the end. (Barrie 1)

While there is a tongue-in-cheek quality to Barrie’s pronouncement that “two is the beginning of the end,” the passage does not escape tones of melancholy. The experience of childhood is one of loss—a dawning realization of finiteness of childhood. The lament of Mrs. Darling is the lament of the adult reader who understands, all too well, that children must grow up and cannot remain precious and infantile. Wendy, even in her most extreme youth, understands that her mortality begins at two. The adult fantasy of a childhood that never ends is traditionally positioned on a kind of limited epistemology. That is to say, the innocence of children is predicated on the idea that children do not understand that they will die. Nor do they understand that they will grow up very soon. Skimpole can be a child forever because he does not understand what it means to be

an adult. But Barrie gives us, in this opening passage, the idea that children know from early on that they must age and lose their innocence. The melancholia experienced by adults is, for Barrie, no different than the child's own understanding of their limited time. This is a stark disruption of the epistemologically ignorant and, therefore, carefree child previously understood in the fantasy.

The perfect fantasy of a childhood without end is undermined by Barrie's assertion that there is no perfect moment of childhood ignorance (save in the deep, pre-linguistic recesses of one's first year). If the child never experiences the perfect bliss of ignorance, the adult's vision of eternal childhood is rendered fantastical, not just in its un-attainability, but in the inability for the child to believe it attainable. If the child is aware of her own mortality and it is, rather, the adult reader that wants to believe she isn't, Barrie must, perforce, phrase the acknowledgement of a finite, ever-dwindling childhood as a lament. Mrs. Darling is distraught that her Wendy will age beyond two. Wendy understands that her innocence was doomed from the moment she understood it to be finite. Barrie undermines the idea of a perfect and perfectly innocent childhood in order to jar the memories of the adult reader, who, like Mrs. Darling, envies Wendy her epistemological bliss.

It is too easy to read a story predicated on figures like Peter Pan and misremember childhood by giving it a pastoral whimsy. There are some overtures to the whimsical innocence of children in the novella. While John imagines Neverland to possess "a lagoon with flamingoes flying over it" Michael "who was very small" imagines a "flamingo with lagoons flying over" (Barrie 7). The quaint reversal of objects: flying lagoons, stationary flamingoes, is the kind of innocent child-logic that readers expect from children—a far cry from the anxieties of recognizing one's mortality that Wendy endures. The fact that Michael is "very small" is deceptive, as it contributes to the idea that younger children are capable of more innocent and

sustained flights of fancy, but it falls flat—a subordinate sentiment—in light of the passage a few pages earlier that declares that “two is the beginning of the end.”

In fact, Barrie’s adults seem more suspicious of their children’s thoughts than enchanted by them. Barrie himself stated in his seminal essay, “The Blot on Peter Pan” that “Children, who were certainties in the old times, have now become riddles.” Mrs. Darling goes on a nightly investigation of her children’s thoughts, literalized, no doubt, for the reader’s delight, but uncomfortably sinister in its execution:

It is the nightly custom of every good mother after her children are asleep to rummage in their minds and put things straight for the next morning, repacking into their proper places the many articles that have wandered during the day. If you could keep awake (but of course you can’t), you would see your own mother doing this and you would find it very interesting to watch her. It is quite like tidying up drawers. You would see her on her knees, I expect, lingering humorously over some of your contents, wondering where on earth you had picked this thing up, making discoveries sweet and not so sweet, pressing this to her cheek as if it were nice as a kitten, and hurriedly stowing that out of sight. When you awake in the morning, the naughtiness and evil passions with which you went to bed have been folded up small and placed at the bottom of your mind; and on the top, beautifully aired, are spread out your prettier thoughts, ready for you to put on.” (8)

On the one hand, Barrie presents this mechanical exercise of cleaning up the clutter of children’s minds as a reinforcement of adult delight at childish thoughts. The reader’s imagined mother lingers “over some of your content, wondering where on earth you had picked this thing up”

implying that innocent misconceptions, whose provenances are unknown, bring joy to the adult. After all, the reader's mother lingers humorously. No doubt, Michael's Neverland, with its lagoons orbiting a flamingo, falls into this category. The stronger sentiment in the passage, however, is one of severe mistrust. The mother figure in this passage cannot purge "naughtiness and evil passions" from the minds of her children; she can only "[fold them] up small" and "[place them] at the bottom of your mind." This kind of direct intervention in the thoughts of children, as posited by Barrie, seems to serve the purpose of keeping the children safe and happy. The mother takes care to "spread out your prettier thoughts" on top, keeping children, temporarily, from those painful truths and dark thoughts that can only be hidden, not expunged. It is precisely this failure to remove such thoughts from the minds of children that apes the adult who is working from a fantasy that fails to match up with the childish mind. The naughty thoughts and passions, recognized in the child by the adult, can only be hidden. Despite this, a nightly effort is made to keep children unaware of their darker thoughts for as long as possible. The adult sees darkness in the child, "hurriedly stowing [it] out of sight" in an attempt to stave off the child's waking recognition of what it already knows. Yet, as Barrie has already told us, "two is the beginning of the end"; keeping the child preoccupied with those happier thoughts, those that are charmingly misinformed, is a nightly struggle, an exercise in futility that must sooner or later lose out to the child's more thorough examination of the drawers. The adult attempt to keep the child ignorant and thereby innocent lasts only as long as this reorganization is possible. The transitioning child who, to take Barrie's metaphor at face value, begins to dress herself and organize her own drawers, runs across thoughts and passions that were always there, lurking at the bottom of the drawer. In Barrie's assessment, children are not truly innocent. They are merely ignorant of their innocencelessness. As a result, the entire process of reorganizing the



drawers plays purely into an adult fantasy of innocent children. The adult recognizes they are not innocent, but plays along, putting pleasantries on the top of the drawer and letting darkness remain hidden. Wendy never unlearns her mortality; she is merely kept from remembering that she knows.

It is against that conception of children, painfully aware of their impending adulthood yet manipulated by their parents into pretending innocence, that Barrie places Peter Pan. If the description of a self-aware two-year-old Wendy is meant to elicit sympathy from the reader, encouraging a desire for the kind of mental rearrangement of Mrs. Darling, then Peter is a cure for those tender feelings. Despite not having an interventionist mother, Peter Pan seems to be almost completely ignorant of the adult world. This ignorance manifests itself not as a failing, but rather as a strength. The reader is at first perplexed when Peter insists that he “is not [ignorant]” (Barrie 26) after Wendy is perplexed by his lack of knowledge about sewing. This lack of knowledge about the world of adult subjects is supplemented by a keen and compendious understanding of fairies and their world. Wendy is described as “living her whole life at home” (Barrie 29) and thereby being ignorant of fairies. Peter’s famous answer—“when the first baby laughed for the first time, the laugh broke into a thousand pieces and they all went skipping about. That was the beginning of fairies” —is described by Barrie as “tedious talk [...] but being a stay-at-home [Wendy] liked it” (Barrie 29). As readers, we recall a delight at Peter’s ignorance. His lack of knowledge about sewing, finance, and fatherhood is played, on stage and in film, for laughs. As Wendy’s ignorance about fairies mirrors our own, we tend to approach it with fascination rather than derision. And yet, Barrie reminds us in this passage that it is no less a form of ignorance; Peter’s answers about fairies’ origins are “tedious talk”; they require Peter to slow down for the ignorants whose “stay-at-home” qualities mark them as bumpkins. It is

strange to think of Peter Pan as a dispenser of information, and yet his explanation of the origin of fairies is one of the most famous and oft-quoted passages in the novella and the play. What is missing in the repetitions is Barrie's dismissive reaction to the answers.

Perhaps the answer to this epistemological quandary lies in Peter Pan's own account of Wendy's ignorance. He tells her, in the extended version of another famous line: "You see children know such a lot now, they soon don't believe in fairies and every time a child says 'I don't believe in fairies,' there is a fairy somewhere that falls down dead" (29). Readers are, again, familiar—even to the point of cliché—with Barrie's assertion of the deadly consequences of disbelief. What is fascinating about the above quote, however, is the idea that knowledge leads to this pronouncement. Given the fact that Barrie has just explained why Wendy and the reader are ignorant about fairies, it is a curious thing that he should link their genocide with the attainment of knowledge. Peter Pan does not recognize knowledge of fairies as knowledge. The logical conclusion of his statement—"children know such a lot [...] they soon don't believe in fairies"—is that knowledge of fairies is a species of ignorance. Ignorance, as a result, seems to include not only a lack of knowledge, but also all those things that fall outside of an adult practical epistemology. What might then follow is the assertion of a kind of knowledgeable ignorance. Peter Pan does know things, but he chooses to categorize the things he knows outside of knowledge.

This kind of rewriting of what does and does not count as knowledge ought to strike us as thin, a poor justification in direct contradiction to what we know to be true. After all, we, like Wendy, have just learned new things: fairies were born from the first baby's laughter, and stating that one doesn't believe in fairies causes their deaths. How could we not see Peter's assertion of the epistemological distinction between ignorance and knowledge as anything but childish? The

result of this sort of thin justification, though it is said with confidence, is that Peter seems to constantly be avoiding those things that might expand his worldview. He can state that some of his knowledge is not knowledge but only up to a point. When Wendy asks him his age, we are told, “‘I don’t know,’ he replied uneasily, ‘but I am quite young.’ He really knew nothing about it; he had merely suspicions” (28). Peter Pan is not ignorant of his age, as we might expect. After all, by book’s end, he does not seem to understand that Wendy “is ever so much more than twenty” (*Peter Pan* 151). Rather he suspects that he is much older than he ought to be, though “he really [knows] nothing about it.” We should take his statement as an admission followed by a groundless reassurance. Though he cannot calculate his years, he is, he assures himself, “quite young.” He does not know his age; therefore, he could be far older than any child should be. After all, recognizing that you are, say fifty, despite being in the body of a twelve-year old boy, might lead to an uncomfortable need to re-categorize yourself as an adult. Peter can entertain suspicions but he cannot *know* how old he is; that would preclude his ability to continually refer to himself as a boy.

Nor can he let knowledge in that might force him out of ignorance. In describing the various members of Peter’s band of Lost Boys, Barrie admits that the twins (who are only ever described as “the twins”) “cannot be described because [he] should be sure to be describing the wrong one”(48). This bit of wit seems to stem from the fact that Peter himself cannot really comprehend the twins properly. Barrie elaborates: “Peter never quite knew what twins were, and his band were not allowed to know anything he did not know, so these two were always vague about themselves, and did their best to give satisfaction by keeping close together in an apologetic sort of way” (48). The twins’ ill-definition is a direct result of Peter’s desire to keep

knowledge from poisoning Neverland.<sup>6</sup> They are vague about themselves to avoid ascertaining what indeed they are, just as Peter is vague about his age, to avoid the revelation that it might not match up to his self-conception. Barrie does not make it clear how the knowledge of what a “twin” is would cause Peter to have to face an unpleasant reality, but he goes to great lengths to make himself the gold standard of knowledge and ignorance in Neverland. The boys’ being “not allowed to know anything” Peter does not know protects him from the possibility that he will uncover something that contradicts his ignorant child-like state.

Essentially, Peter’s embargo against knowledge he does not already possess is a constant uphill struggle. While we often remember Peter Pan as a character who is effortlessly child-like—a view that is supported by an overwhelming number of references to his cockiness and nonchalance—Barrie provides a few clues that let us know how much Peter works to maintain his ignorance. Furthermore, this ignorance seems to be not so blissful after all. The following passage, though well-known, nonetheless illustrates a hint of unremembered dread beneath the confidence we associate with Peter Pan:

“[I ran away] because I heard father and mother,” he explained in a low voice, “talking about what I was to be when I became a man.” He was extraordinarily agitated now. “I don’t ever want to be a man,” he said with a passion, “I want always to be a little boy and to have fun. So I ran away to Kensington Gardens and lived a long long time among the fairies” (28).

The “extraordinary agitation” of Peter Pan in discussing his desire to run from adulthood does not reflect our notions of a boy whose confidence empowers him to defy adulthood. The statement “I want always to be a little boy and to have fun” is, devoid of context, in keeping with

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<sup>6</sup> It is also, in a novella filled with binaries, a strange denial of the one binary that needs no explanation.

our joyous memories of the shameless Peter Pan. He acts on his desires, not his fears. His primary aversion to adulthood is implied, in this statement, to result from the lack of fun. This is the Peter from memory, the boy who *wouldn't* grow up. But this kind of agitation, passion and statements from a boy who “ran away the day he was born” (Barrie 28) must give the reader pause. Peter Pan is not fighting adulthood, he is running from it, just as he runs from knowledge that might accidentally expand his worldview into an adult way of looking at things. He forbids others from knowing things he does not, out of fear of what he might learn.

When running away is not sufficient to his purposes, Peter turns to even darker methods to insure he is not accidentally forced into adulthood. We are told, when the reader is first introduced to the Lost Boys, that “The boys on the island vary, of course, in numbers, according as they get killed and so on; and when they seem to be growing up, which is against the rules, Peter thins them out” (47). The phrase “thins them out” is not necessarily sinister unless paired with Neverland’s natural dangers, which are capable of killing the Lost Boys. We can safely assume—given the context—that Peter is involved in actively murdering his Lost Boys when they begin to show signs of growing up. This is significant for several reasons. That Neverland is dangerous is something that is not shied away from by Barrie. He does not spare us from descriptions of Indians, Pirates, and Lost Boys massacred in bloody confrontation—nor does he refrain from the grisly cruelty and abominable practices of those peoples—but he gives us descriptions from a safe distance, through the obscuring device of a world imagined by children. These are the fantasies of a child who Barrie imagines to be unfazed by death. These fantasies are engaged in the usual invigorating violence of “boy’s own” adventure stories. The deaths of the Lost Boys is not read as the murder of children; rather they are read as a natural side effect of the rough-and-tumble, gory glories of children’s play. The matter of Peter killing his own Lost

Boys when they “seem to be growing up” is another matter entirely. The difference in language should make us uncomfortable immediately. Peter does not “kill” his boys, nor does he “go to war” with them or “cut them down” for insubordination. He “thins them out.” This kind of language, more in line with a culling or a reaping, does not smack of adventurous dangers. It is not glorious battle; rather, it is calculated genocide. The reasoning behind it similarly seems to be cold and unromantic. These boys are not killed for cowardice or treachery—the usual reasons for valorous adventure heroes to off their allies—rather, they are killed for a thing they cannot help: growing up. We accustom ourselves to Peter’s desire to control his Lost Boys through limiting their knowledge, as well as his strategy of running from that which does not allow him to “always remain a boy and have fun.” But the casual reference to his propensity for murdering those who do not fit his paradigm is almost too much for the reader to bear. Perhaps Barrie recognized that his readers would be unnerved by this, and that accounts for his hiding the information in a passage about the other dangers of Neverland: a secondary admission, not prioritized in the narrative or in the sentence in which it resides. And yet, for his attempt to hide the information, Barrie still includes it—lurking at the bottom of the drawer.

Though the gratuity of “boy’s own” adventure violence is present in the novella (Peter kills plenty of mindless savages and black-hearted pirates), Barrie is compelled to discuss the much less forgivable violence of murdering his comrades in arms for showing signs of a development that they cannot cease. Given that John and Michael Darling, whom the reader meets prior to Peter Pan, are included in this list of possible targets, the reader cannot help but feel unease.

Though Barrie hints that there are multiple kinds of knowledge, e.g. knowledge of sewing vs. knowledge of fairies, Peter Pan states that knowledge of fairies is not knowledge, because

knowledge is what kills fairies. As a result, we are not left with multiple categories of knowledge, but a single binary in which some things that appear to be knowledge are instead categorized as ignorance. Similarly, the end of childhood would seem to be a space of maturation, different in specifics from adulthood but not wholly different in kind. Childhood, the place of blissful ignorance and non-maturation, falls into a different category altogether; and yet, the desire to preserve childhood, similar to Peter's desire to preserve ignorance—at the cost of human lives, no less—leads those with an interest in its preservation to make the transitional period an exceptional (and exceptionally ill-defined) category of non-adulthood, despite the evidence that it seems to have some things in common with it.

Thus far, we have not yet proved that Peter Pan is the boy who *couldn't* grow up, merely that he is the boy who *wouldn't* grow up *at any cost*. Though the above may do much to dispel the readerly myth about Peter's effortless and nonchalant attitude toward remaining a child, it does not speak to his inability to progress out of a state of childhood.

In order to fully understand this Peter who not only does not wish to grow up but also cannot, we must look beyond his actions and justifications. His stunted nature is written in his physiology. This is especially apparent when Peter encounters Mrs. Darling: "He was a lovely boy, clad all in skeleton leaves and the juices that ooze out of trees, but the most entrancing thing about him was that he had all his first teeth. When he saw she was a grown-up, he gnashed the little pearls at her" (15). Baby teeth are not meant to gnash threateningly. These are the teeth, widely spaced and pearl-like, that are fawned over by new parents, hard won through months of teething and totemized when lost. Baby teeth are sacred; they require a fairy to carry them off in exchange for a coin—a fiction that speaks to the gravity that parents feel at their loss. These childhood fetishes can only be replaced by treasure. Their loss is an inevitable sign of a child

growing up. Thus, the retention of his baby teeth serves as a heavy-handed metaphor for Peter's eternally pre-pubescent state. It makes him physically engaged with the stuff of childhood. It also makes him somewhat grotesque. This image of the gnashing of baby teeth is terrifying—the stuff of slasher films—but not, apparently, for Barrie. Rather, in the voice of Barrie's narrator, the baring of malformed teeth becomes a display of youthful energy and self-assertion. The pre-pubescent boy with none of his adult teeth, gnashing at Mrs. Darling after slipping in through her open window, seems more appropriate to a horror story than a children's tale, yet Barrie describes it as “entrancing.” Peter, even at his most feral and violent, seduces adults with his markers of an undevelopment that cannot be destroyed—no amount of fussing, no slamming of a door with its knob-attached string can pull Peter's childlikeness free from him. Mrs. Darling, who is already mourning the loss of her daughter's innocence at age two, is entranced by a boy who, though on the verge of puberty, retains his perfect “little pearls,” rather than horrified by the savage child bearing his teeth.

We must admit then that, if Peter is an ideal of Victorian childhood, he is a recalcitrant one, far from the seen—but-unheard child that practices obedient social decorum. Peter Pan is, more often than not, heard but unseen. His bearing and countenance are at once seductive and petty. He is described as “Gay, innocent and heartless”(Barrie 154)—mirthful but unloving—devoid of great sin but also devoid of great compassion. His beauty is the beauty of a fairy (apt, given the company he keeps): severe, cruel, and unremittingly greater than yours. The reader, like Mrs. Darling, loves him because he stands for the childhood that will not end. It is written in his teeth. We care for Peter because the nostalgic joys that we ourselves have lost, and that our children are bound to lose, are alive and eternal in his countenance. But Peter cares not a whit for



us. He is not merely gay and innocent, but heartless as well. He crowns (literally) his advantages, rests easy on his ever-blooming laurels, and his pride is bound up with his rancor towards adults.

This pride and rancor, one might think, is another sign of Peter's endless war against adulthood—his refusal rather than his inability to grow up. His response to Mrs. Darling is to gnash his teeth at her, unaware that it will merely endear him to her. His response to Captain Hook is to treat him as a rival, the sum of all the evils of adulthood. But the willfulness of Peter's project, the amount of volition he has in struggling against adulthood, becomes even more complicated when adult ideas are put to him by other children. This is where the novella's title, *Peter and Wendy*, becomes an important revision to the title of the original play, *Peter Pan, or, the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*. I will write in detail on Wendy in the next section of this chapter but, for now, let us say that Wendy, though a child, is on the verge of pubescent sexual awakening and that her love for Peter Pan is considerably more romantic than the nostalgic love that the reader and Mrs. Darling possess. That understood, Peter sees her as a fellow child, though distinct from his Lost Boys, as a result of her sex.

These differences between Peter and Wendy are most clear when they play at “mother” and “father,” with the Lost Boys and Wendy's siblings taking on the roles of children. While this kind of normative play strikes us as natural, we must recall that Peter's desire to “always remain a boy and have fun” is at odds with even the pretend suggestion that he is a father. This is a difficult matter, however, since Neverland itself seems bound and determined to cast him in the role of *pater familias*. Note how he is viewed as the central figure in the following passage, the head of the household as it were:

Feeling that Peter was on his way back, the Neverland had again woke into life. We ought to use the pluperfect and say wakened, but woke is better and was always used by Peter.

In his absence things are usually quiet on the island. The fairies take an hour longer in the morning, the beasts attend to their young, the redskins feed heavily for six days and nights, and when pirates and lost boys meet they merely bite their thumbs at each other. But with the coming of Peter, who hates lethargy, they are all under way again: if you put your ear to the ground now, you would hear the whole island seething with life. (Barrie 52)

Neverland is not, as one might assume, dependent on Peter to exist: it does not cease to be in his absence. Rather, Peter gives it purpose and lends definition to its actions. Neverland is a place of fantastical imaginative yarns and boyish adventure but, without Peter, it becomes a staid and mundane place where savages are lazy gluttons, animals are domesticated and pirates are rude but toothless. This casts Peter in a managerial, fatherly role. He “hates lethargy,” and while Barrie may simply be referring here to Peter’s exuberance and boundless energy, I would like to think that his anti-sloth platform is reminiscent of Mr. Darling’s desire to see things in their proper place and not “have a dog for a nurse” (14). Pirates pillage, savages hunt and wild beasts rage; Peter wants to see them in their proper place, attentively doing what it is they ought to do.

Indeed, Peter’s position as the father of Neverland is not only reflected in his stewardship of the island. The Indian tribes, once they have made peace with Peter and his Lost Boys, name him such: “they called Peter the Great White Father, prostrating themselves before him” (Barrie 107). Though Barrie is playing into colonial stereotypes, having the Indians name Peter “father” when they might mean *warlord*, or *king*, the passage comes at the start of a chapter entitled “The

Happy Home” which chronicles Peter and Wendy’s playing house, and Peter’s own fatherly relationship not only to Neverland generally, but to the Lost Boys and Darling children specifically. As we will see, this is a role that he is both naturally suited to and completely inept at.

Given that Wendy is viewed as the de facto “mother” of the Lost Boys, it is natural that the object of her affection should be named “father.” The role carries with it power over others. We are told that Peter’s response to being named Great White Father is that “he liked this tremendously, so that it was not really good for him” (Barrie 107). And this reverence extends to the privacy of the Hollow Tree, home of the Lost Boys and Darling children. This love of praise does not appear to translate into aptitude or an understanding of the stewardship that fatherhood carries with it, as we can see in the following passage—a conversation between John and Wendy:

“May I sit in Peter’s chair, as he is not here?”

“Sit in father’s chair, John!” Wendy was scandalized. “Certainly not”

“He is not really our father,” John answered, “He didn’t even know how a father does till I showed him.” (109)

Peter is an eager receiver of praise, but he does not understand what fatherhood means and must be told by John. John sees this lack of inherent knowledge as a blow to Peter’s fatherly legitimacy. Peter can be a father in terms of authority, but he lacks the wisdom and the desire for real fatherly behavior that would inspire his “children” to think of him as such. Essentially, Barrie offers a clear judgment on Peter’s desire to engage with adulthood when he is not an adult: “it was not really good for him.” The limitations of childhood intrude upon the story Barrie would like to tell, one in which the wondrous Peter Pan is both Great White Father and

eternal child. Barrie's assertion that desiring both things simultaneously, is "not good for" the character who does so attempts to reinforce the binary that there are adult roles and there are children's roles, and the two cannot coexist in the same person. It is the nebulosity of the transition between the two that seems to win out. After all, Peter is both child and adult. Neverland does fall out of working order when Peter is away and springs back into useful productivity when he returns. The Indians do call him the Great White Father and, despite the fact that it may not be good for him, the only toll it takes seems to be on Peter's own psyche.

Peter is singularly uncomfortable with the possibility that the role might be made real: "he looked at her, uncomfortably blinking [...] 'I was just thinking,' he said, a little scared, 'it is only make-believe, isn't it, that I am their real father? [...] You see, it would make me seem so old to be their real father'" (Barrie 110). Peter frets about the possibility that he really is a father and that his Lost Boys and the Darling children really are his own. The root cause of his fear, that "it would make [him] seem so old to be their real father," is plain enough and in keeping with our conception thus far. To be a father is to not "always be a little boy and have fun." Peter worries that he will need to run from this new game if it proves to define him. Of course, the game is play pretend. The looseness of the roles and the pretend nature of the game is obvious to the other players. Tootles, the dullest of the Lost Boys, for instance, asks "if [he] can be the father" in Peter's absence. When he is turned down, he asks Michael "if [he] can be the baby." When that is denied him, he asks if the Lost Boys "would like to see a trick" (109). Tootles clearly does not believe himself to be either father or baby; he merely jumps at the opportunity to play either role and thus participate in the game. When he cannot do either, he attempts to change the game by getting the other Lost Boys to watch him perform a trick. Similarly John, in the earlier paragraph, wishes to sit in Peter's chair in his absence, perhaps not to take on the role

of father, but his desire (combined with his insistence on calling him “Peter” and not “father”) gives us an insight into the fluidity of the roles in John’s mind. Peter is not only ignorant of what it means to be a father, or, as John puts it “how a father does,” he is only one player in a role that could be cast differently in his absence.

Peter himself seems to be alone in his inability to tell truth from fiction, a game of play pretend from actual fatherhood. In fact, it is not only his fatherly role that is up for debate. During the final confrontation, Hook and Pan play a guessing game, a compliment to the one played earlier during the “Skull Rock” incident:

“Pan, who and what art thou?” he cried huskily.

“I’m youth, I’m joy,” Peter answered at a venture, “I’m a little bird that has broken out of the egg.”

This, of course, was nonsense; but it was proof to the unhappy Hook that Peter did not know in the least who or what he was, which is the very pinnacle of good form. (130)

It is easy to think that Peter’s statement, “I’m youth, I’m joy [...] I’m a little bird that has broken out of the egg” is a metaphor for what the audience has suspected all along: Peter is the representation of the fantastical desire for eternal children who are lost but not unhappy. However, Barrie feels the need to point out that Hook sees through this. Peter is spouting “nonsense,” not because he is using an incorrect metaphor, but because he does not understand metaphor. In Hook’s estimation, Peter is admitting that he believes he may well be these things, in a decidedly literal sense. Though Hook respects good form, it gives us a view onto a Peter Pan whose child-like imagination does not permit metaphor and whose identity, as a result, is muddled. This explains his discomfort with being a father. Peter is unable to grow up because he

is unable to leave behind the fluid role afforded him by having no clear end to childhood. If the Victorian reader was concerned about the uncertainties of puberty and attempted to classify it as a species of childhood, then Peter, the eternal child, seems to play into those concerns by being unclear of what he is. Though he usually settles on “boy” or the cockier “wonderful boy” as the most likely definition, he does not know, with any certainty, all the things he might be. He fears being old, leaving childhood behind, but he does not rightly know what precisely he is, and he believes that he may, in fact, be a father. Peter, as John points out, “does not know how a father does” and for him this means that he may already be doing as one, just as he thinks he may be “youth,” “joy,” or “a little bird that has fallen out of the nest.”

Childhood is clearly defined. Peter wishes to be a child, but he is not. He is somewhere between childhood and adulthood, and, with no clear knowledge of what that means, he can't grow up—not even in the moments when he may wish he could. This is laid clear when Wendy, in a private moment, asks, “what are your exact feelings to me?” Peter responds, “Those of a devoted son.” Peter can take the authority and praise that comes with being a father, but he does not understand familial responsibility, nor can he even mention the word “husband.” Peter and Wendy are father and mother to the Lost Boys and Darling children. But Peter and Wendy are not husband and wife. Rather, they are mother and son. The unclear boundaries between father and son, mother and wife, here play out as disappointment for the love-struck Wendy, but they are illuminating of Peter's own failure to understand what adulthood is. It was earlier stated earlier that Peter wished not to grow up and so did not: that he ran from the suggestions of his parents in an attempt to escape adulthood. Here, where sex is concerned, Peter does not know what adulthood entails. He cannot run from it, because he has no idea which way he might turn,

or indeed, even that he ought to run. He continues to question Wendy on the matter illuminating the basic problem with Peter's understanding of the relationships between men and women:

‘You are so queer’ he said, frankly puzzled, ‘And Tiger Lily is just the same.

There is something she wants to be to me, but she says it is not my mother.’

‘No indeed, it is not,’ Wendy replied with frightful emphasis. [...]

‘Then what is it?’

‘It isn't for a lady to tell.’

‘Oh very well,’ he said, a little nettled, ‘perhaps Tinker Bell will tell me.’ [...]

He had a sudden idea, ‘Perhaps Tink wants to be my mother!’

‘You silly ass!’ Cried Tinker Bell in a passion. (113)

Here we see that Peter, loved and sought after by Wendy, Tiger Lily, and Tinker Bell, has no idea what they want from him. For Peter, “mother” is an indistinct term for a woman, a teller of stories, and a caretaker. It has nothing to do with the biological reproductive processes. The bonds of endearment produced are generalized. The women who love Peter love him with all the romance of a pubescent admirer. Wendy wants Peter to be more than a boy, though she does not wish him, per se, to be a man. Our modern, hyper-sexualized vision of adolescence would be useful here in defining what Peter and Wendy are to one another. With only the asexual inclinations of childhood to guide him, Peter cannot have adult feelings. He cannot understand what parts of him may be adult and which parts remain a child. He is nettled by the conversation. He wishes to please Wendy, Tiger Lily and Tinker Bell, but he has no ability to be what it is they want him to be, because he does not know what he is, or how he is different from a child.

Recent film adaptations position themselves as stewards of the story's tragic, Gothic qualities of unrequited love. P.J. Hogan's 2003 *Peter Pan* remake has both Peter and Wendy

played by young adolescents rather than by children. The film stands out from previous film adaptations (namely the Disney version) in its frankness about Wendy's sexual desire for Peter. Peter is portrayed here as cocky and over-confident when it comes to boyish adventure, fighting, and horseplay, but inept, awkward and frightened of Wendy's romantic advances. Wendy, in an apparent update of the Victorian origins of the tale, wants to be the aggressor and is not content to be housewife and mother. She boldly asserts that, if she had her druthers, she would be a pirate herself, and is the sexual aggressor in her relationship with Peter, unsatisfied by the exchange of thimbles and adopting a fascination with him that is expressed in longing, sultry looks and the perpetual lean forward into a kiss. While the novella always refers to Wendy as a mother to the lost boys and pirates, Hook refers to her simply as "your Wendy," suggesting an indefinite, unfulfilled role that Peter desires but does not understand.

This lack of understanding plays out as his desire to ape adult romantic behaviors. In one scene, Peter and Wendy waltz, mimicking a fairy couple. For Peter it is play-acting, going through the same movement and motions of another, without any underlying meaning. Wendy, on the other hand, is deeply immersed in the romantic portents of the waltzing. It is only when the fairies who surround them flee that Peter, now alone with Wendy, is made uncomfortable by her feelings. When pressed on the issue of his love, he states that he and Wendy "fly and fight together [...] What else is there?" Peter cannot voice his burgeoning sexual attraction. His constraints are inborn. Though the Peter of the novella often eschews an opportunity for learning in the desire to remain perfectly ignorant, there is the suggestion of his frustration with the unfamiliar—his inability to process the pubescent sexuality of Wendy. Hook seduces Wendy into becoming a pirate in this version by revealing to her what she has all along feared: that Peter Pan "cannot love" and that this inability is "part of the riddle of his being." Despite this assertion



however, Peter Pan is shown to be capable of love, merely inarticulate about it. During the final confrontation in Hogan's version, Hook nearly gets the better of Peter in a monologue delivered at rapier point. In reference to a plot-point in the film, play and novella, where Wendy, weary of playing mother and worried about her own parents, convinces John, Michael, and the Lost Boys to return home to London, Hook states:

I know what you are [...] You're a tragedy. [...] Your Wendy was leaving you. Why should she stay? What have you to offer? You are incomplete. She would rather grow up than stay with you. Let us now take a peep into the future. What's this I see? 'Tis the fair Wendy. She is in her nursery. The window is shut. [...] I'm afraid the window is barred. [...] She can't see you. She can't hear you. She has forgotten all about you. And what is this I see? There is another in your place. He is called husband. (Hogan)

"Husband" and its hetero-normative compliment, "wife," are the words that this film version of Peter (and indeed the Peter from the novella) has not been able to articulate. In fact, the novella itself never actually articulates this idea. The film coheres around the idea that it is not a mother that Peter wants, it is a wife. He is caught up in a confusing world where the sexual feelings of puberty are at odds with his childish desire to remain eternally a boy. The film collapses all the terms for us: "your Wendy" is both "mother" and "wife." Peter confuses and conflates all three, but he cannot specifically define the sexual/romantic aspect of his feelings for Wendy. He expects, in childlike fashion, that he can come to her window for decades, little suspecting that, in doing so, he is aping but not fulfilling the sexual/romantic behavior that Wendy wants from

him. Peter loses Wendy, not because he refuses to grow up, but because he cannot understand what that might mean: a tragedy indeed.<sup>7</sup>

The lack of definition, in both Peter and the transitional end of childhood period, is a naïvely-defined construct. The former is constructed by both Barrie and Peter himself. The latter is constructed by the Victorian reader who, like Peter, believes that adulthood is a space for work and drudgery, free from play and innocence. The ill-definition of both is seen as a panacea to the problem of becoming an adult. Peter is the boy who never grows up, and he remains fun and full of life for generation after generation. However, this naïvely defined space also serves as a kind of limbo. If eternal childhood is a space without clear boundaries, then Peter is in purgatory, forever caught between the childhood he is on the verge of outgrowing and the adulthood he will never reach. He is the boy who *couldn't* grow up, because he is arrested in this stage of development, unexamined for fear that it is similar to adulthood, and thus unable to understand what he is. Our fantasy of Peter, the boy who *wouldn't* grow up, keeps him from being able to.

## *Part II: Wendy Moira Angela Darling, Ever So Much More than Twenty*

One of the primary reasons for our attraction to Peter as a self-determined eternal child (one who *won't* grow up) as opposed to a tragic child (one who *can't* grow up) is his own inability to descant on his condition. Peter's inability to grow up lies (mostly) unexamined in his own mind. Essentially, we think of him as a boy who won't grow up because he thinks of himself in the same terms. Were Peter the protagonist of *Peter and Wendy* and the reader were to

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<sup>7</sup> I find this inability to be a sexual creature somewhat odd, seeing as Barrie has gone through great lengths to craft a name for Peter that emphasizes his phallic potential. With his first name being a crude euphemism for the man genitalia and his last referring to a notably licentious satyr-god, one would think Peter Pan would be nothing but masculine sexual energy. Perhaps Barrie intended the name to be ironic. It is a bit amusing to think that the sexually over-determined name now absolutely represents a complete state of arrested development.

follow him and him alone, there might be no way of making this distinction about his capacity for maturation. The novella does not follow him, however. That is to say, nearly all we know of Peter is filtered through Wendy. She is the observer that reacts to him, judges him by turns monstrous and fair, and desires from him a relationship that he is unable to give her. Though Wendy is enchanted by Peter Pan, she also notes his fierce fragility: the precariousness of the boy whose lack of definition makes him immortal and keeps him from the fulfillment of growing up. Peter is the manifestation of our fantasies, so Wendy ought to be our stand-in, the lucky girl who gets the chance to watch Peter Pan, advise him, and try to tame him, but instead she comes away with a story of pre-pubescent heartache, mirroring our own feelings of loss at having reached adulthood. As M. Joy Morse tells us, “it is significant that the desire to defer adulthood is first addressed to a girl” (293). Wendy is the necessary sounding board for Peter’s project because she approximates our own interest in Peter Pan, who, by contrast, is too embroiled in the growing pains of puberty to accurately represent our readerly desires to see eternal childhood preserved.

Wendy is a hybrid figure. Though she is a child, she is an older one, defined by her maternal streak and her desire to help usher others into adulthood. The Lost Boys, as we established in the previous section, look to her as a mother. Even her own siblings, John and Michael, do the same in the aforementioned games of play pretend. This aura of maternity extends far beyond the hollow tree where she plays mother to Peter and his Lost Boys, however. When she is captured on Hook’s *Jolly Roger*, she manages to find converts who are won over by her sensible recommendation that they live an adult life, as we see in an admission from Smee, Hook’s bo’sun: “See here, honey [...] I’ll save you if you promise to be my mother” (151).

Wendy as mother is a valued and rare commodity in Neverland, such that even her enemies are willing to bend their rules if only she will act as mother to them.

This over-determination of Wendy as mother deserves some scrutiny. After all, as discussed in the previous section, “mother” is an indeterminate term for Peter Pan, as multifarious and impossible to know as the precise end of childhood. Because it cannot clearly mark the boundaries between child and adult, the transitional stage of life that Barrie writes about also cannot clearly mark the moment of sexual maturity. We, as adherents to the well-defined tropes of adolescence, can recognize the period as one that divorces sexual maturity from parental responsibilities. Adolescents are expected to be sexual but not expected to be parental. For Barrie and his readers, there is no codified set of valences that make the distinction clear. As we shall see shortly, Barrie seems to be acutely aware that mothers as well as daughters are capable of being sexual creatures. The fog obscuring childhood’s end precludes a clear definition of Wendy’s sexuality (unlike the Hogan film, which has the advantage of filtering her through a recognizably adolescent lens). In order to get at some of these issues of Wendy’s sexuality and her hybridism in a story that tries to impose strict binaries on an ill-defined stage of development, we must look to Wendy’s own mother, whose sexual nature, as an adult, is much more clearly defined.

The matter of Mrs. Darling is a complicated one. We have already looked into her habit of rummaging through her children’s minds and rearranging the thoughts she finds, though this is an action that Barrie also attributes to the reader’s own mother. Though romance is missing from Neverland because it is inaccessible to Peter’s asexual mind, Barrie describes Mrs. Darling in almost exclusively sexually/romantically suggestive terms:

“She was a lovely lady, with a romantic mind and such a sweet, mocking mouth. Her romantic mind was like the tiny boxes, one within the other, that come from the puzzling East, however many you discover there is always one more; and her sweet, mocking mouth had one kiss on it that Wendy could never get, though there it was, perfectly conspicuous in the right hand corner.” (1)

The feminine psyche is described by Barrie as a somewhat maddening landscape, full of puzzle boxes and kisses that cannot be gotten, despite their being in plain sight. Her mind is tidy, unlike the minds of the children. The cost of that tidiness is compartmentalization and secrecy. More than secrecy, there is a quality of sympathy withheld to Mrs. Darling’s kiss. Wendy tries to get at the “perfectly conspicuous” kiss but never can. Moreover, the smile that hides it is not merely sweet but sweet and “mocking.” Mrs. Darling (whose first name is just as elusive as her kiss) is a woman whose intrigue, for Wendy, comes from her inability to be known and her seeming enjoyment of one’s inability to know her. Peter Pan’s inability to understand what a mother is may have more merit, now that we see that Wendy’s own model of motherhood is a woman of inaccessible information, and sweet mockery of those who would try and ferret it out. Her inaccessibility is the key to her sensuality. Peter misidentifies what a kiss is, and, in doing so, gives Wendy a thimble. Mrs. Darling’s kiss is perfectly visible, easily read and identified, but inaccessible. All this is to say that motherhood, as exemplified by Mrs. Darling, is both sensual and remote. Wendy, poised on the threshold of adulthood, is forever trying to get at her mother’s kiss, to reach those deeper mysteries beyond childhood--the same mysteries that Peter Pan seeks at all costs to avoid.

In terms of the Victorian reader’s desire to preserve an asexual, innocent childhood through a lack of definition, Mrs. Darling’s style of motherhood would seem to be anathema to

the fantasy of eternity. After all, it is her “sweet, mocking mouth” with its visible kiss that appears to tempt Wendy into trying to “get” it. Wendy learns, at the corner of her mother’s mouth, to desire that which she cannot have—either her mother’s kiss or Peter Pan’s. One wonders if Wendy were a less inquisitive and sexually curious child if the project of elongating childhood and remaining safe from adulthood’s ravages in Neverland would have been more successful. It should strike us as very strange that Barrie has this to say about Mrs. Darling at the novel’s end:

“On that eventful Thursday week Mrs. Darling was in the night nursery, awaiting George’s return home; a very sad-eyed woman. Now that we look at her closely and remember the gaiety in her old days, all gone now, just because she has lost her babes, I find I won’t be able to say nasty things about her after all. If she was too fond of her rubbishy children, she couldn’t help it. Look at her in her chair where she has fallen asleep. The corner of her mouth, where one first looks, is almost withered up. Her hand moves restlessly on her breast, as if she had a pain there. Some like Peter best and some like Wendy best, but I like her best” (172).

The narrator of *Peter Pan* likes Mrs. Darling best. Moreover, he says he likes her best at the end of a paragraph he began by implying that he was going to “say nasty things about her.” What passes between Barrie’s suggestion that he was about to condemn her and his encomium of her as his “favorite” is precious little. There is the line about her not being able to help her feelings for her children, despite their “rubbishy” nature (presumably rubbishy because they have left her to worry), and there is a description of her physical decline. The language here remains playful: the children are not “awful” or even inconsiderate but “rubbishy.” But it should be noted that it is pity, essentially, that moves Barrie’s narrator from repulsion to sympathy. One cannot help but

pity her as she sits in her chair, unable to help herself from loving her children, her hand moving across her chest “as if she had a pain there.” But more than pity at her physical state, and the loss of her children, we see the compromise of her sensual nature. The kiss hiding in the corner of her mouth has “almost withered up.” Mrs. Darling, defined by the unattainable sensuality plain on her face, risks losing her definition in the absence of her children. Though we are tempted to think of *Peter and Wendy* as a story about the exuberance of children in a world without parents, Barrie gives us this sobering reminder of the decidedly nonexuberant consequences of Wendy and her brothers’ flights of fancy.

Even more telling in this regard is the idea that Mrs. Darling seems to deny there being any truth to Peter’s assertion that, in order to “always have fun,” he must “remain a boy.” Morse, in her article, asserts that the kiss in the corner of Mrs. Darling’s mouth is “inextricably tied to perpetual, childish freedom,” (293), taking as evidence the scene in which the Darling family engages in a “romp” and “the gayest of all was Mrs. Darling, who would pirouette so wildly that all you could see of her was the kiss, and then, if you had dashed at her, you might have got it” (Barrie 12). Morse assumes that this reckless gaiety must be of Peter’s world. However, as I have already established, Peter does not know what a kiss is. He cannot comprehend it—the concept being from an adult world he is barred from—and so he must substitute a thimble. And yet, here is Mrs. Darling, on a gay romp, having such fun that she becomes nothing but her kiss. Adult readers might overlook this seemingly unimportant scene, but it proves that, at the heart of it, Mrs. Darling can both have great amounts of fun and be an adult woman, whose kiss is, if anything, even more visible when she is at her happiest. Paired with the knowledge that, as she grows sad and weary in the absence of her children—ostensibly the base condition that Peter believes all adults to live in—her kiss fades, we must conclude that, despite Peter’s assertion of

adulthood as death, drudgery, and depression, we do not need to “always remain a boy” in order to “have fun.”

But we need to ask ourselves why Barrie should think of Mrs. Darling as his favorite. After all, in the next chapter, which details what happened “when Wendy grew up,” Barrie tells us, amidst lengthy descriptions of the Lost Boys’, Darling siblings’ and even Mr. Darling’s fates, “Mrs. Darling is now dead and forgotten” (185). She moves from a figure of sensual mysteries, to the narrator’s favorite, to not only dead but also forgotten all in a matter of ten or so pages! In order to understand this strange trajectory, one must assume an interchangeability between Wendy and her mother, and as a result, return to the meaning of mothers in *Peter Pan*, with which the titular character wrestles.

The mysteries of Mrs. Darling’s kiss—a kiss that seems to be both implicitly sexual (or, at the very least, sensual) and also related to her maternal instincts—are, as we’ve said before, fascinating to Wendy. While she is still a child, and a pre-pubescent one, her interest in childish games always skews towards the sexual or the domestic. After helping Peter to reattach his missing shadow, Wendy immediately offers a kiss and only substitutes the famous thimble so as “not to hurt his feelings” (28). In a rare moment of foreshadowing, Barrie informs us that the thimble Peter offers in return “was to save her life” (28). I take this curious exchange of thimbles and kisses as a parable about the nature of adult sexuality in Neverland. Peter is ill at ease in the world of the Darling nursery where kisses—real kisses—are hard-sought. The thimble kiss is the only kiss that matters in Neverland. The dangers of ill-loosed arrows and vengeful fairies are not ameliorated by traditional kisses, but by the stopping power of thimbles worn on a thong around the neck. Wendy’s kiss, though it is freely given and not hidden in the corner of her mouth, is just as elusive once in Neverland, having been replaced by sewing equipment.



Wendy's kiss—her real kiss—has no place in Neverland, but Wendy's desires for sexuality and domesticity, a blend that her mother displays, do not wane. We have seen in the previous section that Wendy's favorite game is one of families, mothers and fathers. When asked about her adventures in Neverland, long after the fact, Wendy states that she "liked the home under the ground best of all" (187). The home under the ground is her favorite from a list that includes, by her own admission, "fairies [...] pirates [...] redskins and a Mermaid's lagoon" (186). We remember Neverland as a place of boyish adventure and excitement, but Wendy herself remembers it as a place of cozy domestic bliss, not so very different from the married life she so desires and, presumably, eventually attains.

This attempt to domesticate Neverland is not merely a project of memory; her time in Neverland is spent attempting to remind the Lost Boys of their domestic duty. In the chapter "Wendy's Story," she tells a story that Peter finds "beastly," a yarn about the joys of growing up. In the following passage, I have removed the constant interruptions of the Lost Boys and Darling siblings, for brevity's sake. Such interruptions show their active fascination with such tales. Note also, the emphasis on parents left behind rather than the children who might miss their forebears:

"There was once a gentleman [...] There was a lady also [...] The gentleman's name was Mr. Darling and the lady's was Mrs. Darling [...] They were married you know, and what do you think they had? [...] They had three descendants. [...] Now these children had a faithful nurse called Nana; but Mr. Darling was angry with her and chained her up in the yard; and so all the children flew away. [...] Now I want you to consider the feelings of the unhappy parents with all their children flown away."

“Oo!” They all moaned, though they were not really considering the feelings of the unhappy parents one jot.

“Think of the empty beds!” [...]

“It’s awfully sad,” said the first twin cheerfully.

“I don’t see how it can have a happy ending,” said the second twin, ‘Do you, Nibs?’

“I’m frightfully anxious” [said Nibs]

“If you knew how great is a Mother’s love,” Wendy told them triumphantly, “You would have no fear.” (116)

We pause a moment here to reflect on what has been said. Wendy cannot describe her own anxieties about leaving behind her parents; such is the behavior of “a cowardly custard,” a flustered child who does not wish to be in Neverland. But, in using her role as storyteller (the principle role of a mother in Neverland), she can drive home her main point: a mother’s love is so great as to not be deterred by long absences or the removal of hope that her children should return. The formal demands of familial structure in Neverland are turned on their heads. Mothers ought to tell stories, but those stories should delight children, not encourage them to grow up. Instead, Wendy’s desire to leave Neverland is figured into her performance of her formal role. What remains is an indistinct blend of several different roles, muddled, poorly bound, and characteristic of this space between childhood and adulthood.

The Lost Boys gruesomely and gleefully anticipate a tragedy—they “cannot see how it could have a happy ending.” Wendy imagines, instead, a world where the very real tragedy of the loss of one’s children is no match for the love a mother bares her children. This thought, of course, proves untrue. As we have seen, Mrs. Darling does leave the window open for her

children in the hopes that they will return, but it is not the fearless love in the face of tragedy that fills her. Rather, Mrs. Darling is drained of her being and substance, her kiss all but faded. She does not give up hope, but she also does not thrive on mother's love alone. A mother must have a child unto whom to render that love, or she fades away. Wendy imagines that a mother's love endures everything, but Barrie, who likes Mrs. Darling best, tells us that this endurance comes not without cost. Mrs. Darling's kiss, unspent in the corner of her mouth, is in danger of withering without the presence of her children. Wendy tells the Lost Boys that they "would have no fear" if only they knew the power of a mother's love, but the entire story is given as a call to action, an attempt to get her own siblings and the Lost Boys home. Her own anxieties are both fed and masked by her fearless belief in the staying power of motherhood.

Perhaps this complex mishmash of fear and hope explains why Mrs. Darling is "dead and forgotten" by the novella's end. By the time we learn this, we have also learned that Wendy herself is a wife and mother. Barrie is terribly concerned with mothers and their endurance, but he does not seem interested in treating more than one mother at once. Mrs. Darling is "dead and forgotten" because, in a sense, by taking on that role, Wendy has become Mrs. Darling. The only semblance of overlap that we get involves Wendy's homecoming and the final exchange with Peter. Peter makes a last, desperate appeal for Wendy to come home with him:

"Come home with me to the little house!" [Peter said]

"May I, mummy?" [said Wendy]

"Certainly not. I have got you home again and I mean to keep you."

"But he does so need a mother."

"So do you my love." (181)

Wendy wishes to mother Peter, but Mrs. Darling steps in to remind her that she herself is still in need of mothering. Motherhood, for Barrie, is a proposition with one giver and one recipient. Wendy cannot mother Peter while she is, herself, a child in need of a mother. She only does so in the parentless, nearly adult-less world of Neverland. Upon her return, Wendy is returned to the more concrete binaries of parent and child. This would seem to prove that the complex nebulousness of this pre-adolescent space is conquered by a more traditional adult/child binary by the end of the novella. However, Wendy constantly subverts that binary while she is in Neverland. As I have said before, Neverland seems exempt from this binary relationship since it does not feature parents of any kind, and barely features adults. In this world, Wendy can be mother, not only to the Lost Boys and Peter, who are not her offspring, but her own siblings. This is accomplished, in part, because the Lost Boys and Darling brothers seem to be hazy at best on their recollection of their life before coming to Neverland. When Wendy tells her story about the Darling parents, John responds, as though it was not entirely obvious. “I know them!” Michael, even younger and more subject to Neverland’s Lethe-like effect states only “I think I know them.” The subversion of the adult/child binary is expressed not only in Wendy’s willingness to be both mother and child, storyteller and revolutionary, kiss and thimble, but also in the lack of adults in the Hollow Tree. John and Michael are free from their parents in Neverland, but they are also in a space where adults do not exist. In the hollow tree Wendy and Peter become parents, stepping into the adult roles while simultaneously proving the parent/child distinction to be essentially meaningless. Peter wishes to abdicate his *pater familias* responsibilities, leaving the household in Neverland to be controlled by Mother Wendy. Her comfort with her juvenescent hybridity—her confidence in her own definition as a mixture of child-like, sexual, and maternal—is what threatens the eternity of Neverland. Her desire to

grow up, a desire that Barrie insists is not felt by children, but by those already in childhood's death throes, is what eventually leads all the children, except Peter, back home to London.

And when Wendy does return home, she makes short work of adulthood. Though the space between child and adult is less malleable in London than it was in Neverland, we are told:

the years came and went without bringing the careless boy; and when they met again, Wendy was a married woman, and Peter was no more to her than a little dust in the box in which she had kept her toys. Wendy was grown up. You need not be sorry for her. She was one of the kind that likes to grow up. In the end, she grew up of her own free will, a day quicker than other girls (184).

This should come as no surprise to us. Wendy, after all, is not only the “kind that likes to grow up,” she is, as far as will is concerned, already grown up. Her first response to Peter is to offer him a kiss, emulating the sensual mother whose kiss lies hidden in the corner of her “sweet, mocking mouth.” Her frustration with Peter is not his unwillingness to play father, but his inability to play husband. Barrie tells us that she is entranced by Hook because “she was only a little girl” but I think this line is a bit disingenuous. She is entranced by Hook because she is “a girl” with a burgeoning, gendered sexuality, not the meek, Victorian temerity encapsulated in the phrase “little girl.” That Wendy “grew up a day quicker than other girls” is telling as well. Barrie uses the phrase “in the end” implying that, at some unspecified point between her return from Neverland and her adulthood, Wendy was faster on the physiological draw, but that seems to follow naturally, again, from her pre-sexual but nonetheless aching desire to be something more to Peter Pan than a mother.

All this points to a tragic end. As we saw with Peter in the previous section, Wendy's inability to be with Peter, who cannot grow up, should strike us as profoundly sad. The novella

is, after all, called *Peter and Wendy*, and though it contains both *Peter* and *Wendy*, it does not contain *Peter and Wendy*. If Wendy is our nostalgic avatar for experiencing the wonders of Neverland, then Barrie should write of the tragedy of the love lost between them. But look at this passage detailing their final meeting. We have already established that Peter had turned to “a little dust” in Wendy’s mental toy box, but the point is driven home here. Peter is tragic, Wendy is not:

For almost the only time in his life that I know of, Peter was afraid. “Don’t turn up the light,” He cried.

She let her hands play in the hair of the tragic boy. She was not a little girl heart-broke about him; she was a grown woman, smiling about it all, but they were wet smiles.

Then she turned up the light and Peter saw. He gave a cry of pain; and when the tall, beautiful creature stooped to lift him in her arms, he drew back sharply.

‘What is it?’ he cried again.

She had to tell him.

‘I am old, Peter, ever so much more than twenty. I grew up long ago’” (189).

Peter, described here as the “tragic boy,” is far past being horrified at Wendy’s having grown up; he cannot comprehend it. Moreover, though her smiles are wet, we are explicitly told that Wendy is not “heart-broke about him.” She is, in fact, “a grown woman,” one who does not need Peter’s love and validation. We want to read *Peter and Wendy* as a story about the merits of eternal childhood, one that validates the Victorian desire to adumbrate adulthood and elongate the indistinct period of time before one must acknowledge that a no-longer-a-child is now an adult. As such, it ought to venerate tragic, pre-teen love. It ought to show us that Wendy is sad, not just

for Peter, but alongside him. After all, if childhood is so worth preserving, then childish love ought to be the purest and most painful to lose. Wendy is an imperfect heroine for preserving this way of thinking. It is not just that she ends up “ever so much more than twenty,” rather that in some ways, she always was. To return to her account of Neverland, she loves the home under the ground best of all, just as Barrie loves Mrs. Darling best of all. Her desires are for the domestic, the sexual, and the adult. Peter remains eternally in limbo as a way of extending childhood. Wendy however, never had such desires or ambitions. She grew up a day quicker than the other girls, knew of her mortality at age two, and spent even her formative years trying to get at Mrs. Darling’s kiss. Peter is a tragedy, and we cannot live out our fantasies of eternal childhood through him. Wendy is not a tragedy, and so we cannot be nostalgic through her.

### *Part III: Hook, Not Entirely Unheroic*

So we come, now, to the villain of the piece. “Capt. Jas. Hook,” Peter’s archenemy, a character almost as beloved in his own right as the boy with whom he is locked in eternal struggle. Hook’s capture of the public imagination at some points seems to eclipse Peter’s. We must remember that the 1953 Disney version made special note of Hans Conreid’s voice acting work as the centerpiece of the movie. Both Jason Isaacs and Dustin Hoffman received top billing for their portrayals of the infamous captain, above and beyond the Peters opposite whom they played. The latter was especially noteworthy, given the fact that Spielberg’s film was called *Hook* and not *Peter Pan*, despite featuring the villainous captain far less than Robin William’s frenetic, middle-aged Peter. Why is it that Captain Hook fascinates audiences so? Why do readers and playgoers alike regard him in the great pantheon of villains? My major contention in this section is that Hook, desired by Wendy, aware of what Peter is and is not, and being the only

thinking adult in Neverland, is the only true stand-in the reader has. Peter is too stunted and tragic. Wendy wants the opposite of what the Victorian reader desires for her. It is Hook's commentary on Wendy's observation of Peter Pan that forms the crux of the Gothic streak running through the novel. It is Hook that teaches the reader about the tragic impossibility of eternal childhood and the consequences of attempting to never grow up.

Peter Pan continually alludes to the fact that the choices in Neverland are between himself and Captain Hook. As to what, or who, these are choices for is never elucidated. Given Peter's tyrannical hold on the Lost Boys, one might assume that the choice pertains to who will lead the denizens of Neverland. Even this is unclear, however. What is clear is that Peter constantly formulates himself as one half of a binary. Hook is the yin to his yang. After an initial description of Captain Hook, Barrie states, "Such is the terrible man against whom Peter Pan is pitted. Which will win?" (50) The chapter that details their final confrontation is, in fact, titled "It's Hook or Me This Time." This is no accident. Peter formulates the implied trouble at the core of the adult lament: namely, that adulthood is death, and eternal childhood is the only way to escape it.

Hook appears as the representation of both adulthood and death. He delights in adult delectations, namely cigars, making up for lost time by smoking two at once. The youthful belligerence of Peter Pan is masked in Hook under a layer of adult social decorum and he is described as being "never so sinister as when he was polite," a fact which Barrie describes as "the truest test of breeding" (50). But Hook is death as well as adulthood. The first line of his descriptive paragraph calls him "cadaverous and blackavized" (49)—another binary representation. Peter is pale with white blonde hair and has "little pearl" teeth. Hook is swarthy and "blackavized." Setting issues of race aside, Peter and Hook are chromatically antipodal as



well as philosophically opposed. Barrie calls “the grimmest part of him” his “iron claw” (49). The hook for which he is named seems to resemble nothing so much as a sickle, that symbol of harvest and, through harvest, death, wielded by that most primordial of Gothic villains, Cronos, titan father of the Greek pantheon. He seems to use it as a sickle as well. Though Hook is ostensibly possessed of the pistol and rapier that befit his status as pirate, Barrie’s description of how Hook kills is predicated on the use of the namesake alone. Added to this reaping appendage is the constant, literalized ticking of Hook’s own mortality. Not only does he personify death, but he is accompanied by death, which follows in his wake in the form of a crocodile (that same beast that lends its head to Seth, the Egyptian devourer of souls) who has swallowed a ticking clock, counting down the time he has left.

If, like Wendy, Hook is aware of his own mortality and at the mercy of the narrator that insists on “two” being “the beginning of the end,” his status as adult is not just another restating of his death-adjacent valence. Hook is concerned throughout the novella with “good form”—a phrase that, for Barrie, is a purposefully archaic and obscure set of adult rules of decorum. Hook must meet his death on his own terms, which is to say, he is beaten by Peter in a moment of bad form. He can only allow himself to be eaten by the crocodile when Peter kicks at him rather than slashing with a rapier. This kick is a situation forced by Hook. He forces it, however, due to a rare moment in which Peter displays good form. Here we must expand upon the earlier quote, in which Peter called himself a “little bird that has fallen out of the nest:”

Peter invited his opponent to pick up his sword. Hook did so instantly, but with a tragic feeling that Peter was showing good form.

Hitherto, he had thought it was some fiend fighting him, but dark suspicions assailed him now.

“Pan, who and what art thou?” he cried huskily.

“I’m youth, I’m joy,” Peter answered at a venture, “I’m a little bird that has broken out of the egg.”

This, of course, was nonsense; but it was proof to the unhappy Hook that Peter did not know in the least who or what he was, which is the very pinnacle of good form. (130)

Hook’s dour confidence that Peter does not know himself in response to his assertion that he is “youth” and “joy” is troubling to the observant reader, given how far Barrie has gone to assert that Peter, though personally unclear on what he is, is the emblem of “youth” and “joy.” What Hook sees in Peter, either a little boy with the potential to be a gentleman with excellent form or, perhaps, something less savory, Barrie does not describe. It is enough that Barrie—and through Barrie, Hook—recognizes that Peter ought not to be considered a stand-in for youth and joy and freedom. Even Hook recognizes that the dichotomy he has participated in is false. The “dark suspicions” that assail him as to who his opponent is, as well as his “tragic” realization that Peter is showing good form, seem to prove that well enough.

Moreover, good form here might be taken to be a matter of good manners. Hook believes in decorum, propriety and manners far beyond what we might expect of a pirate lord. Barrie remarks upon this, accounting for the discrepancy:

Hook was not his true name. To reveal who he really was would, even to this date, set the country in a blaze; but as those who read between the lines must have already guessed, he had been at a famous public school; and its traditions still clung to him like garments, with which indeed they are largely concerned. Thus it was offensive to him even now to board a ship in the same dress in which he

grappled her; and he still adhered in his walk to the school's distinguished slouch.

But above all he retained the passion for good form. (146)

Barrie's sly nods towards Hook's Eton education are more than just playful ribbing at the expense of a beloved institution. Unlike Peter, who has spent his interminable childhood in the unschooled wilds of Neverland, Hook is more in line with the reader's own biases: Eton educated, interested in imposing order on chaos, and caught up in the Victorian obsession with good manners. If Wendy was never truly interested in being a child, Hook has let his upbringing shape him into the man he is today. He remembers childhood and its mannerisms, but does not scorn adulthood.

Beyond his sympathetically unremarkable boyhood and his obsession with manners, Hook is a constant reminder to us of how much Neverland is not a place for the adult reader. We may initially sympathize with Mrs. Darling's propensity for rummaging about in the minds of children, amusedly remarking upon the strangeness of the ideas, but it is not until we readers are actually witnessing Neverland and its nonsensical chaos that we feel like we are in a space unintended for adults. Hook's loneliness in this world anchors the reader's own feelings: "There was no elation in his gait, which kept pace with the action of his somber mind. Hook was profoundly dejected. He was often thus when communing with himself on board ship in the quietude of night. It was because he was so terribly alone" (Barrie 145). Hook is alone in Neverland. Hook's adulthood, his solitude, is linked inextricably to his introspective melancholy. Peter Pan, as stated in previous sections, is capable of feeling fear—he does run from adulthood, and cry out upon seeing Wendy grown up. Hook, however, lives in a state of perpetual sadness. If Peter's joy and exuberance is the kind of joy and exuberance we often associate with seeing a performance of *Peter Pan* or reading the novella, then Hook's melancholy is representative of

the state of the mind of the reader that is sated by such exuberance. Hook's loneliness as the sole adult in a world populated by children is linked to the pangs of nostalgia that come with a desire to return to childhood.

Let us look to one of the more intimate portraits of Hook to gain a deeper understanding of his nostalgic melancholia. As he stands over the sleeping form of Peter Pan, we are told:

[Hook] stood silent at the foot of the tree, looking across the chamber at his enemy. Did no feeling of compassion disturb his somber breast? The man was not wholly evil; he loved flowers (I have been told) and sweet music (he was himself no mean performer on the harpsichord); and, let it be frankly admitted, the idyllic nature of the scene stirred him profoundly. (111)

Barrie is tongue-in-cheek with his descriptions of Hook. By turns the man is murderous and sensitive. The suggestions that he loves flowers and music fall into the realm of light-hearted playfulness on the part of the author. What does strike us as true, however, is that Hook is moved by the "idyllic scene" of Peter, asleep and prone. Hook is moved by a tableau of childhood innocence; his better self would like to see it preserved.

That Hook should be categorized as Peter's opposite by Peter himself is the source of our unease. Barrie returns to a binary construction of adults and children so often that we come away with a memory of Hook as a child-hating adult who wishes only to see his opponent dead. We forget the Hook who loves flowers and music and who revels in the perfect innocence of witnessing his rival in untroubled sleep. Hook is villainous only as categorized by Peter Pan. Our distaste for Hook is either unexamined misremembrance, or else it is a feeling of creeping dread, a feeling that we have been cast as the villain in the very fantasy we wish to preserve. We want childhood elongated, adulthood banished, but to do so is to buy into Peter's binary, to see Hook

and therefore ourselves as “cadaverous,” “grim,” “melancholy,” and “blackavized.” Essentially, though Victorian readers/playgoers revisit Peter Pan in order to be purified by a display of childhood innocence, Hook’s characterization reminds them that they are, indeed, in need of purification. Perhaps this is why Barrie describes Hook as “not entirely unheroic” (132), an appellation that does not fit in the least with Peter Pan’s construction of “Hook or me.” The reader sees their own station in Hook, and in order to continue to venerate Peter Pan, they must not be alienated from the boy-tyrant by seeing themselves portrayed as entirely awful. Adulthood must be the enemy, but its symbol need not be “entirely unheroic.”

Barrie makes this point subtly, at the novel’s close. The playgoer, having witnessed the role of George Darling and James Hook played, almost invariably, by the same actor, and the reader, noticing the melancholy similarities between the two, likely see Mr. Darling as an echo of Hook after the children return from Neverland. Mr. Darling, during this part of the novella, seems reluctant to adopt all the Lost Boys. Barrie rectifies this by saying, “Then he burst into tears and the truth came out. He was as glad to have them as [Mrs. Darling] was, he said, but he thought they should have asked his consent as well as hers, instead of treating him as a cypher in his own house” (179). That Mr. Darling should fear being a “cypher” in his own home speaks to our own fears of being forgotten as important players in Neverland’s schema. If eternal childhood is the adult reader’s fantasy, then Peter’s characterization of Hook as being opposed to everything youthful and joyous is damning and ungracious. We do not wish to be cyphers in our own home, no more than Mr. Darling, no more than the maligned (even according to Barrie) Captain Hook.

*Part IV: Reconciliation and Transition*

This dread of Mr. Darling's brings us to the novella's end. The return from Neverland is expressed as a slow and painful process. Though the Lost Boys are adopted by the Darling family and integrate back into the society that they sought to escape, they find themselves regretting having ever left, saying: "Before they had attended school a week they saw what goats they had been not to remain on the island; but it was too late now, and soon they settled down to being as ordinary as you or me or Jenkins minor" (145). This "settling down" turns out to be literal as well as metaphorical, since they have lost the ability to fly. Barrie tells us that they claim that this is due to "want of practice" but it is actually because "they no longer believed" (145). For Barrie, magic is a matter of imagination, and as the adult world crowds out childish fantasies, it literally arrests their ability to perform them.

What they have entered into is a kind of adult longing, upon which the novella is predicated. Barrie's assertion that "all children, but one, grow up" is a sadness now shared by the Lost Boys as well as the reader. Barrie tells us that Michael hangs on to his childhood the longest (fitting, since he was the most infantilized in Neverland) but that his insistence on remaining a child places him at Wendy's side. She too, pines for Peter, though she does so with the awareness of adult, sexual feeling, rather than out of a childish attachment to childhood wonder. But this longing is dispelled by the arrival of Peter. When he returns, he does not remember Captain Hook (finally a cypher) and he does not remember Tinker Bell. They are merely two forgettable specifics in a never-ending stream of rivals and companions. The childhood that Michael longs for and, indeed, the Peter that Wendy desires, are gone. What does remain is the Peter described as "innocent, gay and heartless," the Peter who cannot love and whose only concern is for fun and folly.

The figuring of this end to childhood as a sad occurrence continues with a description of the adult Lost Boys and Darling children:

You may see the twins and Nibs and Curly, any day, going into an office with an umbrella. Michael is an engine-driver. Slightly married a lady of Title and so became a lord. You see that judge in a wig coming out at the iron door? That used to be Tootles. The bearded man who doesn't know any story to tell his children was once John. (147)

Not only are the specifics of Peter lost amidst the passage of time, but the children themselves are casualties of adulthood. Tootles did not become a judge; a judge used to be Tootles. John did not grow a beard; a bearded man once was John. Their new identities are nameless and flat, unknown and unimportant. Barrie even tells his readers that they are grown up and so “it is scarcely worth while saying anything more about them” (146). All this, in fact, might not be worth remarking upon, save that Barrie chooses to leave us with this. There is no fond remembrance of who the children were when they were children. In fact, we are often given quite contradictory visions of them as they settle into adulthood. Barrie only describes them so much as to tell his audience that they did not remain as they were. This is presented with a kind of melancholy that Barrie seems to feel is important to remark upon while simultaneously noting its unimportance. He wishes for his reader to not know the disappointing fates of his secondary cast, but he refuses to let them go un-announced. One would think that this is a final proof of Peter's assertion: “Hook or me.” The Lost Boys and Darling children grew up and died. “Mrs. Darling [is...] dead and forgotten” (147) And death, it seems, is no great adventure—just a slow, anonymizing decline.

But in the final pages of the novella, we are reminded that growing up is not so terrible. When Peter returns to visit Wendy, it is, as we have established, Peter who is heartbroken. Furthermore, Wendy, our rebellious craver of adulthood, is now much closer to Hook or Mr. Darling. She has a daughter of her own, Jane. She is the adult reader, looking down at a figure of eternal childhood and seeing she has no place in it. When Jane asks if she can join Peter in Neverland, Wendy remarks that Peter “does so need a mother” (152). Barrie tells us that Jane stays, but not forever. Jane is succeeded by her own daughter, Margaret. In jumping so far into the future, Barrie proves that Wendy is not a uniquely precocious child who happened to return from Neverland because she was extraordinarily opposed to the desires of the Victorian child cult. She is a stand-in for all children that outgrow their childhoods, enter with confidence into that uncertain space that adults fear to define, and emerge as healthy, functional people. Mrs. Darling, Wendy, Jane and Margaret all reject Peter Pan’s unexamined self-assessment, his eternal childhood, and his scorn for adulthood.

Richard Locke insists that the central theme of Peter Pan is death, specifically “a bittersweet attempt to overcome death, an attempt that fails” (106). Locke believes the only unending struggle against death is the “demigod’s [Peter’s] recurrent but brief appearance to generation after generation of children” (106). I contend that there is no unabashed joyousness in Peter’s victory over death. Wendy recognizes what Barrie seems to be attempting by making Peter the ultimate bearer of grief at not being able to grow up: the Darling children were never the Gothic maidens who were trapped in Neverland: Peter is. His inability to mature sexually and his constant need for a mother can never be fulfilled, as she will always come to desire him sexually with no hope of satiation. To become an adult may be a kind of death, but to remain a child is purgatory. Peter is Peter forever, and Barrie shows us that his fate is not altogether



joyous. After all, Barrie ends the penultimate chapter by telling us that Peter “had ecstasies innumerable that other children can never know; but he was looking through the window at the one joy from which he must be forever barred” (177). That joy is a childhood in the company of parents. While such a childhood is marred by the recognition of the inevitability of growing up (as when Mrs. Darling impresses upon Wendy that “two is the beginning of the end”), it exists within the context of the child cult’s veneration; to know that one will grow up is also to know that one is possessed of a special purity desired by adults. Peter, though presented as a capricious woodland spirit who has only a fairysized amount of empathy for children that inevitably age, is rendered pathetic in Barrie’s final estimation. We may be suckered into the fantasy of his performed joy (and remember only his magical flight, his daring acts of courage in the face of pirate adversaries etc.) but the boy of “innumerable joys” is “forever barred” from the joys of cozy domesticity and forward momentum that the novella chooses to end upon.

Unlike Dickens and Wilde, who seem to make monsters of their eternal children in order to dissuade readers from desiring eternal childhood, Barrie tells us that the very state of eternal childhood is not so much monstrous but tragic. The fantasy is fulfilled and shown to be hollow. For the reader of *Peter and Wendy*, the ultimate takeaway is not the grand adventure and fun of Neverland (though it may be misremembered that way); it is the profound melancholy that comes from Peter’s inability to grow up. In failing to leave Neverland, he fails to love Wendy and Jane and Margaret and, likely, countless other Darling girls. To return from Neverland and grow up is a bit sad. The end of childhood is figured as a loss, but to remain trapped in childhood is a greater loss. The adumbration of adulthood and the treatment of the space between childhood and adulthood as a mere extension of childhood bars Peter from the joys of growing up. He is taken prisoner by the fantasy of eternal childhood, unable to escape. If this is a Gothic novel,

Wendy is not the captured heroine and Hook is not the villain. Peter, tragic Peter, is the heroine, captured not by a villainous Marquis or a vengeful uncle, but by the audience's fantasy that he could remain a child forever. Wendy escapes this to become a well-adjusted adult. Wendy is the success story of *Peter and Wendy*, and Peter is the cautionary tale.

## Chapter Two

### Vulgar Gratitude: *Bleak House*, Harold Skimpole and Endless(ly Productive)

#### Childhood

Harold Skimpole seems like something of an anathema in *Bleak House* criticism. While many critics include the rakish hanger-on in larger schemas of the novel or mention his effect on the plot, Skimpole-centric arguments are rare. In my researches, most of the readings available, firstly, are quite old, and, secondly, focus on Skimpole as a caricature of Leigh Hunt. Many take the incensed position that the generous, talented Hunt was a far better man than the selfish, boorish Skimpole, and take Dickens to task for his lack of deference to his friend.

This kind of gloss on Harold Skimpole is troubling. While many of the biographic arguments about the Hunt comparison date back to a less rigorous age of scholarship between the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the mid-1940s, it is telling that, as the novel is subjected to greater scrutiny, Skimpole is increasingly relegated to the background. To use the words of another Skimpolian critic, frustrated with the character's short shrift, "[For] critics from Dickens's own time to the present [...] he appears to be merely an excrescence, a grotesque figure who takes up a disproportionate amount of space and yet seems to signify very little"(Erickson 48-59). Even in recent works such as Malcolm Andrews' *Dickens and the Grown-up Child*, a well-reasoned work of criticism that seems to demand an intricate reading of Skimpole, the rake is barely mentioned; his appearance in the text seems to stem from necessity rather than interest. We get a single paragraph that begins:

Before leaving this category, I should make *some* mention of a character who deliberately exploits the condition of arrested development for his own purposes,

*in some respects like those sophisticated versions* of the professional ‘children’ discussed earlier. This is Skimpole. His masquerading as a grown-up child is a *thoroughly manipulative affectation, a cruel parody* of the condition of arrested development. [...Skimpole is] importing into the Victorian age, *alien* cultural values. But the alignment in Skimpole of pernicious dandyism with the qualities of childlikeness does *suggest something* of the ambivalence of Dickens’s attitudes towards childhood and maturity. [My emphasis] (79)

At every turn, there seems to be revulsion in even mentioning the character’s existence.

Skimpole is so cruel, so off-putting, and so uncomfortable a subject that he only surfaces as an afterthought—fodder for a footnote about Dickens’s possible ambivalence. Furthermore, the rare Skimpolian article tends, more often than not, towards identifying him as a rake or a dandy—all but ignoring his most oft-repeated phrase that he is “but a child.”

Those who wish to focus their critical attentions on the Summersons and Jarndyces, the Buckets and the Dedlocks, are well-justified in doing so, but Harold Skimpole’s prominence and, indeed, centrality in *Bleak House* cannot be overlooked. Lest this chapter read as a sort of Skimpole boosterism, it is not my intent to generate sympathy for the character, rather to remove the kind of personal, emotional revulsion that most critics seem to express on the subject. That the character elicits such strong responses is telling, in and of itself, that he warrants further consideration. Certainly, in a project about distended childhood, Skimpole is one of the most memorable, complicated, and pernicious figures. Appearing both in “Esther’s Narrative” and, briefly, in the more capacious third-person segments, Skimpole transcends many boundaries and categories. He is both adult and child. He is both malicious and good-natured. He is both helpless

and capable. And perhaps most troublingly, in a novel about the interconnectedness of human suffering through business, Skimpole stands outside the very paradigm of work.

It should be obvious, given the subject of this dissertation, that Skimpole must be a deeply considered figure. His insistence that he is “but a child” in all matters of adult finance and debt places him squarely in that indefinite category— neither child nor adult, yet mistaken for both. Unlike Peter Pan, a liminal outsider in the shape of a child who cannot grow up even when remaining child-like is to his detriment, Harold Skimpole is a liminal outsider in the shape of a man who will not grow up and profits immensely from the refusal. Barrie was incorrect to call Peter “the boy who wouldn’t grow up.” Skimpole had already claimed that title half a century earlier.

But it is more than mere liminality that marks Skimpole as the embodiment of the uncategorized space between childhood and adulthood. Many have described the Gothic qualities of “Esther’s Narrative”— the house full of long-lost secrets, the entanglement of its heroine with an older man who wants her for himself, the stifling of sexuality in the forbidden marriage of Richard and Ada, and, perhaps most obviously, the name of the locale itself. Critics tend to comment on the irony of Bleak House’s name and the toothlessness of its growlery, but in naming the central locale “Bleak House” (chosen from what was a very long list of possible titles), Dickens casts a Gothic pall over the proceedings and raises our expectations of a place of ghosts, sorrow, and entrapment. Indeed, *Bleak House* (the novel, not the place) is a narrative full of Gothic locations, from the decaying, haunted Chesney Wold to the infected purgatory of Tom’s-All-Alone. What these places lack, however, is a true Gothic villain—an organizing figure that embodies the root of what is rotten in the novel. Bleak House (the place, not the

novel) may be a refuge from rain-choked London and its man-eating machine, Chancery, but it also houses the only viable, classically Gothic villain in the novel: Harold Skimpole.

The dangers of skimping on Skimpole are numerous. Without a clear understanding of Harold and his particular brand of Gothic villainy, readers and critics tend to point to characters like the vampiric, lawyer Vholes and examples of what Dickens sees as immoral. As we will discuss later in the chapter, Dickens goes out of his way to show that Vholes is merely a symptom of a terrible economic model: the sometimes beneficiary of the system's cruelty and not its instigator. To focus our attentions on characters like Vholes as the paragons of Dickens's critique of work is to miss a great deal of Dickens's subtle social commentary and, furthermore, to remove a complex dimension of the novel wherein the villain is a perfect Victorian child—precisely the sort of figure that Dickens is most associated with championing.

In the previous chapter, we examined Barrie's deft deliberation on Peter Pan's liminal state. Barrie takes the Gothic archetype of the abducting, covetous villain and places the character in a role normally filled by the tragically entrapped heroine, unable to be rescued by others or to effect her/his own salvation. Skimpole's role in *Bleak House* is equally expansive. Not only does he represent roles traditionally filled by both Gothic villains and, occasionally, the hero, he seems to be an alternate economy unto himself. Barrie needed to create a Neverland to house his uncategorizable figure. Skimpole is Peter and Neverland all in one. *Bleak House* is a novel of work—monstrous work that consumes those who labor in it. Skimpole is, in this paradigm, an alien economy, not just a “being” but a “doing” whose purposive and industrious alternative to the working world of Chancery not only proves successful (by Dickensian standards), but sucks other characters in, forcing them to take Skimpole on his own terms, rather than “outing” and miscategorizing him as a charlatan.

The goals of this chapter are twofold. First, we must examine how Skimpole's Gothic villainy is directly related to his uncategorizability as either adult or child, and secondly we must look to the ways in which *Bleak House* functions as a Gothic novel, one that uses Skimpole as its villain-by-proxy, ultimately condemning not any one character or set of behaviors, but a far-spanning social system where eternal childhood is a central form of resistance. In order to do this, we must treat Skimpole as more than a character, even one emblematic of eternal childhood. He is, as previously asserted, an economy unto himself, his own Neverland, in which he plays both active hero and malicious villain. Skimpole must be described in several ways across the chapter: as a vampire, a revenant, an eternal child, and a heroic icon. All of these takes on Skimpole become possible when we admit that he is both a being and a doing, both a laborer and an economy, and that the nebulosity of childhood's end is the key to his becoming such. In proving these theses, one can begin the work of a reading of *Bleak House* where the ever-present problem of work is solved only through a monstrous alternate economy where the liminal, alien interloper can be both hero and villain, child and adult, master manipulator and passive beneficiary. Only then can we surrender the notion that Skimpole's repulsiveness makes him unworthy of study and see, with greater clarity, the social commentary on work that Dickens is trying to illustrate. Skimpole is not an outlier to Dickens's qualms about Chancery, he is the condition of possibility for them.

### *Part I: The Victorian Child in a Romantic World*

While Dickens is often described in terms of his social realism, most critics recognize that *Bleak House* and many of his later novels start to address a heightened reality and include the supernatural. Of especial interest is Dickens's own preface to the 1856 edition of *Bleak*

*House*, wherein he says he wished “to dwell on the romantic side of familiar things” (7). While this statement is most often used in conjunction with his employment of the then-plausibly uncertain science of spontaneous human combustion, later critics point out the novel, as a whole, casts a veneer of the romantic over events that could otherwise exist within the genre of the realist novel.<sup>8</sup> A starting point for this reading trajectory can be placed on Robert Newsom’s 1988 book, *Dickens on the Romantic Side of Familiar Things*, wherein he states:

Things do not, of course, have “romantic” and “familiar” sides. The qualities “romantic” and “familiar” reside not in the things themselves but in our perceptions and imaginings of them. [...] When something strikes us as romantic, then it ceases to be familiar, and vice-versa. But it is just this proposition that Dickens, I believe, typically works against [...] he has not allowed them to cease to be familiar or to become entirely romantic. Rather, he imposes upon the reader a kind of unsettled and unsettling double perspective which requires us to see things as *at once* “romantic” and “familiar.” [...] This is not the same kind of thing as [an] alternating point of view [...] but something much more disturbing. For when objects, events, and even people themselves seem to be at once familiar and strange, then our relationship with those objects, events and people itself seems to dissolve and our very sense of self begins to dissolve as well. Rather than simply seek to merge the “romantic” and the “familiar” into some new synthesis, Dickens sought to keep each quality intensely alive for his audience. (6-

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that in the context of Newsom’s book, “Romantic” carries with it a particularly Gothic meaning. Newsom chooses to look at “suspended animation” and “the uncanny” as two ways into Dickens’s aesthetic. As both are tropes of the Gothic, I feel quite justified in extending this idea of the “romantic” into my particularly Gothic reading of *Bleak House*.



This understanding of Dickens's project as essentially uncanny gives us a space to think of *Bleak House* as co-existing in both Gothic and Realist modes. The Gothic is notoriously elusive to define. Newsom's assertion that "romantic" and "familiar" are traits that do not exist in the objects themselves undermines that argument that the Gothic is centered on charged tropes (as posited by Eve Sedgwick, say). Similarly, his assertion that the quality of the familiar was kept "intensely alive for [Dickens's] audience," works against the notion that the Gothic is a mode, requiring a similar state or style of writing throughout a piece (as posited e.g. by Elizabeth Napier or George Haggerty). What I do find useful about Newsom's analysis of Dickens's romantic and familiar project is the idea that, in forcing us to experience the uncanny, the space in which *Bleak House* can be read as Gothic opens up as an experience of the reader, made uncomfortable by the presence of two incompatible valences. This argument of Newsom's, that Gothic uncanniness is produced by the simultaneous recognition of two mutually exclusive ideas, will become intensely important in the next section, where it will structurally mirror the characters' and readers' experience of Skimpole's multiplicity of roles and lead to the conclusion posited at the beginning: Skimpole is the key to the novel's Gothicism. Without him, we tend to misread what Dickens sees as the true problems of work. For the time being, however, it is enough to say that the Gothic, through an uncanny chill that runs through the reader, is present in *Bleak House* precisely because Dickens dwells "on the romantic side of familiar things."

That kind of haunted realism, Gothic in feel without literally employing the supernatural, is repeated over and over within the novel. Take, for example, the infamous instance of spontaneous human combustion. In his preface, Dickens goes to great lengths to attempt to justify the scientific rationality of the event: "I have no need to observe that I do not willfully or negligently mislead my readers and that before I wrote that description I took pains to investigate

the subject” (4). He goes on to relate several instances from the historical record that chronicle that event, then ends by saying that he will not make up his mind until more conclusive evidence is discovered. Clearly, Dickens believed in spontaneous human combustion as plausible, at least at the time of the publication of those chapters.

The trouble comes when Dickens actually gives us the combustion of Krook. It comes at the precise moment in the novel when the document that could give an answer to the various parties involved is discovered. Furthermore, Krook, an illiterate, is able to, in that moment, read and decipher the symbols of the previously unreadable letter. In the Gothic tradition of Zeus and Semele, Krook is illuminated to death, filled up with the fires of enlightenment before bursting and burning in the revelation. Essentially, while Dickens goes out of his way to justify spontaneous human combustion as a plausible scientific possibility, he also goes out of his way to make the moment within the novel as weighty and monolithic as possible where its Gothic valence is concerned.

Likewise, when Esther says of the lawyer Vholes: “So slow, so eager, so bloodless and gaunt, I felt as if Richard were wasting away beneath the eyes of this adviser and there were something of the vampire in him” (924), we are meant to understand that Vholes is not literally a vampire, but that he does drain Richard’s life-force. Vholes-as-Vampire is tricky insofar as he does have the capability of draining Richard Carstone’s essence, but does not push the novel into a speculative fiction genre where the reader is forced to accept literal vampires. Essentially, the plausible plot of *Bleak House* as a novel of scientific, psychological, and social realism is buried under a text that is haunted by ghosts, vampires, deadly knowledge, hunters whose instincts are preternaturally enhanced to sniff out crime and corruption, doppelgangers, deposed and decaying patriarchs, revenants, and phantasms; all of it is furthermore crushed, Otranto-like, under the

judgment of a resurrected giant that Dickens calls “Chancery.” The Gothic is what buries the social realist novel *Bleak House* in a tomb of spooks and haunts.

This may account for the head-scratching of so many critics when they encounter Dickens’s passionate defense of the scientific reality of spontaneous human combustion in the preface. How does one parse the fantastical from the realistic—the romantic from the familiar? Ought we call *Bleak House* a piece of speculative fiction or a heavily symbolic work of social and psychological realism? The answer posited here, of course, lies in the unwillingness to define the space between childhood and adulthood—an almost pathological project. It allows for the existence of Harold Skimpole: a figure whose liminality unnerves and repulses readers, and whose obvious ill intent seems to be all but invisible to other characters in the novel who willingly engage in both play and business with him.

*Part II: “Not By the Usual Road of Years, Cares or Experiences”*

When confronting the space between child and adult in *Bleak House*, the novel suffers from an overabundance of examples. Nearly every character has some odd relationship to his or her age: he or she is either prematurely old or eternally young. Esther Summerson is described as “old mother Hubbard.” The Smallweed children are old and bent before their time. Boythorn and Jarndyce have a boyish exuberance. Old Mr. Turveydrop attempts to be a young fop with ridiculous results. Charlie Neckett and Jo are made into parodies of adult responsibility by their social standing. While these first descriptions might be read as the kind of standard descriptive flourishes that could characterize any novel, Dickens pushes the uneasiness and uncanniness of these characters to such an uncomfortable place that it makes all such characterization seem

suspect. While *Middlemarch*'s Dorothea can be described as a blend of youth and age with no Gothic consequences, she does not inhabit a world where pernicious, seemingly immortal children are placed at her side. Perhaps if a Skimpolian figure had haunted *Middlemarch*'s pages, we might come to see her as equally *unheimliche*. This confusion of age seems explicitly tied to people's professions, fates or general social markers, rather than actual physical maturation.

In *Bleak House*, age seems to be a matter of accounting for a narrative of how someone arrived in his or her present state. Though we will treat with Skimpole specifically in later sections, it is useful for us to take Esther's initial impressions of him as a template for Dickens's understanding of a character neither child nor adult. Keep in mind that Skimpole's literal age has already been discussed. Jarndyce informs Esther and company that Skimpole is "at least as old as I am" (87), thereby establishing a lens through which Esther can manage her expectations. Esther informs her readers that he "had more the appearance, in all respects, of a damaged young man, than a well preserved elderly one" (89). The description of him as more closely resembling a damaged young man than a well-preserved elderly one suggests that a person's age is not reflected, for Dickens, in a narrative that describes a progression of years. Skimpole, being generally child-like, does not retain his child-like spirit into old age. Rather, his youth is first and foremost in Esther's mind and the physical reality of his being an adult reads as "damage."

Dickens drives this point home when Esther later informs us that, "It struck me as being not at all like the manner or appearance of a man who had advanced in life, by the usual road of years, cares, and experiences" (89). Here, the "usual road" implies not only a temporal but also a socially constructed path. It is not just the road of "years" but "cares, and experiences" as well. The progression of time is not up for debate in Dickens's novel, but Skimpole seems to find himself outside of it, and so what is prioritized in Esther's account of Skimpole is the usual road

of cares and experiences. If one returns to Pater's description of La Gioconda, which figured into the introduction, it eerily echoes Esther's of Skimpole: given enough unusual experiences, one reads as ageless. La Gioconda is "older on the rocks among which she sits" but she is defined by the variety of life she has experienced, not the years she has attained. (98-99)

In not having taken the normal path into adulthood, Skimpole does not read as an elderly man. His childlike spirit is not a vestige of youth (the look of a well-preserved elderly man); rather his temporal advancement is a wound in his "perfect" child-like spirit (the look of a damaged young man). Essentially, Esther's assessment tells us that physical age has little to do with the way in which someone's age is read. She implies that there is an unusual road of cares and experiences that is more essential than time in determining the way in which childhood and adulthood are read. This seems particularly important to the ways in which *Bleak House* conceptualizes eternal childhood and arrested development. Whereas the eternal child in *Peter and Wendy* was a child who could literally arrest time and remain physically child-like long after he should have outgrown himself, *Bleak House*'s Skimpole (and others, as we shall see) remains child-like by aging naturally in the temporal sense but not progressing down a socially constructed path that differentiates childhood and adulthood.

Here, we depart from Skimpole, specifically, to address some of the other characters that populate the age-anxious pages of *Bleak House*. The most important of these other figures is Esther Summerson, the protagonist of *Bleak House*, narrator of half (some would say all) of the story, and Skimpole's inverse. Whereas Skimpole is a child who is only marked as vaguely adult by his physical age, Esther is an adult whose youth is an accident of her years. Early on, her adulthood (and specifically her elderliness) is marked out for the viewer:

“You are clever enough to be the good little woman of our lives here, my dear,” [Jarndyce] returned, playfully “The little old lady of the Child’s (I don’t mean Skimpole’s) Rhyme.

“Little old woman, and whither so high?—

To sweep the cobwebs out of the sky.

“You will sweep them up so neatly out of *our* sky, in the course of your housekeeping, Esther, that one of these days we shall have to abandon the Growlery and nail up the door.”

This was the beginning of my being called Old Woman, and Little Old Woman, and Cobweb, and Mrs. Shipton, and Mother Hubbard, and Dame Durden, and so many names of that sort that my own name became quite lost among them. (Dickens 121)

Esther’s role as housekeeper, and the associated demeanor (a woman with great attention to detail and desire to “sweep the cobwebs out” literal and figurative), marks her as an elderly woman. Her function at Bleak House determines her age. Furthermore, Esther points out that her elderly nicknames are so ubiquitous that her “own name became quite lost among them.” If function defines form with regard to adulthood in *Bleak House*, then nomenclature is used to solidify the characterization. The name Esther Summerson, with its suggestion of youth, springtime holidays, and summertime dalliances, is lost among the seemingly more accurate characterizations of her as an old woman.

Esther is far from the only character to be referred to in this manner. The disjunction between a character’s age and the age he or she appears to be is made explicit throughout the novel; Hortense, in speaking about dumbstruck Leicester Dedlock, calls him “the poor infant”

(Dickens 837); Caddy Turveydrop's unfortunate child is characterized as "such a tiny old-faced mite, with a countenance that seemed to be scarcely anything but cap-border, and a little, lean, long-fingered hand, always clenched under its chin" (Dickens 768); Prince Turveydrop, though he is of marriageable age, is constantly infantilized: "his little dancing shoes were particularly diminutive, and he had a little, innocent, feminine manner" (Dickens 224). Esther also remarks upon the seeming link between a life of hard living in a child and the effect of age it produces, telling her readers that "It was very odd to see what old letters Charley's young hand made; they, so wrinkled, shriveled and tottering; it, so plump and round" (Dickens 487). In all these cases, our impression of a character's age is mediated through some essential quality of their person. Characters are remade into parodies of the age that reflects their state. The incompetent, innocent Leicester Dedlock is made into an infant. Prince Turveydrop, ever-exuberant and youthful, is made diminutive. Caddy's infant and Charley are rendered old through their lives of hard living.

Halfway through the novel, Dickens brings this general discomfort with youth and age and the inability to tell the one from the other to a head. Dickens gives us a hallucinatory fever dream wherein Esther has a vision of herself at multiple ages:

While I was very ill, the way in which these divisions of time became confused with one another, distressed my mind exceedingly. At once a child, an elder girl and the little woman I had been so happy as, I was not only oppressed by cares and difficulties adapted to each station, but by the great perplexity of endlessly trying to reconcile them. I suppose that few who have not been in such a condition can quite understand what I mean, or what painful unrest arose from this source.

(Dickens 555)

Esther is distressed when she is forced to recognize not only that she can conceive of herself as existing at multiple ages, but also that she must somehow reconcile them into a consistent identity (this is something we will revisit in a later chapter with George Eliot's Janet Dempster). In a novel with more certain markers of age, Esther might simply be able to conceive of herself as existing in a progression from childhood through the space between and into adulthood, with a different set of cares and difficulties at each stage. In the world of *Bleak House*, however, where age is an uncertain idea that is predicated on the unusual progression of an individual network of experiences, Esther cannot be secure in the belief that she is not multiple ages and that her duties from various ages do not disagreeably intersect. Even within the description of distinct ages, she cannot seem to keep anything straight. She refers to herself as an "elder child" in what is perhaps a description of late childhood, but even in referring to that stage of life Dickens must employ an oxymoron—an *elder* child—in order to comfortably refer to this liminal state. She also makes reference to the state of her distress as being specific to one who has "been in such a condition as herself." Ostensibly, this condition is smallpox or, perhaps more generally, hallucinatory illness of any kind. But one might also read the state as being one where multiple ages seem to apply. She insists that the discomfort is only understandable to a select few, yet she lives in a world where so many of the people around her seem to suffer from this same lack of categorizability. The enmeshing of responsibilities from different ages is a pretty standard problem in the novel.

Essentially, Dickens treats this ill-defined stage of life as a state of "confusion," both in the sense that it is bewildering (as with Esther's hallucinatory anxiety) and in the older sense of *con-fusion*, a "mixture in which the distinction of the elements is lost by fusion, blending, or intimate intermingling."<sup>9</sup> Esther is not only bewildered by her indistinct age, she also identifies it

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<sup>9</sup> "confusion, n.". OED Online. December 2012. Oxford University Press. 17 December 2012 <<http://oed.com/view/Entry/39014?redirectedFrom=confusion&>>.



as a mixture of various stages of life, each with their own responsibilities and distinct elements, whose reconciliation is both a source of anxiety and (in the context of the hallucination) a necessity. The shadowy path between child and adult, characterized by confusion, is the “great perplexity” that afflicts Jo and Charley as much as it afflicts Richard, Sir Leicester and Esther herself. The characters of the novel are baffled by their inability to read the definite ages of others and, in some cases, the inability to understand their own ages. Dickens seems to be employing this bafflement with a kind of wry confidence, however, giving us only a single figure who is untroubled by his *con-fused* age. This figure (and the economy and philosophy he embodies) does not seem burdened with the “painful unrest” of reconciling the responsibilities of different ages. He is the novel’s Gothic villain, Harold Skimpole. It is to him that we must return.

Addressing Skimpole directly is a task that, as previously stated, few critics seem interested in tackling. It is not necessarily an enviable task. He is the most mercurial of these *con-fused*, blended figures. Before we even meet him, we are given a description that attempts to lay out the uncategorizable nature of his person. Moments before his introduction, Jarndyce tells an anxious Ada that he is not “literally a child [...] not a child in years. He is grown up—at least as old as I am—but in simplicity, and freshness, and enthusiasm, and a fine guileless inaptitude for all worldly affairs, he is a perfect child” (87). The formal move here is subtle. To be “literally a child” is not to be “a perfect child.” Being a perfect child is, instead, a function of “simplicity [...] freshness [...] enthusiasm [and...] guileless ineptitude.” The formal gulf that Jarndyce opens here, between literal children and perfect children, is the space in which eternal childhood can exist, and it is the space that Skimpole can exploit.

This space is predicated, according to Dickens, on the adult desire for restorative contact with children. We have spoken, in the previous chapter, about the desire to keep children child-

like and the importance of the perceived ability of children to retroactively purify adults. Claudia Nelson says, “the man who forms loving bonds with children is establishing for himself an emotional life centered on innocence, purifying his own existence retroactively” (80). Jarndyce clearly ascribes to this line of thinking, seeking to have his bachelor’s life purified by the presence of a child, fished from among his friends, as one was not provided to him through family.

The strange twist here in *Bleak House* is that Jarndyce seems to believe that it is not the essential innocence of the child that helps keep one youthful and pure. It is not some ineffable, auric quality of their innocence *qua* innocence. Rather, it is a childlike perspective, unburdened by the mutable nature of physical childhood, that Skimpole possesses. The uncanny *con-fusion* of the two ideas, like the simultaneously romantic and familiar tone of the novel, gives the reader no clear-cut way to negotiate Skimpole. He cannot be a child in an adult’s body or an adult masquerading as a child—neither definition fully satisfies the role and the description. All that is left is an uneasy acceptance of a physical adult who possesses a child’s perfect nature. Jarndyce accepts that Skimpole is a “perfect” and not a “literal” child, whose time on the planet qualifies him as an adult. Jarndyce also seems to tacitly recognize that the innocence produced by ignorance (which an old but stunted eternal child like Peter Pan possesses) is also not completely applicable. After all, Skimpole, though he does not have the taint of money in his character, is not pure in the traditional Victorian sense of the word; he is married with close to a dozen children. Sexual purity is not a claim he can make. His status as child is a confusion produced not by an intrinsic quality, but by a series of stances: an attitude.

The clarification of the “perfect” versus “literal” child is preceded by the statement that “there’s no one here but the finest creature upon the earth—a child” (87). Jarndyce is later prone

to “pat[ting] him on the head; as though he had been a real child” (93). The confusion is not merely a matter of semantics. Jarndyce, in patting Skimpole on the head, and indulging his apparent ignorance, does think of Skimpole as a child. While the reader might recoil from Skimpole, Dickens makes it clear that Skimpole is capable of being a “perfect child” for some. Jarndyce seems to participate just as actively in Skimpole’s distended childhood as Skimpole himself does. In professing him a child and treating him as such, Jarndyce takes part in the fantasy that others are eventually drawn into. It is only after Esther has spent her savings to relieve Skimpole’s debt that Jarndyce warns her and her companions against further financial transactions with his houseguest. Jarndyce explains that Skimpole only needs “a habitable doll’s house with good board and a few tin people to get into debt with and borrow money of” (102). Jarndyce’s warning about Skimpole is dire. He worries that Esther, Richard, and Ada will be drawn into financial ruin through contact with him. But he also couches the malice that Skimpole bears towards others in explicitly child-like terms. Skimpole is not a master manipulator, wheedling money out of people to fill his coffers; he is a child who needs a “doll house” and “tin people to get into debt with and borrow money of.” It seems that, even when Jarndyce doubts Skimpole’s positive effect on others, he never doubts that Skimpole is a child.

The closest we get to a straightforward explanation of the root cause of Skimpole’s ability to remain a child is Jarndyce’s answer to the question, posed by Ada, late in the novel:

“What made him such a child?” inquired my guardian, rubbing his head, a little at a loss.

“Yes, cousin John.”

“Why,” he slowly replied, roughening his head more and more, “he is all sentiment, and—and susceptibility, and—and sensibility—and—and imagination.

And these qualities are not regulated in him, somehow. I suppose the people who admired him for them in his youth, attached too much importance to them, and too little to any training that would have balanced and adjusted them; and so he became what he is.” (670-671)

It should be noted that Jarndyce is confused by the terms of the question. If Skimpole is a perfect child, then he must have always been so, even as he aged out of being a literal child. When pressed on the issue, we see that not only does Jarndyce seem to stammer, unable to account for Skimpole’s passage into adulthood (it was “not by the usual road of years, cares and experiences” after all), but also the explanation does not actually describe the feelings that Jarndyce seems to have for Skimpole-as-child. What Jarndyce describes is a failure to mature, a man who, like Peter Pan, is caught in arrested development, too obsessed with the fetching qualities of his youth and, thereby, unable to reevaluate his character as a grown man. Jarndyce’s account describes a tragic figure, out of humoral balance and unable to self-correct. This account does not seem to hold with Jarndyce’s previous assertion that Skimpole is a perfect child; after all, a perfect child would not be thought of as imbalanced. Furthermore, those very qualities that Jarndyce asserts, in this explanation, to be over-emphasized in Skimpole (sentiment, susceptibility, sensibility, imagination) are the very qualities that Jarndyce delights in and desires to have restored in himself.

Skimpole’s own account of how he went from being a literal child to a perfect one is no less vague, though it paints an image of Skimpole that is strangely complementary to Jarndyce’s:

Mr. Skimpole had been educated for the medical profession, and had once lived, in his professional capacity, in the household of a German prince [...] as he had always been a child in point of weights and measures, and had never known

anything about them (except that they disgusted him), he had never been able to prescribe with requisite accuracy of detail. In fact, he said, he had no head for detail. [...] When he wanted to bleed the prince, or physic any of his people, he was generally found lying on his back in bed, reading the newspapers, or making fancy-sketches in pencil, and couldn't come. (89-90)

Skimpole's own account of his child-like nature is predicated on a separate set of terms from Jarndyce. As opposed to Jarndyce's account, which emphasizes how Skimpole had an over-abundance of childhood, Skimpole seems to think that he did not have enough of a "head for detail." In essence, Skimpole says that he did not have enough adult in him to become an adult, as opposed to Jarndyce who, when pressed, insists he had too much child. Jarndyce suggests a man out of humoral balance, filled with unregulated sentiment and imagination, while Skimpole suggests that his attempts to be an adult go awry because he cannot, in a responsible, adult manner, make the requisite prescriptions for the prince's bleeding.<sup>10</sup> Skimpole's laxity in treating the ailments of the prince also seem to stem from very childish pursuits, being too busy reading or "making fancy-sketches in pencil." Essentially, the gap between Jarndyce and Skimpole's accounts of Skimpole's perfect childishness mirror Esther's initial confusion with regard to Skimpole's age; either he is "a damaged young man" (a child unable to become an adult because adulthood is not a skill he has learned) or he is a "well-preserved elderly one" (a man who has an over-abundance of child-like qualities).

This must be noted because it places Esther in a similar position to the reader, unable to neatly understand what precisely Skimpole is. If he is a stunted man with a childish demeanor, he is an object of pity. If he is a cold and calculating impostor, he is a monster that deserves no

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<sup>10</sup> Also note that while Jarndyce attempts to name Skimpole a man out of humoral balance, Skimpole's attempts at adulthood put others out of humoral balance.

sympathy. If we believe the former, we cannot hate him for his mistreatment of Richard. If we believe the latter, then we must accept Jarndyce as foolish or complicit when we give Skimpole the blame. The answer must be more complicated to both properly hate Skimpole and exonerate Jarndyce (which Esther seems to want the reader to do). The only useful option that does not contradict these emotional relationships is to see Skimpole as something else entirely. This seems to confuse both readers and characters. It is so marked that even the ways to properly, grammatically express Skimpole start to fail. Jarndyce, in an early defense of Skimpole, states:

‘When you come to think of it, it’s the height of childishness in you—I mean me—’ said Mr. Jarndyce, ‘to regard him, for a moment, as a man You can’t make *him* responsible. The idea of Harold Skimpole with designs, or plans, or knowledge of consequences! Ha, ha, ha!’

It was so delicious to see the clouds about his bright face clearing, and to see him so heartily pleased, and to know, as it was impossible not to know, that the source of his pleasure was the goodness that was tortured by condemning, or mistrusting, or secretly accusing anyone, that I saw tears in Ada’s eyes while she echoed his laugh, and I felt them in my own. (101)

The labyrinthine prose that Dickens inserts here is worthy of the “confusion” evoked by Skimpole; for Jarndyce to think of the adult Skimpole as anything but a child is, itself, “the height of childishness.” What it means to be a child gets confused in Jarndyce’s speech here. The “height of childishness” is to have expectations of Skimpole, who is an adult and yet behaves as a child. Childishness is used as a deficiency when it refers to Jarndyce’s own bad assumption, but as a quality in Skimpole it is the highest compliment and the most sacred of qualities. Even more confusing, Jarndyce seems to be confused as to where this negative connotation of

childishness ought to be placed. He must correct himself, removing childishness from a hypothetical adult (“you”) onto a specific example (“I mean, me”) for fear that Ada misread the statement as an insult directed at her. Jarndyce, in trying to parse what it means to be a child acting as an adult or an adult acting as a child, ends up confusing the two and being unable to properly identify to whom he is speaking. The only way out of the linguistic puzzle is to deflect by laughing. Esther reacts, not to Jarndyce’s logic *vis-à-vis* Skimpole, but to his emotional response, his affable nature, which demands that people remain unjudged and taken on the merits they have. Confusion is inherent in Skimpole’s natural state of being.

From the previous section, we have learned that *Bleak House* is a novel in which people’s ages are difficult to read, or in which people’s ages are misread, and in that context, Skimpole himself may seem to be merely one of many characters that do not neatly fit the category of child or adult. He might just be one more eternal child masquerading among the throng. Significant, however, is Skimpole’s conscious attempt to keep himself young. While Esther cannot determine his age in initial descriptions, most of Skimpole’s youth comes from his repeated mantra that he is “but a child.” Skimpole constantly reminds the people around him of his child-like nature. Again, in a novel where everyone seems to be unnaturally young or prematurely aged, this may read as unremarkable, but Dickens goes out of his way to provide us a counter-example to Skimpole in the form of Old Mr. Turveydrop. Upon first seeing him, Esther remarks, “he was a fat old gentleman with a false complexion, false teeth, false whiskers, and a wig [...] he was pinched in, and swelled out, and got up, and strapped down as much as he could possibly bear. [...] puffing his very eyes out of their natural shape” (225). Like Skimpole, Old Mr. Turveydrop attempts to mimic youth, and the result is comically grotesque. Mr. Turveydrop’s portly, aged

body is literally unable to be contained in the youthful guise he has fashioned for himself.

Meanwhile, Skimpole seems to rest naturally in his guise as a “perfect child.”

If anything, Skimpole, though his guise is child-like youth and naïveté, is more like the other great mimic of the novel, Inspector Bucket. In an early description of Bucket’s manner, Dickens notes:

Now and then, when they pass a police-constable on his beat, Mr. Snagsby notices that both the constable and his guide fall into a deep abstraction as they come towards each other, and appear entirely to overlook each other, and to gaze into space. (357)

While the paragraph generally illustrates Dickens’s fascination with the police detectives and their chameleon-like ability to be anywhere and everywhere, the description itself seems to mirror reactions to Skimpole. The closer one comes to him, the more one falls “into a deep abstraction,” perceiving him as a “perfect” child and ignoring the lack of “literal child” signifiers (which look so ridiculous on Old Mr. Turveydrop). As a result, one “entirely overlooks” Skimpole the man, and sees instead only the child-like chameleon, whose age confusion is abstracting and whose description as a child defies linguistic logic. If Peter Pan is trapped in eternal childhood by clear physical and emotional boundaries that cannot be overcome, Harold Skimpole thrives in it by never defining his own edges or allowing those who perceive him to have a steady grasp on exactly what he is.

### *Part III: Skimpole as Vampire, Villain, and Hero*

Skimpole is not only an eternal child. He is a Gothic villain as well. His ability to remain convincingly childlike in the eyes of his benefactors is not merely a survival strategy; it is a way



to gain the upper hand, entrap his fellows, and dominate his would-be detractors. In the last chapter we discussed Barrie's vision of what it means to be neither child nor adult: a state of eternal, irresponsible *joie de vivre* that does not so much stave off adulthood as prohibit it. Peter must be the tragic, Gothic "heroine" of the novella because he cannot rise to the heroic position of adulthood. In the context of the Gothic, Dickens treats unending childhood as a sinister formal move rather than an impediment to character development. Most readers come away remembering that Esther saw through Skimpole's impersonation of youth. However, on first meeting Skimpole, Esther informs her readers that he "had more the appearance, in all respects, of a damaged young man, than a well preserved elderly one" (89). Thus, though we are told by Jarndyce to keep in mind Skimpole's commensurate age, Esther herself must, in order to account for his appearance, leap to a narrative of violence or wear (being a damaged young man, not a well-preserved elderly one). As Esther continues to observe his seemingly bohemian nonchalance and "easy negligence" (89) she comes to a conclusion about his age which suggests unnatural interference, saying, "It struck me as being not at all like the manner or appearance of a man who had advanced in life, by the usual road of years, cares, and experiences" (89).

This account of Skimpole as having not taken the "usual road of years," is at the heart of my Gothic reading of both *Bleak House* and the shadowy space between childhood and adulthood generally. Skimpole fits into a long trajectory of Gothic villains whose advanced age is obscured by some internal quality that makes the perception of that age read rather differently (this phenomenon is discussed fully in the introduction). In *The Romance of the Forest*, Radcliffe's reader must keep in mind that the Marquis is about forty, just as the reader of *Bleak House* is told that Skimpole is of an age with Jarndyce. But in both cases, the assumption of the age is made complicated by a less solid statement about what his age might be. It is not that the

impression of time has not worn on the Marquis de Montalt, but that, in some way, the effect is lessened by his internal spirit. Similarly, though Skimpole appears in *some* manor aged, Esther cannot parse properly if he is a “well-preserved elderly” man or a “damaged young man.” This kind of inability to properly perceive the age of a Gothic villain will become more literal in *fin-de-siecle* Gothic novels. We’ve spoken about Dorian Gray’s preternatural appearance of youth through the device of his magical portrait, but let us not forget that Bram Stoker gives us an initial description of Dracula as “a tall old man, clean shaven save for a long white moustache, and clad in black from head to foot, without a single speck of colour about him anywhere.” This elderly Dracula is made youthful, dark haired and handsome after drinking the blood of the crew of the *Persephone*, and thus he is able to seduce Lucy and Mina. To put it simply, Esther says, late in the novel:

The helpless kind of candour with which he presented this before us, the light hearted manner in which he was amused by his innocence, the fantastic way in which he took himself under his own protection and argued about that curious person, combined with the delightful ease of everything he said exactly to make out my guardian's case. The more I saw of him, the more unlikely it seemed to me, when he was present, that he could design, conceal, or influence anything; and yet the less likely that appeared when he was not present, and the less agreeable it was to think of his having anything to do with any one for whom I cared. (675-676)

As we saw in the previous section, Skimpole’s child-like manner, his “helpless candour” and “innocence,” is a quality stemming from an in-person performance. Juliet John argues, “it is Skimpole’s manner that is captivating [... His performative artifice] is so powerful that the

reaction he stimulates [...] is best described as an unwilling, rather than a willing, suspension of disbelief” (159). Just as the audience recognizes that the disjunctively youthful appearance of Radcliffe’s Marquis de Montalt is a sign of his perfidy, so too does Esther recognize that Skimpole’s intentions are bad; his presentation of child-like innocence precludes her from properly understanding his villainy when she is in his presence.

This seems to go back to the obfuscatory power ascribed to Bucket in the previous section. Skimpole can abstract his person and thereby present himself as a “perfect child” when he is present, but the siren-call of his repeated mantra does not hold water when one is not around to be ensorcelled by it. He is disagreeable only *in absentia*, which is not enough to help poor Richard.

Comparing Skimpole and Dracula is not overstatement. The vampiric qualities of the infamous Count are present in Skimpole. Though Skimpole neither drinks blood nor sleeps in a coffin, he has a vampiric relationship with youth, feeding off of the charity intended for children. Dracula may drink blood to stave off the ravages of age, but Skimpole feeds on the power of youth, not only avoiding the adult world of fiscal and moral responsibility, but also trampling upon the futures of the children with whom he comes in contact. *Bleak House* is, after all, a novel in which children are threatened when placed in an adult context. Skimpole’s masquerade as a child is not simply an attempt to receive undue charity, but instead an inherently threatening attempt to push actual children out of the nest. Dickens manages to tease out a kind of supernatural, uncanny, or even Gothic valence to Skimpole’s youthful demeanor and appearance. Skimpole, more than being an inept adult who wishes to be viewed as a child, is a complicated figure of indeterminate age that appears to have, more than merely a child-like irresponsibility, a

perverse desire to supplant the actual children in his vicinity in order to remain the sole beneficiary of youthful bounty.

We get an early taste of this when Skimpole's debt collector, Neckett, dies. Skimpole is heartlessly amused, joking not only about Neckett being taken "by the great bailiff in the sky" (242) but also about the fact that life will be difficult for his three orphaned children, given the unpopularity of their father's profession. Cruel levity and *schadenfreude*, even where children are involved, is one thing, but Skimpole's desire to be rid of actual children crosses further bounds of good taste later in the novel.

When the orphan crossing-sweep, Jo, comes to Bleak House, sick with smallpox, it is Skimpole who discloses his location to Inspector Bucket. When Bucket later reveals this (long after Jo has perished of smallpox), Esther regards Skimpole's action as "very treacherous on the part of Mr. Skimpole towards my guardian, and as passing the usual bonds of childish innocence" (875). Though Esther already perceives Skimpole as capable of villainy at this late stage in the novel (and long after the harm to Jo has already been done), Bucket lays out the precise problem with attacking Skimpole: "Bounds, my dear? [...] Whenever a person proclaims to you 'In worldly matters, I'm a child,' you consider that that person is only a crying off from being held accountable, and that you have got that person's number and it's Number One" (875). Bucket's assessment is a simple one: while one can easily trace culpability back to Skimpole, he is "just a crying off" from blame. The leniency shown to children for their broken promises is not commensurate with their self-interest. While Bucket admits that Skimpole is essentially self-interested, he is also beyond reproach, because the self-interest of children is forgivable.

A child who is cruel to another child is naughty. For Skimpole to imperil Jo or to take delight in Charlie Neckett's suffering is not above reproach, but it is assuredly beyond

condemnation. Juliet John argues, as part of a larger chapter on Skimpole-as-dandy, that, “Whereas society prima donnas like Lady Dedlock are shown to be distorted by the effort of repressing passion [...] Skimpole is portrayed as free from such struggles. This apparent absence of interior struggle functions as a sign of his monstrosity” (159). I would argue that it also functions as a sign of his cruelly childish nature—and that’s the point. Peter Pan was described in the previous chapter as “gay, innocent and heartless,” as though the three terms are necessarily linked. The uncomfortable truth that both Barrie and Dickens seem to want us to see is that children are monstrous—that their monstrosity comes from the selfish wonder and discovery that we praise them for. What reads as acceptably boyish in Peter Pan is transmuted in Skimpole into something utterly discomfiting.

Though Skimpole’s interior innocence is questionable (as we will see in the next section), his gay heartlessness is intrinsically, perfectly child-like. Esther sees children as bounded in their innocence and essentially good. Bucket, in questioning her terms, cuts to the heart of it: the selfishness of children is potentially unlimited because the ability to forgive children their selfishness is unlimited.

The clearest object-lesson in Skimpole’s vampiric cruelty and desire to supplant other children takes over much of the latter half of the novel and revolves around his relationship with Richard Carstone. It has been suggested that the relationship between Skimpole and Richard is one of pedagogue and protégé.<sup>11</sup> Skimpole, an old hand at receiving the generosity of others, serves as a model, and at times, an active guide for young Richard who hopes, through the settlement of the Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit, to gain a fortune unearned.

Indeed, the fear that Richard will become Skimpolian in his attitude towards money is a fear constantly voiced by Esther and Ada and dismissed just as constantly by Jarndyce:

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<sup>11</sup> As in Richard Altick’s “Harold Skimpole Revisited.”

I took one of these opportunities of mentioning my doubts of Mr. Skimpole as a good adviser for Richard.

“Adviser?” returned, my guardian, laughing, “My dear, who would advise with Skimpole?”

“Encourager would perhaps have been a better word,” said I.

“Encourager,” returned my guardian, “who could be encouraged by Skimpole?”

“Not Richard?” I asked.

“No.” he replied, “Such an unworldly, uncalculating, gossamer creature, is a relief to him, and an amusement. But as to advising or encouraging, or occupying a serious station towards anybody or anything, it is simply not to be thought of in such a child as Skimpole.” (670-671)

One of the most striking things about this paragraph is the description of Skimpole as an “unworldly, [...] gossamer creature.” Given the fairy descriptions of Peter Pan, there may be something to be said for the link between the fey and the eternal child: a beautiful, reverence-worthy cruelty.

Moreover, the leniency granted Skimpole as the result of his childishness also applies to the incredulity of Jarndyce in processing the fact that Richard has fallen under Skimpole’s influence. That incredulity, in part, seems to stem from Jarndyce’s inability to perceive Richard as a juvenescent. It should be noted again that children in the Victorian consensus are not merely free from financial woes, but free from carnal knowledge. While Richard is “but a child” in his desire to profit from Jarndyce and Jarndyce without seeking gainful employment, he is very much an adult in his desire to marry Ada Clare. Jarndyce takes issue with Richard’s marriage

before financial stability and, as a result, reads him, not as a “perfect child,” but as an imperfect adult whose shucking of responsibility is not “a crying off from blame.” Richard’s sexuality removes his being perceived as child-like and, as a result, taking Skimpole’s advice or being encouraged by him is as ludicrous to Jarndyce as any adult taking the ramblings of children seriously.

The matter of Skimpole’s malicious tutelage, however, is one that goes beyond Jarndyce’s inability to read Richard as similarly between two recognizable stages of life. Rather than training Richard as his protégé in career begging, Skimpole is setting him up for failure, thereby disposing of a possible rival. As the only other dependant male at Bleak House—and a relative of Jarndyce besides—Richard, with his similar ineptitude for various forms of work, is on his way to becoming a second Skimpole. The tin friend in the dollhouse has become another player, and Jarndyce’s generosity can only stretch so far.

Dickens places a clever excuse in the middle of the plot to depose Richard Cartson. In describing how Richard came to be acquainted with the aforementioned vampiric lawyer, Mr. Vholes, Skimpole gives the following narrative:

“Vholes asked me for the introduction, and I gave it. Now I come to think of it,” he looked inquiringly at us with his frankest smile as he made the discovery, “Vholes bribed me, perhaps? He gave me something and called it commission. Was it a five-pound note? You know, I think it must have been a five-pound note!” (605)

The unctuous, faux-disbelieving tone with which Skimpole reveals that he was bribed to introduce Vholes to Richard likely elicits an eye-roll from the reader who has already guessed that Skimpole’s repeated mantra (“I’m but a child!”) is feigned ignorance. In fact, much of the

public loathing of Skimpole might be traced back to the way in which his play for the benefits of adult attention seems to fool the characters but rarely the reader. If Skimpole is just a mimic of youth, the reader comes away thinking that Jarndyce and Richard are saps for believing him. That is why there is need to play him as a Gothic villain with motives other than petty cash. The subtlety of the con is that the end-goal is not the five-pound note. The scheme to give five pounds for selling out a friend smacks of naughty childishness, rather than careful manipulation. For Esther and Ada to believe (alongside the reader) that the calculating Skimpole would think so lightly of Richard as to trade him for a five-pound note is the ultimate reinforcement of the idea that Skimpole is, in fact, a child. Naughty children are capable of short-term schemes and selfishness, and to believe that the bribe was the motivating force is to deem him worthy of petty, childish scheming. The reader, at the moment they believe they have figured Skimpole out, is, in fact, coming to agree with Jarndyce, rather than Esther, in believing Skimpole capable of only the most obvious kind of deception.

The proof of this seems to be in Jarndyce's response to Esther's communication of Skimpole's plot. When faced with Skimpole's acceptance of the bribe, Jarndyce is said to express "a passing shade of vexation" before exclaiming "But there you have the man! [...] If he had meant any harm by it [...] he wouldn't tell it. He tells it as he does in mere simplicity" (671-672). Though Jarndyce remains Skimpole's most ardent apologist, we might read, in his "vexation," some flickering doubt in the good intentions of his friend. Nonetheless he is utterly drawn in, not only by his belief in Skimpole's innocence, but also by the focus on the transfer of five pounds. The vexation, though ultimately dismissed, only seems to address Skimpole's acceptance of another man's bribe. Skimpole refers to the bribe as a "commission," which might be read as a sin of omission; the fault, however, lies with Vholes who offered the bribe and not



with Skimpole who accepted it. In having characters puzzle through the possible intentionality of this exchange, offered up for debate by Skimpole himself, they miss the more sinister intention: Skimpole gains little from the five pound bribe, but much in moving blame for Richard's wasting illness and eventual death onto Vholes.

Vholes makes a far better Gothic figure than Skimpole, at least if we think of the Gothic as a set of purely visual identifying tropes. Literally referred to as a "vampire," he is first described as:

a sallow man with pinched lips that looked as if they were cold, a red eruption here and there upon his face, tall and thin, about fifty years of age, high shouldered and stooping. Dressed in black, black gloved and buttoned to the chin, there was nothing so remarkable in him as a lifeless manner, and a slow, fixed way he had of looking at Richard. (606)

He is repeatedly described as "bloodless" as well as "lifeless" and, when he and Richard depart, Dickens drives the point home with a description of the young, vibrant Richard being watched by Vholes "as if he were looking at his prey and charming it" while the two are led in away in a carriage drawn by "a gaunt, pale horse" (608). Vholes is almost comically over-determined as a deathly, corpse-like figure who is heralded by a pale horse and always stands in stark opposition to Richard, who is described as "all flush and fire with laughter," even as he is led away to his eventual death (608). When compared with the alternately foppish and Byronic descriptions of Skimpole, Vholes, the walking corpse, is much more suspect. Readers and critics dislike Skimpole, but they buy into his innocence just enough to see him as an ineffectual annoyance, playing into the much more dire schemes of Vholes.

This vision of the gaunt, lifeless Vholes, whom Esther sees as a vampire, standing over the ailing Richard, is one that Dickens seems to soften from the start, even as he reinforces it. Vholes himself is quick to point out: “with my three daughters, Emma, Jane and Caroline—and with my aged father, I cannot afford to be selfish” (607). Indeed, most of the chapter “Attorney and Client” (which paints the most intimate picture of Vholes in the novel) is spent reiterating how his predatory practice is set up to provide for his dependents. Dickens succinctly puts it this way: “Make man-eating unlawful, and you starve the Vholeses” (623). Esther may rankle at the manner in which Vholes makes his money, but Dickens encourages his readers to remember that Vholes is, first and foremost, a family man with children to support and an aging father to attend to. Even more suspect, we are told that Vholes’s “digestion is impaired” (621). So, while he is a vampire, he is also, in some capacity, unable to perform the basic function of a vampire, i.e. to feed off of the blood of the living. This digestion problem (never specified) is always deemed “respectable” and perhaps it may refer to the sympathetic, charitable nature of his vampirism. Vholes is a vampire and a “cannibal-chieftan” but his blood sucking and man eating are done by proxy, on behalf of his family.

The term “by proxy” is useful to us here. Skimpole is not the beneficiary of Vholes’s legal fees, but he is the beneficiary, by proxy, of Vholes’s vampirism. After all, Dickens is painstakingly clear to point out that Vholes does not receive any benefit from Richard’s death—quite the opposite. Richard’s money is life-sustaining for the Vholeses in a way that his health and life are not. Skimpole, however, as the only beneficiary of Jarndyce’s charity and generosity, no longer has to split his friend’s attention with Richard. It is Skimpole who maintains his youth as a result of imperiling children and other potential beneficiaries of goodwill towards children. However, in providing such an obvious target for his readers’ anxiety in Vholes, Dickens makes

Skimpole a Gothic villain by proxy. Richard stands in for the tragic, Gothic heroine, trapped in the tower and wasting away. Skimpole still benefits from feeding off of Richard's life force and Wholes, who is physically described as a reanimated corpse, shoulders the weight of the reader's judgment and nervousness. Wholes is the dangerous man and Skimpole, though he may be judged harshly, remains a naughty, vampiric child.

We shall end our discussion of Skimpole's interference with Richard Carstone with a strange discrepancy that lays bare Dickens's interest in showing Richard's ineptitude at successfully becoming Skimpole. Standing at Richard's deathbed, Esther tearfully tells the reader: "I cannot use the expression that he looked old. There is a ruin of youth which is not like age; and into such a ruin, Richard's youth and youthful beauty had all fallen away" (926). This is that self-same Esther who proclaimed that she had no idea if Skimpole was a "damaged young man" or a "well-preserved elderly one." Here, when Skimpole's plot to dispose of Richard Carstone has come to dark fruition, Esther confidently asserts that she knows the difference between young and old: that the ruin of youth looks nothing like age. Richard is ruined, drained of all his life force, and "into such a ruin [all his] youth and beauty had fallen away." Meanwhile, Skimpole remains oddly ageless. The true test of his vampirism is his ability to not fall into either the ruin of youth or the mercies of an easily-lived old age. Precisely the quality that Skimpole exhibits is the one that Richard no longer can. Richard dies, definitively, young and damaged. Skimpole lives, indefinite, without a clear sign of how old he is and how he came to be that age.

If there is one way in which Gothic villainy and eternal childhood seem to conflict, it is on the matter of sex. After all, ensorcelling and entrapping the maiden in the tower seems to be the chief activity of Gothic villains and, as we learned in the previous chapter, one of the

benchmarks of eternal childhood seems to be a lack of sexual interest. Even in this chapter, we have spoken at length about how the inappropriateness of the Gothic villain as a suitor stems from his potential impotence mixed with his superficial desirability (or at least the illusion of it). If Dorian Gray weren't a sexual threat to the purity of Lord Henry's daughter or Sibyl Vane, if Dracula weren't a sexual threat to the purity of Mina Harker or Lucy Westenra, if the Marquis de Montalt weren't a sexual threat to the purity of Adelaide, there would be no plot foil. And thus far, we have treated Skimpole as an asexual creature. Not just that, we have said that it is his asexuality coupled with his inability to work (and therefore provide for a family) that makes him a child. It is his own repeated mantra: "I am but a child." I suggest that Jarndyce cannot similarly view Richard as anything but an adult, precisely because of Richard's sexual interest in Ada and his desire to start a family with her.

Skimpole, of course, does have a family: a wife and close to a dozen children. In conceptualizing him as both eternal child and as Gothic villain, we must reconcile this family to Skimpole's façade of asexual innocence. Of interest here is not only the ways in which Skimpole's family still fits a vision of eternal childhood, but also the ways in which his status as a patriarch repurposes some of the Skimpole-as-Hunt criticism to comment both on the Gothic nature of *Bleak House* and the Gothicness of that which is between child and adult in the novel. Earlier, we discussed Skimpole as a vampire-by-proxy. Here, we will take that idea further in discussing Skimpole's patriarchal possibilities as being directly connected to a kind of ghostliness that resonates with his age "confusion" and positions him rather nicely to be the driving, villainous force behind Esther Summerson's disastrous engagement to John Jarndyce.

The discrepancy between Skimpole the perfect child and Skimpole the patriarch is apparent to numerous characters. They seem to forget that he has a family almost as often as the

reader does, even though all are informed of the fact before Skimpole even appears in the novel: ““Did you imply that he has children of his own, sir?” inquired Richard” (88). This assertion that Skimpole has children of his own seems to fascinate his observers far more often than the fact of his marriage. To be clear, his marriage does come up on occasion. More often than not, however, it is comically dismissed, its miseries hinted at rather than explained: “Mr. Skimpole having (as he added with delightful gaiety) ‘nothing to live upon but love, fell in love, and married, and surrounded himself with rosy cheeks’ ”(90). The explanation is so pat, so charmingly, nonchalantly *childish* in its conception of the way in which people fall in love, that it merits no further discussion. It can be totemized as a delightful explanation of love and marriage from the mouth of an innocent babe, confusing the idiom “nothing to live upon but love” with some actual sustenance that might be used to sustain a life. The only other mention of Mrs. Skimpole in the novel comes some six hundred pages later, where we are introduced to her as a woman “who had once been a beauty but was a delicate, high-nosed invalid, suffering under a complication of disorders” (676). Though the ravages of time are apparent in Mrs. Skimpole (“she had *once* been a beauty”), she has not stepped into the adult role of caretaker, as one might expect of Harold Skimpole’s partner. Dickens is quite clear on the fact that Mrs. Skimpole bemoans her lot in life: “Mrs. Skimpole sighed [...] she impressed her sigh upon my guardian and [...] took every opportunity of throwing in another” (676). Her frustration and, perhaps, even her despair at her husband’s lifestyle is apparent, but she cannot take care of herself (being an invalid); she can only pointedly hint at Jarndyce that he is somehow the enabler of all this. She may be the most self-aware member of the Skimpole clan, but she is still every bit a child, being an invalid given over to sighing and unable to care for herself.

With Skimpole's actual children, we come to some of the more direct discourse on the nature of juvenescence and its dangers. As we previously discussed in Part II, Skimpole is not the only example of age discrepancy in *Bleak House*. However, where Skimpole is most certainly an eternal child, most of the other figures seem to be children that have grown old before their time (e.g. Charley Neckett's old handwriting, Esther Jellby's wizened face). Dickens attributes this premature age to a kind of social failing. Malcolm Andrews observes of Dickens that "children, in whom childhood has not 'naturally ripened' but in whom maturity is forced are deprived of [...] the proper cultivation of childhood," and goes on to insist that "such deprivation produces deformed adults" (Andrews 84). The problem with this reading is that Skimpole's children, as we shall see, are not deformed adults. Dickens makes specific mention in *Bleak House* of how Skimpole's children differ from those children abandoned by the system and forced to mature unnaturally. It is especially clear in this exchange between Richard and Jarndyce:

"[Skimpole has] half-a-dozen [children]. More! Nearer a dozen, I should think. But he has never looked after them. How could he? He wanted somebody to look after *him*. He is a child, you know!" said Mr. Jarndyce.

"And have the children looked after themselves at all, sir?" inquired Richard.

"Why, just as you may suppose [...] It is said that the children of the very poor are not brought up, but dragged up. Harold Skimpole's children have tumbled up somehow or other." (89)

Dickens believes that growing up is a supportive process for the middle and upper classes (being "brought" up) and much more inherently violent and unwilling for the poor (being "dragged" up). Skimpole's children do not fit the paradigm, however. They "tumbled up somehow or

other.” This particular diction seems to imply a more light-hearted process of maturation. If they grew up, they did so through accidental, acrobatic gaiety, rather than being forced into the process before they were ready. This is a novel where children, especially poor children, die violently or are orphaned suddenly, a novel where Dickens again and again makes the point that children, if not properly looked after, will experience tragic deprivations. And yet, for all these dark possibilities, Skimpole’s children find their way, “somehow or other,” tumbling up and landing on their feet.

When we actually meet his daughters, Skimpole essentializes them:

“This,” said Mr. Skimpole, “is my Beauty daughter, Arethusa—plays and sings odds and ends like her father. This is my Sentiment daughter, Laura—plays a little but don’t sing. This is my Comedy daughter, Kitty—sings a little but don’t play. We all draw a little, and compose a little, and none of us have any idea of time or money.” (676)

One notes that the qualities he values in his daughters (Beauty, Sentiment, Comedy) map, somewhat, on to the values that Jarndyce accuses Skimpole of having been over-praised for in his youth (sentiment, susceptibility, sensibility, imagination). The truth of the matter is that those qualities, though Skimpole values them, do not appear to actually describe Skimpole’s assessment of each: the Beauty daughter plays and sings, Sentiment plays but doesn’t sing, Comedy sings but does not play. As one might expect, they are all identified by the childish pursuits at which they exceed. Skimpole goes on to say that “it is whimsically interesting, to trace peculiarities in families. In this family we are all children, and I am the youngest” (676). As near as we can tell, that is actually true. Skimpole does seem to have raised a family of children, all of whom tumbled up into, if not adulthood, then their own form of successful, manipulative

eternal childhood. The successful perpetuation of such a lineage goes beyond having sympathetically aligned daughters. Skimpole continues the tale of his family in saying:

Here is my Beauty daughter, married these three years. Now, I dare say her marrying another child, and having two more, was all wrong in point of political economy; but it was very agreeable. We had our little festivities on those occasions, and exchanged social ideas. She brought her young husband home one day, and they and their young fledglings have their nest up-stairs. I daresay, at some time or other, Sentiment and Comedy will bring *their* husbands home, and have *their* nests up-stairs too. So we get on; we don't know how, but somehow.

(677)

While Esther expresses, in the next paragraph, that she pities them, Dickens does not seem to provide much to pity. Skimpole's daughters seem to be utterly content in their confused and blended states of age. Mrs. Skimpole may sigh, but Esther does not express pity towards the long suffering spouse. The scariest thing about the Skimpole clan is not their father's inability to take care of himself, but the fact that the entirety of the line is content to muddle through, never having to take charge. There might have been a tone of despair that Dickens wished to insert into the sentence "so we get on; we don't know how, but somehow," but there appear to be no ill consequences to this kind of living. Jo dies of smallpox. Charley must be taken care of by Esther and Jarndyce, Caddy Jellby must take care of her younger siblings in the absence of their mother, Old Mr. Turveydrop is a burden upon his son, and even Vholes must work a thankless job to provide for his daughters and ailing father, but the Skimpoles *somehow* get on and never seem to suffer for it.



Perhaps this is what rankles Dickens and his readers so much about Skimpole. He and his family get away with being burdensome. Skimpole haunts us because, like the ghosts of the past or the return to a repeated word, there is no escaping his success. If to haunt is simply to recur, then Skimpole recurs again and again in the form of his tumbled up children, all of whom manage to sustain themselves through the charity meant for youth. *Bleak House* is a haunted novel, after all. John Jordan, in his *Supposing Bleak House*, points out that “nearly every chapter features a ghost” and that its spaces are all haunted, after a manner of speaking: be it the ghost walk at Chesney Wold, the dark memories of Bleak House’s growlery, or the invisible specter of disease that infests Tom’s-All-Alone. And when Jordan asks the question: “if *Bleak House* is a ghost story, who are its ghosts?” (124). the answer for Skimpole comes in the form of John Dickens. John Dickens, the father of Charles, passed away just prior to the writing of *Bleak House* and Jordan argues that “Skimpole is [...] a remembrance, in a different key, of [...] John Dickens [...] like John Dickens, Skimpole has a distinctive rhetoric and a childish relation to money” (Jordan 107). One must remember, of course, that it was the spendthrift habits of Dickens’s father that led to the young Charles growing up in debtors’ prison, prematurely taking on a job in a printing factory and, one supposes, resenting the child-like habits of his father that forced him and his siblings into premature adulthood. If Jordan’s assessment of Skimpole-as-John-Dickens is correct, part of the villainy of Skimpole must be the success of his progeny, succeeding in creating more Skimpoles rather than the “deformed adults” that Andrews insists upon.

This assessment may also help to account for the ever-popular, ever-embittered comparison of Skimpole to Leigh Hunt. Hunt, like John Dickens and Skimpole, was a notorious wastrel when it came to money, constantly in debt and indebted to his friends, supported by their

generosity in exchange for remaining a charming and naïve man of letters. The major difference between Leigh Hunt and John Dickens may provide a clue to the intensity of the rancor that Harold Skimpole evokes from readers; that is to say, Hunt was successful in his eternal childhood in a way that John Dickens was not.

In the second section, we discussed Skimpole's *confusion* as being related to that of the Gothic villains of Radcliffe, Walpole and, later, Wilde and Stoker. Here, that comparison plays a pivotal role in understanding more of Skimpole's by-proxy villainy, especially as it relates to the chief activity of Gothic villains, i.e. the capturing and imprisoning of young maidens in the hopes of marrying them. I have previously contended that it is a fear of impotence that makes May-December Gothic couplings so unsettling. Essentially, Gothic villains are closed circuits. In marrying or seducing young women, they break the reproductive cycle, wasting the fertility of an Adeline or a Mina or a Sibyl Vane on an old, impotent, covetous man. Skimpole, though older than he looks and philosophically a child, is not impotent, as we have discovered. One can argue for a kind of impotence in the production of like, burdensome offspring, all of whom are content to sponge off of friends and acquaintances, but I would like to suggest a slightly different trajectory for Skimpole's marriage plot villainy, that is, to link it to John Jarndyce's engagement to Esther Summerson.

This is not to argue that Skimpole literally puts the idea to propose to Esther into Jarndyce's head. The evidence does not exist for some secret Skimpole-Jarndyce conspiracy. But the desire to possess a young woman and not admit to one's own advanced age is particularly Skimpolian in nature—not to mention the typical behavior of a Gothic villain. Jarndyce sees, in Skimpole, not only the possibility of remaining child-like after reaching maturity, but also the possibility of remaining child-like even while being married and producing children.

This engagement has proved problematic for readers and critics alike. It forces a stark divide in opinions about Jarndyce: either he is a kindly benefactor who wants to continue to provide for Esther, or he is a lecherous old man whose feelings transcend the fatherly. While pre-sexuality was the condition of possibility for childhood in *Peter and Wendy*, *Bleak House* makes it clear that a non-relationship with money is what makes a child a child. Jarndyce, scarred by the loss of his brother (and eventually Richard) to the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case, sees in Skimpole, beyond the delights readily available to time spent among children, the solution to the ever-present problem of money. If it is possible to marry, produce children, and lead a life free from deprivation, all while avoiding the corrupting influence of money, then the sad fate of his brother Richard and, indeed, all the purgatorial souls stuck in Chancery needn't be his own.

This is, of course, the chief purview of the Gothic villain: extending unnatural youth, or at least its appearance, by taking a younger consort. If Jarndyce is our villain in this regard, just as Vholes was our vampire, Skimpole still lurks, spectral in the background of the plot. In having Jarndyce marry Esther, Skimpole undermines the role of maturation in his old friend, but he reasserts Esther's role as a youth who is neither child nor adult. After all, as an unmarried woman about to enter into marriage, Esther also lives in that liminal stage of life.

This, in and of itself, presents an interesting conundrum. If Skimpole is hiding in juvenescence to avoid adulthood, Esther appears to be his opposite: hiding in adulthood as "Old Mother Hubbard" while still an unmarried girl who is no longer fully a child. We have presented Skimpole, thus far, as a villain who is adept at preying on other children and those who would seek to become eternal children by using the adult agency of others (Bucket's legal authority, Vholes's vampirism, Jarndyce's patriarchal authority to marry, &c.). Esther, in being singularly

adult and responsible within the narrative, however, is a fly in Skimpole's ointment. Despite her callow age, she seems almost singularly able to cut through Skimpole's façade:

I thought I could understand how such a nature as my guardian's, [with his] experience in the world, and [his being] forced to contemplate the miserable evasions and contentions of the family misfortunes, found an immense relief in Mr. Skimpole's avowals of weakness and display of guileless candour; but I could not satisfy myself that it was as artless as it seemed; or that it did not serve Mr. Skimpole's idle turn quite as well as any other part, and with less trouble. (134)

Esther attributes the reason for Jarndyce's blindness vis-à-vis Skimpole to her guardian's easy-going, generous nature. The truth of the matter may, however, lie in Esther's rejection of her own less-than-adult status. She seems to readily accept the burden of adult responsibility, submitting to the name "Old Mother Hubbard" and relishing in her position as Bleak House's "keeper of the keys." This desire for adult responsibility is what prevents Esther from satisfying herself with Skimpole's apparent "artlessness." Insofar as she believes that Skimpole consciously manipulates his child-like persona, she is his enemy and his greatest threat.

And this is what Skimpole stands to gain out of Jarndyce's engagement to Esther: the reassertion of her position as inexperienced youth who accepts her husband's position on Skimpole. Just as John Dickens and Leigh Hunt haunt Skimpole's philosophies, taunting Dickens and the reader with a vision of a sustainable model for social parasitism, Skimpole haunts the Jarndyce-Summerson engagement, taunting his old friend with a model of what it means to start a family without giving up on child-like innocence.

We have established that *Bleak House* is a novel that is written under a Gothic pall, that Skimpole fulfills the role of Gothic villain in his by-proxy seduction of Esther and his by-proxy

vampirism with regard to Jo and Richard, and that juvenescence is his obscuring mask—the disguise behind which he can work his malice. The discussion now turns to an alternate and far less comfortable reading of the role that Skimpole plays in the novel; that is to say, we will focus on Skimpole as an heroic figure who complicates the novel’s relationship with work.

*Bleak House* is often conceived of as a novel about interconnectivity, work, and the interconnectivity of work.<sup>12</sup> And for all that work seems to link people together in the novel, it is also responsible for people’s inhumanity to one another. We laud Bucket for his pivotal role clearing Lady Dedlock of the murder of Tulkinghorn, but we are distressed by his need to apprehend Jo and return him to Tom’s-All-Alone where he succumbs to his smallpox. We have already discussed the lengths Dickens goes to in order to justify the vampiric profession of Vholes as a necessary part of sustaining an existence for himself, his daughters, and his elderly father. In fact, the motto of *Bleak House* might be his summation of the Vholes conundrum: “Outlaw man-eating and you starve the Vholeses.”

Critics have noted Chancery’s monolithic propensity for man-eating, the sorrow it sews in killing Gridley, Jarndyce’s brother, Richard, Miss Flite and others. But it is also a center for employment. It is not just the Conversation Kenges, Smallweeds, Vholeses and Lord Chancellors that benefit from Chancery’s carnivorous appetites; it is, indirectly, the Snagsbies, the Hawdons, and the Guppies. Even Gridley and Flite are given purpose, desire and motivation by Chancery. Work is inherently degrading and dangerous in *Bleak House*, but it is also necessary. Man-eating is everywhere, and attempts at non-work charity like those of Mrs. Jellby or Mrs. Pardiggle fall ludicrously flat. All attempts save Skimpole’s, that is. In a novel that presents us with the dismal

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<sup>12</sup> Consider seminal works like Norman Page’s *Bleak House: A Novel of Connections*, Jordan’s *Supposing Bleak House*, or J. Hillis Miller’s emphasis on interconnectedness in his 1974 introduction to the novel.

prospect of survival only through pernicious, man-eating work, Skimpole stands outside the entire paradigm.

Part of how this feat is managed may lie within Skimpole's own philosophy of generosity:

‘It's only you, the generous creatures, whom I envy,’ said Mr. Skimpole, addressing us, his new friends, in an impersonal manner. ‘I envy you your power of doing what you do. It is what I should revel in, myself. I don't feel any vulgar gratitude to you. I almost feel as though *you* ought to be grateful to *me*, for giving you the opportunity of enjoying the luxury of generosity. I know you like it. For anything I can tell, I may have come into the world expressly for the purpose of increasing your stock of happiness. I may have been born to be a benefactor to you, by sometimes giving you an opportunity of assisting me in my little perplexities. Why should I regret my incapacity for details and worldly affairs, when it leads to such pleasant consequences? I don't regret it therefore.’

Of all his playful speeches (playful yet fully meaning what they expressed), none seemed to be more to the taste of Mr. Jarndyce than this. (91-92)

Skimpole's reversed model of charity may sound to the jaded ear like utter nonsense, a cruel reversal of the actual process of charity, and yet, it does seem to give Jarndyce genuine joy to keep Skimpole around. It is not a recognition of child-like innocence in Skimpole that delights Jarndyce, but the reification of that child as a receptacle for charity without consequence.

Skimpole feels no “vulgar gratitude”—vulgar because it comes at a cost for most. The gratitude that Vholes's daughters must feel for their father's hard work is rendered vulgar by the fact that it can only be attained in hurting Richard and countless others. Skimpole's declaration of

selflessness gives Jarndyce the ability to feel grateful at the opportunity to help another without costing others their livelihood. Furthermore, Skimpole demands nothing. He requests money of his friends with no apparent knowledge of what the money means to them, so it can be given without rancor. Skimpole does not demand too much, only what others are willing to give him. His supply of goodwill is inexhaustible, and one need only pay into it in order to feel better about the one's charitable nature. Skimpole hurts no one through working. Instead, he is supported by those who desire to support him. It is a system free from the obligation of harming others in order to protect one's own. The idea that he would be most delighted by the assertion that his generosity does some pure and unselfish good makes sense, given that the alternative is a zero-sum-game where working, even for the most noble of circumstances, must necessarily cause others pain and deprivation.

Early in the novel, Skimpole launches into a speech about the elegant beauty of the orphaned child ("a child of the universe") to which Jarndyce, distressed by the hard reality of the orphan's lot, makes the following observation.

"The universe," [Mr. Jarndyce] observed, "makes rather an indifferent parent, I am afraid." [...]

"Well!" cried Mr. Skimpole, "You know the world (which in your sense is the universe), and I know nothing of it, so you shall have your way. But if I had mine," glancing at the cousins, "there should be no brambles of sordid realities in such a path as that. It should be strewn with roses; it should lie through bowers, where there was no spring, autumn, nor winter, but perpetual summer. Age nor change should never wither it. The base word money should never be breathed near it." (93)

This is, of course, the core of the fantasy of eternal childhood—an endless summer, basking in the new growth of childhood’s spring, never fearing the oncoming responsibilities of autumnal harvest and deprivations of wintry dotage. Compelling as it may sound, it is a fantasy nonetheless. Skimpole, as I have stated in earlier sections, plays upon the “brambles of sordid realities” in order to dispose of Richard and, perhaps, Esther as well. Skimpole sees scarcity in generosity and though he claims to wish an eternal summer of plenty that neither “age nor change should [...] wither,” he is very much engaged in pushing others out of that halcyon space. But one must compare Skimpole’s fantasy in this paragraph to the harsh realities that *Bleak House* presents us with. Skimpole is, as previously stated, a threat to other children and non-adult youths, and Esther is correct in her estimation that he is “not as artless” as he seems—but the world of *Bleak House*, the world where social responsibility and care of the poor and helpless is the duty of the capable, is bleak, indeed. At the death of the orphan crossing-sweep, Jo, Dickens launches into one of his most famous passages: “The light is come upon the dark, benighted way. Dead! Dead, your majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us, every day” (734). Skimpole’s vision of a world of eternal summers may be a fantasy, but it is a far more compelling vision than the world of the novel. In *Bleak House*, even the most innocent children, even as they are surrounded by those who wish them well, are “dead” and “dying thus around us everyday.”

Readers condemn Skimpole for his lack of responsibility, for his selfishness, but he is not the sum total of the world’s ills. Unlike work, which Dickens presents as a game in which there must be a loser, Skimpole’s irresponsibility doesn’t seem to destroy or even drastically effect others. When Esther confronts him about his palpable effect on Richard, he responds:



My dear Miss Summerson, here is our friend Richard [...] full of the brightest visions of the future, which he evokes out of the darkness of Chancery. Now that's delightful, that's inspiriting, that's full of Poetry! [...] Some ill-conditioned, growling fellow may say to me 'What's the use of these legal and equitable abuses? How do you defend them?' I reply, 'My growling friend, I don't defend them, but they are very agreeable to me. There is [...] a friend of mine, who transmutes them into something highly fascinating to my simplicity. I don't say that it is for this that they exist—for I am a child among you worldly grumblers, and not called upon to account to you or myself for anything—but it may be so.

(594)

Skimpole, in his own estimation, is not an encourager or adviser to Richard (as Esther previously states); rather, he is a dreamer who validates Richard in his own desire to win the fortune stashed at the center of the Jarndyce & Jarndyce labyrinth. I have contended that there is malice in Skimpole's interest in Richard. I do not deny that here; but while Skimpole may delight in Richard's downfall, he is not the root cause of it. Richard is un-made by his own interests in eternal childhood and his failure to skillfully pull it off in the manner in which Skimpole does. Skimpole does not defend poetry or dreams. He merely advocates that they are more pleasant to think on than the reality where the innocent are "dying thus around us, every day."

When further pressed on the issue of his irresponsibility, Skimpole states:

"Responsibility, Miss Summerson," he said, catching the word with the pleasantest smile, "I am the last man in the world for such a thing. I never was responsible in my life—I can't be. [...] But every man's not obliged to be solvent? I am not. I never was. See, my dear Miss Summerson [...] there's so

much money. I have not an idea how much. I've not the power of counting. Call it four and ninepence—call it four pound nine. They tell me I owe more than that. I daresay I do. I daresay I owe as much as good-natured people will let me owe. If they don't stop, why should I? There you have Harold Skimpole in little. If that is responsibility, I am responsible.” (603)

Again, Dickens writes him as undeluded. Skimpole's loophole is not in pretending to be a thing he is not, but in allowing people to feel useful in giving him the money he needs but does not ask for. Skimpole is not a charity case like the unfortunates that Jellyby and Pardiggle fail to aid. Instead, he is boundlessly selfish, a trait he renders as selfless, and he only borrows of people what they are willing to contribute. Besides which, unlike the Vholeses of the world, who make their honest living on behalf of others and at the expense of others, Skimpole's endless debt creates an industry for debt-collectors like Neckett who, in turn, can provide for their own children. His childishness, his irresponsibility, even his selfishness, is a kind of generosity in the context of a world where work breeds deprivation. If providing for others while not causing collateral damage is responsibility, then Skimpole is, logically speaking, responsible.

In fact, one must wonder what good the so-called heroine of *Bleak House* actually does. Esther, after all, is the epitome of responsibility and, moreover, of the adult recognition of the need to be responsible. Skimpole says as much:

Now when you mention responsibility [...] I am disposed to say I never had the happiness of knowing anyone whom I should so consider so refreshingly responsible as yourself. You appear to me to be the very touchstone of responsibility. When I see you, my dear Miss Summerson, intent upon the perfect working of the whole little orderly system of which you are the centre, I feel

inclined to say to myself—in fact I do say to myself, very often—*that's*  
responsibility! (603)

And what has that “orderly” system achieved? Esther fails to save her mother, fails to save Jo, fails to save Richard, fails to save Ada, and fails even to give Jarndyce the spouse he desires. She brings Prince and Caddy together, only to have them birth a deaf and deformed child who bears her name, old before its time. Even Esther’s eventual husband, the savior doctor, Allan Woodcourt, only saves the lives of drowning soldiers when he is conveniently off the page (with the knowledge of his derring-do presented as rumor). When Dr. Woodcourt is present in the novel, more often than not, he is presiding over the death of a patient he has failed to save. Responsibility doesn’t actually seem to do much good in *Bleak House*.

Skimpole, in his irresponsibility, does manage to provide for his children. He lives a life unmolested by cares or concerns. He never gets his just desserts—or at least never gets the comeuppance demanded by the readers’ outrage. Even in death, Esther writes that Skimpole’s posthumously published diary “showed him to have been the victim of a combination on part of mankind, against an amiable child [and] was considered pleasant reading” (935). Skimpole is not even entirely incorrect in the diary’s assertion that “Jarndyce, in common with most men [he had] known, was the Incarnation of selfishness” (935). We, the readers, may rankle at what we see as a mischaracterization of the beloved Jarndyce; but, weighed in the world where responsibility fails to do good and men, women, and children are consumed by work done on behalf of loved ones, all generous people register as a bit selfish. Skimpole feels no “vulgar gratitude” because he provides people with a figure so helpless, they cannot help but feel good in lending him money. The conflict of interest that comes from providing for one’s own while destroying another is erased in the pathetic figure of Skimpole, an eternal, amiable child who

only asks as much as people are willing to lend. Skimpole is the hero of *Bleak House* inasmuch as he finds the one true solution, the only legal loophole, to doing harm in the name of doing good.

Despite Skimpole's role as Gothic villain, the legitimacy of his claim to heroism, or at least innocuousness, in the bleak world presented by the novel, may be at the root of critics' and readers' shared loathing of the man. If he is the Gothic villain lurking at the core of *Bleak House*, he is a ghostly one. He makes himself known, villainously, only by the perceived trail of misery he leaves behind. He haunts the text, not as an instigator of misery, but as an undeniable alternative to the problem of work. He is so easily hated, so clearly manipulative and selfish, vampiric and villainous, un-heroic and calculating, and yet he succeeds where others do not. He succeeds in being an eternal child, while physical children go hungry or succumb to disease. And yet, he does not succeed by trampling on them. Others trample for him. He receives only what others are willing to give, and that turns out to be quite a lot indeed. Dickens may have written Skimpole to expose the malice and unpleasantness of Leigh Hunt—a man who may have figured large in Dickens's mind as another bad father, a man who refused to grow up—but Dickens also wrote him as an ideal of childishness. In a Fishian way, we are surprised by our sin at having hated Harold Skimpole for so thoroughly achieving the things we want, both as borrowers and lenders. Peter Pan is the beloved failure of the eternal child. Harold Skimpole is its reviled apotheosis. His success is our own discomfort with the world we have made.

## Chapter Three

### The Banshee in the Bildungsroman: Asymptotic Adulthood in Brontë's

#### *Villette*

*Villette* is an odd novel, albeit an essential one to understanding the Gothic characterization of those caught between childhood and adulthood. In previous chapters, we have examined how the figure of the eternal child is used to turn an otherwise grounded novel into a spawning ground for Gothic sentiments. In many ways, *Villette* serves as an outlier to this process. It is written in a much more consciously Gothic style and, alongside Charlotte Brontë's other novel, *Jane Eyre*, serves as a kind of midway point between Gothic yarn and distaff *Bildungsroman*. Both of these novels feature women who enter the workforce (though an appropriate form of work for Victorian women) and, thus, spend more time in the space that precedes adulthood (having not entered female adulthood through marriage)—despite being women in their mid-twenties. Both novels position their protagonists to move towards marriage—their point of no return as far as adulthood is concerned—and, as we shall see, in the case of Lucy Snowe, her journey is asymptotic.

Unlike both *Peter and Wendy* and *Bleak House*, *Villette* does not locate eternal childhood in a villainous (or, at the very least, selfish) figure. Its protagonist, Lucy Snowe, serves as the novel's narrator and heroine, presenting her desire never to enter adulthood as an imperative to avoid a kind of Gothic infection. Whereas eternal childhood was a trap for Peter Pan and a loophole for Harold Skimpole, it is a prophylactic for Lucy Snowe—a way to avoid a society she sees as toxic. The novel casts similarly liminal, ill-defined figures in the majority of its central roles. I will use the term “adolescent” throughout the chapter when referring to the ages of these

characters, seeing as *Villette* adumbrates some stage of life between childhood and adulthood without ever truly exploring it. With those caveats in place, *Villette* meditates masterfully on the gap between childhood and adulthood, and all of it plays out in a Gothic space that either elongates or destroys childhood, depending on how it is approached.

Lucy Snowe is the central object lesson in arrested development in the novel. When I explore other characters, as I must in some of the subsequent pages, it is, more often than not, through Lucy's unreliable account. The Gothic elements of the novel seem to be a matter of place, as with the fictional country of Labassecour – the capital, Villette<sup>13</sup>, and the girls' finishing school or *pensionnat*, located in the Rue Fossette; all are examples of increasingly concentrated Gothic spaces. As such, some of this chapter will be about the intersection of place and genre. The genre is the *Bildungsroman*, the novel of maturation. Though *Villette* poses as one, it undermines the tropes of the genre. As opposed to the majority of entries in the genre, which focus on a male subject (whose path from childhood into adulthood through education and professionalization is far clearer for Victorians), *Villette* looks to a number of female subjects who experience an education that will prepare them for marriage. In this way, it more resembles the novels of maturation, which chart a clear path from education to adult life, than courtship novels featuring a more passive female subject. While I fully intend to discuss the shifting roles of Lucy Snowe and company, the character of the place Villette and the character of the novel *Villette* comment upon the nebulousness and anxiety of the path out of childhood just as much as the figures that populate it. Essentially, this chapter will take on the problems of moving from childhood to adulthood in a Gothic space and will explore the way that it arrests not only the development of the character, but the narrative progression of the *Bildungsroman* itself.

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<sup>13</sup>In order to avoid future confusion, I will refer to the place, Villette without italics as opposed to the novel: *Villette*

The result of all this is a chapter in two parts that seeks to prove two separate but deeply entwined points. The first is a discussion of the ways in which *Villette* serves as a *Bildungsroman* gone awry, seeming to take its protagonist from childhood into adulthood, while, at every step, keeping its protagonist from crossing the final threshold—marriage. This is a generically uncomfortable novel that asserts all the formal elements of a tale of growing up, but rather little of the content. The second part deals with the Gothic elements of the novel, and the ways in which the protagonist's youthful stasis is used to avoid infection by these elements. It also explores the didactic counterpoint of the experiences of Lucy Snowe and those of her unspoken romantic interest, Ginevra Fanshawe. In combining those two generic identities: a *Bildungsroman* caught in arrested development and a Gothic tale where resisting the forces of darkness turns out to be a wrong choice, we can better understand *Villette* as a novel that outlines the pitfalls of remaining a child, even as it seeks to justify and ennoble the actions of its eternally childlike heroine.

*Part I: The Tragic Tale of Lucy-Pure-As-Snow(e)*

If ever arrested development had a heroine, Lucy Snowe, the strong-willed protagonist of *Villette*, is it. While Peter Pan is, at best, a fey fantasy—delightful only insofar as he could not exist (and would be somewhat monstrous if he did),—and Harold Skimpole is a self-serving monster, heroic only in his opposition to the already lamentable world of *Bleak House*, Lucy Snowe remains stuck between childhood and adulthood with a steely determination, a sense of well-earned self-satisfaction, common sense, and protestant abstinence that seems designed to make readers nod in silent approval. Gone from her person is the kind of sinister self-interest Dickens sees in the child-like figure, or the other-worldly alien with which Barrie associates it.

Lucy, in her spare, first person narration, comes across as down-to-earth and curiously self-reliant in her never-ending quest to remain outside adulthood.

Lucy is rather fortuitously positioned to be this figure. The book gives her age as twenty-three, advanced well beyond the age at which marriage-dependent female adulthood begins. However, she has chosen the path of the teacher in Villette's school in the Rue Fossette, a *pensionnat de demoiselles*, that keeps its live-in instructors as closely guarded as its adolescent charges. This returns to a contention from the introduction to this chapter. Seeing as marriage is the usual entry point for female adulthood, *Villette* stands slightly outside a "typical" story of maturation. Skimpole, for instance, was allowed to marry and retain his child-like status by virtue of his perpetual joblessness. Lucy, on the other hand, retains it by means of her virginity—being unmarried and unattached. She is caught in a world where circumstance demands she work, but temperament causes her to remain little more mature than the girls she tutors.

It might be argued that, insofar as the *pensionnat* is a finishing school, intended to educate women for their roles as seductresses, wives, and mothers, *Villette* still follows the basic schema of a *Bildungsroman*. It undermines the idea of the female Victorian subject as passive by showing adolescent women actively engaged in becoming "professional" wives. We will discuss, a bit later, how the goals of the *pensionnat* are undercut by a pervasive, confining arrested development present within its walls. For the moment, however, it is enough to say that the novel conflates education, work, and marriage, and that, in choosing to educate other women rather than prepare herself for married life, Lucy Snowe is actually a less advanced and professional subject than her students.

So let us say that, by asserting the idea of the finishing school as a place of advancement where marriage is a prospect that can be studied for, *Villette* structures itself as a *Bildungsroman*.



Lucy Snowe, always the professional, moves from childhood into the nebulous time in between and, through a long courtship plot introduced towards the end of the novel, struggles towards adulthood. Her journey stops short of the final step, however, hinting at tragedy but refusing to acknowledge it directly. What does one make of a novel about growing up that actually refuses to grow up in its final moments? Part of this discussion will focus on the ways in which Lucy identifies the terms of adulthood and what possibilities she sees for herself and others. It must look critically at the relationship between Lucy and her equally willful pupil, Ginevra Fanshawe, and the possibility of homosexual attraction that is at its core. Additionally, it must touch on a handful of minor characters—namely Paulina de Bassompierre, Dr. John Graham Bretton, and M. Paul Emmanuel—in order to understand how *Villette's Bildungsroman* is improperly built. Lucy's failure to become a full adult by the end of the novel accounts for some of the odd structural features of its plot. In short, her desire for pre-adult stasis turns a novel of maturation into a strange, quasi-Gothic hybrid that must constantly undermine its own structure in order to accommodate the figure of Lucy Snowe.

Most *Bildungsroman* begin with an account of childhood. *Villette's* is brief, no more than three chapters out of forty-two, and even then Lucy is thirteen in them, already at the onset of puberty and . Her childhood is neither presented as troubled nor halcyon; in fact, she herself barely appears in those pages at all. Rather, they focus on the interactions between her god-brother, a sixteen-year-old John Graham Bretton, and his future spouse, the six-year-old Paulina Mary Home de Bassompierre. This is worth mentioning as it seems to eschew, utterly, any indication of Lucy's own thoughts on her childhood. Curiously, she states, "One child in a household of grown people is usually very much made of" (Brönte 5) but provides no occasions

in which she was much made of. One might think that this refers to the arrival of Paulina (who is, after all, a child of six), but that too is made odd.

Paulina is described as being completely free of any child-like qualities. Lucy describes her as having “old fashioned charm, most unchildlike” (9) and appearing to be “a completely fashioned little figure [...] seated on my godmother’s lap she looked a mere doll” (8). Lucy ultimately gives us the qualifying statement: “when I say child I use an inappropriate and undescriptive term—a term suggesting any picture rather than that of the demure little person in mourning frock and white chemisette, that might have fitted a good sized doll” (15). Paulina’s doll-like qualities help to point out that she is not, in Lucy’s estimation, a child but a “completely fashioned” miniature adult, child-like in stature but not in character. Already, *Villette* is a world where physical age does not translate into a clear reading on child or adult, and the sexually developed but sheltered Lucy Snowe is as much caught between childhood and adulthood as Paulina, who is a little old lady at six.

The childhood section of *Villette* is one that claims at the outset to be a space where children “are made much of,” but, in actuality, contains no clear-cut children. Bretton (the home and the family that resides in it) is already a space where childhood has qualifiers. Graham’s insistence that its youngest resident is “a changeling” and “a perfect cabinet of oddities” (27) tells us that the inability to categorize age has a somewhat Gothic sensibility. In fact, if there is any child-like creature residing at Bretton, it is Graham himself who, despite being sixteen and aware of attraction and sexuality, is constantly called “dear boy” by his mother and Paulina both.

If a Bretton childhood exists and is made much of, it is the province of boys, and it is only available in the homestead. Brontë details a moment in which Graham is caught between childish play with Paulina and more adult activities with his school chums. The event is

traumatic for the ignored Paulina. Homosociality is played as being too grown up, where the heterosexual interplay between the “little odalisque” (29) and her “dear boy” is made into a relic of a childhood one is rapidly outgrowing. This will be significant later on, when we contrast Lucy’s perceptions of her burgeoning homosexual attractions with her developing homosocial ones.

If Lucy’s childhood is told almost entirely through the un-childlike childhood of Polly Home, then her movement out of childhood and into ostensible adulthood is elided almost completely (I say “almost” since there is one passage that we will be looking at later in this section). We revisit Lucy as a grown woman, or at the very least, a woman no longer living with family, aged twenty-four and employed but unmarried. Ian Emberson writes that, seemingly, “Lucy has usurped the position of heroine” from Paulina (27). It has been pointed out that Lucy herself does not come into her own as a character (and not merely a recorder of others) until she arrives in Labassecour. That makes it seven entire chapters without real agency or internal reflection—nearly half of the first volume. Emberson’s confusion on the matter is laid out: “Why did [Brontë insert this childhood escapade]? Was it merely a problem of technique? Was it to be regarded as a blunder—a miscalculation? [...] Does it arise from a subconscious instinct that enables her to achieve a strange, unexpected unity?” (27). I would argue that this “unexpected unity” is not some accident of Brontë’s confused narrative inclinations or a realized instinct (both notions seem a bit insulting); rather, it is representative of generic chimera: the Gothic novel does not require a section on the protagonist’s childhood, but the *Bildungsroman* does.

Lucy Snowe’s childhood has not, in fact, commenced. She has given us nothing of her nascent perceptions of the world. She has, however, illustrated a world in which childhood is made uncanny: where little girls are most un-childlike. Lucie Armitt posits that ghosts and children

have a commonality in our insistence “on treating them as other” (Armitt 217). Paulina is “other,” both in being a child and in being an animate doll. Lucy achieves a kind of otherness though a complete lack of internality as she narrates her childhood. We will see that this is a novel where the actual ghosts are those struggling to enter adulthood—figures whose travails are relatable to the adult reader. It is those characters that are in a state of willful arrested development who are the most other by the novel’s end.

It is important at this juncture to mention the character of the *pensionnat* in the Rue Fossette (the girls’ boarding school at which Lucy finds employment). The second part of this chapter is dedicated to looking at Villette (the place) and some of its Gothic character in depth. In order to appreciate Lucy’s imbalanced Gothic novel/failed *Bildungsroman*, however, it is necessary to look at the Gothic characterization of the school and focus in on its status as a place of developmental stasis. So forgive a slight digression into an accounting of the spaces of *Villette*, the better to understand its characters.

The *pensionnat*, with its cloistered walkways and its institutional past as a convent, is already over-determined as a Gothic space. Lucy tells us “that something had happened on this site which, rousing fear and inflicting horror, had left to the place the inheritance of a ghost story.” (106). This story has its roots, so to speak, in the gardens of the school. Lucy goes on to say that:

[...] certain convent relics, in the shape of old and huge fruit trees, yet consecrated the spot; and, at the foot of one—a Methuselah of a pear-tree, dead, all but a few boughs which still faithfully renewed their perfumed snow in spring, and their honey sweet pendants in autumn—you saw, in scraping away the mossy earth between the half-bared roots, a glimpse of slab, smooth, hard, and black.

The legend went [...] that this was the portal of a vault, emprisoning deep beneath that ground, on whose surface grass grew and flowers bloomed, the bones of a girl whom a monkish conclave of the drear middle ages had here buried alive for some sin against her vow. (106)

The result is the “black and white nun,” the specter of this young woman (so named for the black of her gown and the white of her veil) who stalks the halls of the convent-turned-*pensionnat* and is the subject of much discussion throughout the novel. While Brönte hits on most of the traditional Gothic themes and images fit for a haunting (live burial, Catholic authoritarianism, female sexuality etc.), she also manages to create a Gothic space that comments on the struggle to reach adulthood. The Nun (referred to as “THE NUN” in almost every instance of her materialization) is both black and white: sinning and sanctified. She is a “girl” but also sexually active; we discover later that the imprisonment is associated with the breaking of her vow of chastity. She is buried in a dark vault, heralded by black stone, but on its surface, grass and flowers grow. The pear tree at whose base the vault lies is ancient and dead, but still manages to flower in spring and fruit in autumn. Essentially, the garden space is simultaneously dead and alive, barren and fecund, and its prisoner is caught between childhood and adulthood. Because the sexual identity of the nun is arrested at the moment of innocence lost, the garden itself hints at maturation, fecundity, and growth but is caught in a moment of stasis.

Similarly, the *pensionnat* is ostensibly a finishing school for young ladies—a space to encourage their growth and development into marriageable prospects—but the reality is a labyrinthine network of spies and plots foiled, resulting in the women being unable to escape. The only men that these young ladies meet are their unmarriageable professors. They must rely on their wealthy families or the luck of the society they keep in order to find the husbands they

are being trained to attract. Essentially, the vault of the nun and the withered pear tree that stands atop it is a gigantic and overwrought metaphor for the Gothic as a stand-in for arrested development. Adult sexuality is buried beneath a garden where education is supposed to take place. The specter of carnality haunts the garden and what is visible is a misshapen tree simultaneously dead and alive. The ghost of the black and white nun attempts to escape her vault, just as the women at the *pensionnat* must escape their confines if they hope to emerge into adulthood.

This phenomenon is most clear when Dr. John is introduced (reintroduced, really) to the narrative. As one of the few handsome young bachelors allowed in the *pensionnat*, Dr. John Graham Bretton (whom Lucy, shockingly, does not recognize), is adored by all. Though he is initially called in to treat Madame Beck's daughter, Fifine, we are told that "no sooner did Fifine emerge from his hands than Désirée declared herself ill. That possessed child had a genius for simulation" (97). As all of Madame Beck's daughters go in for increasingly imaginary illnesses, their mother also seems to take some delight: "every day she received him with the same empressement, the same sunshine for himself" (97). Dr. John, as he becomes physician to the girls of the *pensionnat* in the Rue Fossette, becomes the object of many a student's affection and, eventually, Lucy's as well. So the good doctor is pursued by children of six, widows of fifty, teenage school girls and bachelorettes in their twenties, all without Lucy batting an eye as to the oddity of such disparity. Within the walls of the *pensionnat*, age differences are unremarkable. The failure of the school to provide its students with a way into adulthood, as well as the arrested development of its teaching staff, turns all the women into vague equals. The only one who stands outside it is Madame Beck, the school's headmistress, and her widowhood conveniently

erases all traces of the husband that might force the reader to see her as truly adult. All the women within the confines of the convent-turned-school are rendered fundamentally alike.

This flattening of all of the characters in the *pensionnat* is enforced, in part, by a careful system of spying employed by Madame Beck. She seems to practice a literal version of the nightly surveillance that Barrie ascribes to Mrs. Darling:

It is the nightly custom of every good mother after her children are asleep to rummage in their minds and put things straight for the next morning, repacking into their proper places the many articles that have wandered during the day [...] It is quite like tidying up drawers. When you awake in the morning, the naughtiness and evil passions with which you went to bed have been folded up small and placed at the bottom of your mind. (Barrie 8)

Compare this to the account of Madame Beck's nocturnal spying:

[she] stood before this toilet, hard at work, apparently doing me the kindness of "tidying out" the "mueble." Open stood the lid of the work box; open the top drawer; duly and impartially was each succeeding drawer opened in turn: not an article of their contents but was lifted and unfolded, not a paper but was glanced over, not a little box but was unlidded; and beautiful was the adroitness and exemplary was the care with which the search was accomplished. (118)

The mistrust of children's private lives is clear in both novels, though in *Villette* it is a decidedly more sinister action. It should also be noted that Madame Beck does this to all the residents of the *pensionnat*. If she is a "good mother" in the vein of Barrie's idealized Mrs. Darling, then all occupants of the school in the Rue Fossette are her children, regardless of their age or their stage in life.

The purpose of this surveillance is clear: to keep romantic/sexual love at bay. Lucy tells her readers that “loverless and inexpectant of love, I was safe from spies in my heart-poverty, as the beggar from thieves in his destitution of purse” (119). With no possibility of an adult, romantic, or sexual relationship, Madame Beck has no need to blackmail. Surveillance, though still conducted, turns up nothing of value. Her charges are kept from being able to cross that threshold into adulthood. More than the purely mental “naughtiness and evil passions” that Barrie’s Mrs. Darling fears in her children, Madame Beck literally intercepts the love letters and tokens of affection that may lead to corporeal naughtiness and evil actions. So much of the Victorian female identity is predicated on courtship and flirtation. Even in Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, the flight from and return to Mr. Rochester takes up a significant portion of the novel. In *Villette*, however, all chance of this is curtailed. Lucy’s courtship with M. Paul is brief (and unconsummated, as we will discuss a bit later). The majority of her time at the school is spent not merely “loverless and inexpectant of love,” but also content with that arrangement. Such is the power of Madame Beck’s hold that juvenescent non-development is preferable to Lucy than being found out.

Childhood is uncannily un-childlike in *Villette*, and the school in which Lucy Snowe dwells is similarly lacking in access to adolescent milestones. The real uncanny is most clearly evoked, however, in Lucy’s experience of *auld lang syne*. The term, though it literally means something along the lines of “once upon a time,” evokes Robert Burns’ 1711 poem of the same name, in which he scribes:

Should Old Acquaintance be forgot,  
and never thought upon;  
The flames of Love extinguished,



and fully past and gone:  
Is thy sweet Heart now grown so cold,  
that loving Breast of thine;  
That thou canst never once reflect  
On Old long syne

The Burns poem and all songs based off of it gently nudge the listener to keep “old acquaintance” alive. In *Villette*, it describes, rather than the imperative to remain in contact with loved ones, an uneasy and growing sense of familiarity with people one suspects one knows. Specifically, Lucy meets all the people from her childhood at Bretton but does not recognize them in the slightest. This is essential to our understanding of arrested development because it reflects a break that Lucy has between childhood and adulthood. Lucy initially considers Paulina, Graham and Mrs. Bretton to be figures of her childhood, left behind when she left childhood behind. And so, she does not recognize them as adult figures. Because she skips over the period of time between her childhood at Bretton and her escape to Villette, these characters resurface, for the reader, rather quickly. Indeed, the cunning reader may, in fact, guess that Dr. John is Graham and that the elfin woman who faints at the opera is none other than little Polly. In experiencing *Auld Lang Syne* while simultaneously placing a lacuna on the intervening time between departure and reintroduction, we get an uneasy sense of a childhood that is far from over. The doubling of the characters—no longer the same ones she knew in childhood, nor entirely separate from them—is rife with the uncanny.

Lucy’s inability to recognize figures from her childhood, her uncanny sense of “*Auld Lang Syne*,” is tied into a bifurcation of names. She does not recognize John Graham Bretton, having split him into a child (Graham Bretton) and an adult (Dr. John). Throughout the later

novel, she often combines the two names, clumsily referring to him as “Dr. John Graham Bretton.” She also, thereby, remakes him into a blended figure; he is both the spoiled mother’s boy and the serious adult professional at once. Similarly, Lucy splits Paulina into “little Polly Home” and the “Countess Paulina Mary de Bassompierre” where the title stands in as identity. Ironically, it is the sixteen-year-old Paulina who is child-like in comparison to the serious adult six-year-old. It is only because Lucy can deconstruct and recombine names in this way that she can reconcile her memories of childhood with her current situation and construct a timeline for their maturation. Her understanding of these people is, at once, contiguous (as their full names refer to one complete entity) and broken (as she cannot recognize them as the same as people she knew in her own childhood).

It has been said that Brontë’s novel operates on a “series of substitutions.” Emberson’s question in section one of this chapter—whether or not the inclusion of Paulina was a blunder or a subversive move—is re-visited here. Brontë substitutes Paulina’s childhood for Lucy’s own. Lucy even asks the fates, standing over little Polly’s age-inappropriate crib, “how will she get through this world, or battle with this life? How will she bear the shocks and repulses, the humiliations and desolations, which books and my own reason tell me are prepared for all flesh?” (34). Emberson points out that this is precisely the sort of question that a *Bildungsroman* is equipped to answer. The pages that follow ought to detail Paulina’s progression into adulthood by telling us precisely how she does bear those shocks, repulses, humiliations, and desolations. Brontë is even a bit coy here in mentioning that Lucy knows these obstacles present themselves not just from her own reason, but from books; and isn’t the reader reading a book right now? Oughtn’t that clue them in as to what is to come? Clearly, as Emberson points out, Lucy “usurps” the heroine position from Paulina, who disappears for much of the novel. What is of

interest to us here, however, is that the return of Paulina (and indeed of John Graham Bretton), is another important substitution for *Villette*'s discussion of maturation.

At the moment when Paulina might encounter the first signs of growth—her removal from England, her father's embrace of the family's continental titles—the narrative is taken over by Lucy Snowe, who refuses to tell us anything of her own adolescence, instead picking up with her determination to be a teacher and her observations of another young woman, Ginevra Fanshawe. At the moment when Lucy herself might show some maturation (or even forward momentum) in the novel—her desperate journey out into the streets of Villette, finding solace, eventually, in the confessional of a Catholic priest—the narrative jumps again. Instead of a gap in time, *Villette* uses the well-worn Gothic trope of the heroine's excited unconsciousness to fracture the continuity of Lucy's experience.

The first volume ends with “instead of sinking on the steps, as I intended, I seemed to pitch headlong into an abyss. I remember no more” (164). Note that, while the reader expects some forward movement in terms of Lucy's self-understanding (whether in terms of her faith, or her place in the city of Villette), what they get is only the violent forward momentum into unconsciousness. Lucy “pitches headlong” not into revelation, but into reverie. Lucy blacks out rather than come to any further understanding. The second volume begins with the continuation of this theme. There is a hallucinatory description of Lucy's soul on an imaginary journey where she is rejected from heaven and scours unfamiliar landscapes. It ends with the description, “I know [my soul] entered her prison with pain, with reluctance, with a moan and a long shiver. The divorced mates, Spirit and Substance, were hard to re-unite: they greeted each other, not in an embrace but a racking sort of struggle” (165). I would argue that, much like Esther Summerson in her fever dream midway through *Bleak House*, Lucy experiences a kind of

distancing from her own age. Whereas Esther literally sees herself as a child, a young woman, and a bent and broken old lady, Lucy imagines an end to her life, interrupted, not by her own desire to live, but by a chastising angel turning her away from the gates of heaven. Reconciling herself to life is a struggle. Her body is a prison and reuniting with it carries no joy.

When she does, at last, awaken, it is into her childhood once more. Lucy has been transported in her unconsciousness to La Terrasse, the Vilette townhome of Mrs. Bretton and Dr. John. The title of the first chapter of the second volume is, of course, “Auld Lang Syne” and Lucy spends much of it unable to recognize Mrs. Bretton. Instead she experiences a chill of the uncanny as she recognizes, in turn, every object in the room, albeit in a strange, novel arrangement. I would suggest that this whole break between the end of the first volume and the beginning of the second is not merely a Gothic device to give Lucy some kind of crisis of faith (she experiences no further doubt in her Protestantism, even as she becomes more accepting of Catholics). Nor is it a fairytale’s *deus ex machina*, as Lucy herself suggests: “I thought of Beddredin Hassan, transported in sleep from Cairo to the gates of Damascus” (167). Rather, it is literal return to childhood. The Lucy Snowe of the first volume only served to distract from the rapidly maturing Paulina and to narrate a world where all signs of coming adulthood are policed and reshuffled. At the moment when she herself might break from her stasis, she collapses, blacks out, feels herself dying, and reawakens in a slightly different version of her own childhood. *Auld Lang Syne* is more than the inability to recognize a familiar face save for an uncanny tingling at the back of the neck; it is recognition of living something almost but not quite identical to what was lived before. Lucy’s childhood contained nothing about her childhood, only Paulina’s. Lucy’s young-adulthood was an exercise in non-maturation. Lucy’s second childhood will prove to be similar, but it will, at the very least, suggest a kind of uncanny haunting of experiences she has

already lived through. Perhaps it is the inability to have contiguous experiences of maturation, instead experiencing a continual return to previous spaces and states marked by violent breaks, which gives *Villette* its most uncomfortable feeling of *Auld Lang Syne*.

It is no surprise that Graham and Paulina begin to figure heavily into the narrative, focusing back in on this second childhood. In fact, where Paulina became the focus of Lucy's account of her childhood, the courtship of Graham and Paulina becomes the next stage, with Lucy staying largely on the sidelines, intervening only in service of their love and (almost) never acknowledging her own feelings for Graham, established in the first volume. More than envying Paulina's command of Graham's affections, however, Lucy seems to envy their continuous senses of self:

[Paulina's] eyes were the eyes of one who can remember; one whose childhood does not fade like a dream, nor whose youth vanish like a sunbeam. She would not take life loosely or incoherently, in parts, and let one season slip as she entered on another: She would retain and add, often review from the commencement, and so grow in harmony and consistency as she grew in years. Still, I could not admit the conviction that *all* the pictures which now crowded upon me were vivid and visible to her [...]

"The child of seven years lives yet in the girl of seventeen," said she.

"You used to be excessively fond of Mrs. Bretton," I remarked, intending to test her. (276)

This is a troublingly strange passage. Lucy focuses on Paulina's ability to remember herself not in fragmented stages but as a whole person, as though the ability is somehow strange. Moreover, there is so much doubt in such ability that Lucy seeks to test her by using trivia from their

childhood. The latter suggests to me not so much the distrust of contiguity, but the more serious doubt of any memory of an earlier stage of one's life. Lucy seems to believe that once adulthood has been reached, childhood must be forgotten. This is especially strange as Lucy admits to remembering her own childhood. While there are fragmentary breaks stitched loosely together by bouts of *Auld Lang Syne*, the memories of Lucy's childhood remain intact (though some are consciously unvoiced) in the narrative. Given Lucy's conviction that one cannot normally "grow in harmony and consistency" as she grows in years, this seems to imply that Lucy herself is still in some indeterminate state, not fully separate from the childhood she clearly remembers. Moreover, the uninterrupted memory she attributes to Paulina contains within it the possibility of maturation. She can be a child, then an adolescent, and then (presumably) an adult without any fundamental compromise of self. Lucy's fragmentary existence, her eternal return to childhood, and her broken non-recognition of its elements in totality suggest that she would literally have to be a different person in order to be an adult.

This is made clearer a few sentences later, when Paulina clarifies for Lucy how it was that she recognized Dr. John as Graham before it was made plain:

How strange it is that most people seem so slow to feel the truth, not see, but *feel!*  
[...] Graham was slighter than he, and not grown so tall, and a had a smoother face, and longer and lighter hair, and spoke—not so deeply—more like a girl; but yet *he* is Graham, just as I am little Polly, or you are Lucy Snowe. (277)

Again, the explanation reads as strange, or ought to at the very least. Paulina is describing the wondrous ability to recognize someone, despite their aging only in the most natural and expected ways. Lucy is mystified by the idea that such a person could be recognized (as she herself was unable to see either Graham or Louisa for who they were). We are never told that any of these

old acquaintances have physically changed, except in the perfectly reasonable ways that all children become adolescents and adolescents become adults. Lucy Snowe seems to exist in a static present, an arrested state where signs of adulthood are rendered uncanny and old friends are unrecognizable.

The final proof of Lucy's inability to process adulthood comes in the doomed prognostications that she offers as her friends reach end points for juvenescence. It is late in the novel when Lucy decides "not to delay the happy truth" (436). Graham and Paulina are married in a paragraph-long celebration of the joys of wifehood and the pleasures of young love. Yet here is the paragraph immediately following the announcement:

The pair was blessed indeed for years brought them, with great prosperity, great goodness; they imparted with open hand, yet wisely. Doubtless they knew crosses, disappointments, difficulties; but these were well-borne. More than once, too, they had to look upon Him whose face flesh scarce can see: they had to pay their tribute to the King of Terrors. In the fullness of years, M. de Bassompierre was taken; in ripe old age departed Louisa Bretton. Once even, there rose a cry in their halls, of Rachel, weeping for her children (436)

Lucy is sure to undercut their happiness at every conceivable point. While she insists that their troubles were "well-borne," she follows up with the grandiose and lurid description of the King of Terrors. She alters the order of the clauses in discussing the deaths of Mrs. Bretton and Mr. Home. Had Lucy written "M. de Bassompierre was taken in the fullness of age" one might conceivably come away with the notion that Mr. Home had lived a long and healthy life. The current phrasing emphasizes his death, especially with regard to the grief it causes Graham and Paulina. All this is followed up with assertion that they suffered miscarriages or some other

infant death. It is true that a moment later she assures us that “others sprang healthy and blooming to replace the lost” (436), but this seems inadequately cold comfort up against that fleshless and flesh devouring face that figures so prominently in Graham and Paulina’s adult lives. This is especially strange as the narrative is not even finished. Time jumps ahead here only for Graham and Paulina. Lucy’s story will continue on for another five chapters—chapters that the newlyweds, Dr. and Mrs. Bretton, appear in. But Lucy (and Brontë) very clearly link marriage (and thereby adulthood) with death, sorrow, and loss. Graham and Paulina’s adulthood lives are happy for the mere span of a paragraph. Any other time we see them in the novel, their young love is tainted by the knowledge of hardship to come.

Perhaps this is because, for Lucy, the only exit from a childish arrested development is death. The joys of courtship fulfilled and love found are infinitesimally brief when compared with the horrors of the adult world. Lucy Snowe, imprisoned by her convent-turned-school, unloved by Graham, unable, seemingly, to form friendships with people outside of the narrow band of her childhood companions, asserts that adulthood is death. As Paulina slips from “one season to another,” Lucy imagines that she will become a separate person, one who only remembers her friend with a haunted, ghostly, half-recognition called *Auld Lang Syne*.

It is shockingly late in the novel that we get any kind of maturation or advancement in Lucy Snowe. Having spent all of the first two volumes arranging and commenting upon the love lives of Ginevra, Graham, and Paulina, the novel’s third and final volume focuses intently on Lucy’s courtship with M. Paul Emmanuel, a short, fervid instructor at the *pensionnat*. There are many arguments about the Gothic nature of *Villette* that feature M. Paul heavily. Some have even suggested that he is a kind of Gothic heroine proxy who stands in for much of the entrapment that Lucy seems to resist. Elements of M. Paul’s Gothic plot will surface throughout this chapter,



but my main interest is in the tragic end of their courtship and the ways in which *Villette* refuses to acknowledge his death. The novel has an asymptotic trajectory towards adulthood. Where much of its text delays the inevitable process of growing up, we see a more frantic and rushed desire to not reach the terminus of the novel (which, were it simply a *Bildungsroman*, would signal full maturity). *Villette*'s balancing act of moving towards this formal requirement while keeping its protagonist from maturing makes for one of the most unsatisfying and off-putting endings in all of English literature—the ultimate curiosity in a book that serves as well-stocked cabinet.

Before we get to the final gymnastics of the novel, we must first acknowledge that the romance that precedes it is bizarre. Lucy spends much of the first two thirds of the novel considering that she may be in love with Dr. John (or, alternatively, Ginevra Fanshawe—more on that later). Though M. Paul has been a presence up through that point, he is described as almost cartoonishly unpleasant: a bitter misogynist, short of stature, given over to wild fits, deeply unfair, and overcome with the kind of ill-humor that Lucy attributes to “Romanish” prudishness. In fact, the one bit of commonality between the two seems to come in the form of both characters' predilection for abstinence.

M. Paul begins the novel in some parody of a Gothic villain. His uncompromising professorial authority, his hot-blooded temper, and his miscegenated (French and Spanish) background are all markers reserved for the villains of Gothic tales such as *Villette*. He goes so far as to say, early in the novel, that Lucy will “cast me as some species of tyrant and Bluebeard: starving women in the garret” (137). Much of their touch-and-go courtship has less to do with building affection and more to do with finding ways around his previous description as

villainous. Brontë, through Lucy, must take pains to distance the romantically available M. Paul from the portrait painted earlier.

The new M. Paul must also suffer from arrested development if he is to be a suitable match for Lucy. That much is made explicit: “Most of M. Emmanuel’s [charges] were emancipated free thinkers, infidels, atheists [...] he was more like a knight of old [...] innocent childhood, beautiful youth were safe at his side” (382). That M. Paul’s better qualities should be described in terms of their relationship to protecting children is the first of several steps in making him less a Gothic villain, menacing the children of the novel, and more of a child himself. After all, the revelation of his history is essentially one that casts him in the role of Gothic heroine, trapped by malevolent, bureaucratic forces into serving bad masters.

It is not enough that he should be made into a steward of children and caught in the role of a helpless child. In order for adulthood to remain un-breached, M. Paul must never be allowed to consummate his romance with Lucy. When defanging him is insufficient to stave off the Gothic, Brontë must take on a less savory solution. In the end, M. Paul dies, never to return to Lucy’s arms, and with that loss comes the loss of Lucy’s ability enter adulthood. In the previous pages, she has killed off all her other friends and acquaintances: Graham and Paulina disappear into their tragedy-adjacent marriage, Mrs. Bretton and Mr. Home succumb to old age, and Ginevra is off in foreign lands writing to Lucy but never seen again in person. In short, though the temporal events described previously do not happen for many years yet, Brontë chooses to remove all comfortable space and *auld lang syne* from Lucy’s life prior to the final heartbreak that is M. Paul’s death.

The tense itself switches, implying that, even though the deaths of other characters are said to have already happened (“in the ripe of old age departed Louisa Bretton”), we are suddenly in a close and claustrophobic present:

And now three years are past: M. Emmanuel’s return is fixed. It is Autumn, he is to be with me ere the mists of November come. [...] frosts appear at midnight; November has sent his fogs in advance; the wind takes its Autumn moan [...] the skies hang full and dark—a rack sails from the West; the clouds cast themselves into strange forms [...] the wind shifts to the west. Peace, peace Banshee—“keening” at every window! It will rise—it will swell—it shrieks out long: wander as I may through the house this night, I cannot lull the blast. (495)

This is the last moment. She ends this passage in the present tense by imploring the “Banshee” not to keen. Lucy mentions the Banshee one time prior. During Miss Marchmont’s story about the death of her husband, Frank, Lucy notes that “the wind was wailing at the windows [...] as night deepened, it took a new tone—an accent keen, piercing, almost articulate to the ear [...] Hence, I inferred, arose the legend of the Banshee.” (38) The Banshee is, of course, an Anglo corruption of the barrow-dwelling female Irish spirit, the *bean-sídhe*, who wails at the death of important personages and whose call is said to be both deadly when heard and a sign of imminent doom. That keening in the wind, once an amused inference about the origins of a myth, is now a certainty; the Banshee is real, and she is prophesying M. Paul’s death. Lucy can try to spare herself by attempting to “lull the blast” and she can spare her readers by moving the novel into the present or putting down her pen entirely, but she cannot actually stop the advance of time. Monsieur Paul is going to die. The signs and portents are there. The Banshee has spoken.

The rub is that this is not the end of the novel. Lucy cannot bring herself to write of M. Paul's death, but she can move back into the past tense to argue to her reader that they do not wish to know the details of her life:

Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life. (496)

In the face of the Banshee's supernatural augur, there is no longer any hope for M. Paul or his betrothed: "there is enough said." And yet, Lucy's command is to pause at a moment when the reader can imagine a "happy succeeding life." Clearly, the point is not to spare the reader the pain of M. Paul's death and Lucy's agony at his loss. There are a thousand ways Lucy (and Brönte) might have kept the end of the story vague. It seems to be, rather, an inability to cross over into adulthood. Two realities lie just around the corner from M. Paul's return. In one, he lives, Paul and Lucy are married, she experiences sex, pregnancy, and motherhood, and she joins Paulina, Graham, and Ginevra in the storied ranks of successful adults. In the other, M. Paul dies, leaving her a broken widow; the fact of her virginity is eclipsed by her adult grief, and she moves into post-adolescent spinsterhood.

The pause, the possibility of happiness, the imagination of good things to come, is a relic of childhood, an ability to remake one's reality simply by imagining something else. Lucy suggests that readers have this same juvenile ability to walk away from tragedy, relatively unscathed, pretending that any number of things might have occurred. The final moments of the novel are not an adumbration of adulthood but a dilation of the same state of arrested

development in which the majority of the novel has taken place. The succeeding life of Lucy Snowe is neither happy nor tragic, but whatever the reader imagines it to be.

Another striking feature of Lucy's final, harrowing refusal to let her readership in on her hardships is the finale's similarity to an early passage where she refuses to tell her readers about the trials of her teenage years:

I will permit the reader to picture me, for the next eight years, as a bark in halcyon weather, in a harbor still as glass [...] However, it cannot be concealed that, in that case, I must somehow have fallen over board, or there must have been a wreck, at least. I too well remember a time—a long time of cold, of danger, of contention. To this hour, when I have the nightmare, it repeats the rush and saltiness of briny waves in my throat, and their icy pressure to my lungs. I even know there was a storm, and that not of one hour nor one day. For many days and nights neither sun nor stars appeared; we cast with our own hands the tackling out of the ship; a heavy tempest lay on us; all hope that we should be saved was taken away. In fine, the ship was lost, the crew perished. (35)

Lucy states that her reader would be better served by not knowing her troubles in the time between her stay at Bretton and her indenture to Miss Marchmont. The tone is softened from the novel's coda: the reader is "permitted" to pretend at her good fortune rather than commanded to pause. Nevertheless, Brönte's foreshadowing of M. Paul's death via the maritime metaphor links these two moments in which the reader is asked to turn away from the "reality" of the novel and imagine happiness instead.

Emberson, too, is jarred by the abrupt shift from childhood at Bretton to adulthood, claiming, as others have, that it "may be an echo of a little-known episode in Charlotte's life—

some sort of nervous breakdown” (28). I would suggest that the breakdown in *Villette* is not a case of frayed nerves, but of unclear boundaries. I think it is telling that these two moments come at critical junctures in Lucy’s maturation. The first is her physical transformation from childhood to adulthood. What might have been a window into the teenage years of our protagonist is explained in vague metaphor that the reader is then asked to discard. The second comes at what could have been a moment of real emotional transformation. As previously stated, whether she is wife or widow, Lucy Snowe the non-adult will cease to exist right after M. Paul’s death. Instead, the reader is given a command to turn away from that moment, to imagine vague, unqualified happiness and to live in an eternal, static fantasy. Having rebuffed Ginevra Fanshawe’s advances (as we will discuss in the next section), Lucy hangs all of her hopes for an exit from the ill-defined space between childhood and adulthood on M. Paul. In denying the reader the actual confirmation of his death, and “sparing” them all detail of her life in its wake, Lucy effectively embraces that liminality.

*Villette* is structured both as a Gothic novel and as a *Bildungsroman*. Lucy Snowe moves from childhood through adolescence to a career, a love life, and a schematic for what adulthood might be. She elides, however, the two moments where transformation might be possible. She seems to miss out on, or, at the very least, harshly judge, the maturation of her friends, and she ends the novel by turning back toward childish fantasy and encouraging her reader to do the same. *Villette* is a novel obsessed with maturation that contains no actual instances of it in its protagonist, choosing instead to prognosticate doom, encourage childish fantasy, and fill the void intended for adulthood with the necrophonic call of a malevolent spirit whose wail equates maturation with death.

Other scholars have noted that “instead of adolescence opening up a world to Lucy, puberty seems to set a limit to Lucy’s horizons [...] Lucy’s character comes to rest at this threshold phase, identifying with a limbo-land defined in relation to children, while neither being one, having any, nor ever fully being allowed to distance herself from them” (Armitt 220). I would suggest that this condition *is* the condition of the figure who has exited Victorian childhood but is not yet an adult. Armitt’s argument is one that links Lucy Snowe to the foundling children of faerie stories (yet another link between this stage of development and Fairy), along with the fact that she is an outsider by virtue of her conspicuous lack of blood relations. I would contend that this is a novel chock-full of outsiders and foundlings, and that to be a neither adult nor child is, in some manner, to stand outside familial bonds. Armitt calls Lucy’s adolescence a “threshold,” implying that it sits infinitesimally between two other stages of life. I call it, rather, a long and obfuscated path, one whose end is unreachable. Lucy moves from the childhood that never existed towards an adulthood that never comes.

## *Part II: A Tale of Two Cities*

The final effect of *Villette*, for me and for many readers, is one of agitation. Its strange half-narration of M. Paul’s death, its refusal to give any hint of what lies in store for Lucy Snowe, and its command to ignore what was written in favor of what I might imagine all create a rather unpleasant effect after turning the final page. George Eliot said of her own reading experience, “I am only just now returned to a sense of the real world about, for I have been reading *Villette*, a still more wonderful book than *Jane Eyre*.” That sentiment seems to me to be one that the novel intends: a disjunction from the real world and a sense of wonder, though I would emphasize the word “wonder” as it refers to puzzlement or confusion. It is a more

puzzling book than *Jane Eyre*, and part of that puzzlement is in figuring out where exactly things went wrong for its protagonist.

It is, after all, a novel that is written in self-aggrandizing style, congratulatory in its attitude towards Lucy Snowe's moral fortitude. The novel has rather few hints of Lucy Snowe's unreliability as a narrator (when compared with a Miles Coverdale, for example). She is right to suspect Madame Beck and Père Silas. She puts her faith in Graham and Paulina, and they prove to be completely worthy. M. Paul, whom she is drawn to in spite of his many flaws, also proves to be a solid foundation on which to build trust and love. So where, exactly, does *Villette* show us another path for our heroine? Not all Victorian novels (worse, Victorian *Gothic* novels) are didactic, of course, but there is at least the acknowledgement that Tess Durbeyfield's fate was sealed by certain moments and choices, regardless of her control over them.

The place, Villette, figures prominently into Lucy's account of her actions. Even though she spends much of the novel moving among the cloistered school in the Rue Fossette and the British havens of La Terrasse and the Hotel Crécy, the city stands around her as a Catholic labyrinth full of shadows, spies, and pagan rituals. The glimpses we get of the city, beyond the bounded spaces in which Lucy spends the majority of her time, are terrifyingly Byzantine: the performance of a tragedy by the half-mad actress, Vashti; a crumbling manor-hall inhabited by a malevolent "faerie queen;" and a dreamlike vision of a civic victory fête, lit by garish torches. Lucy, like any good Gothic heroine, does her best to stay clear of these temptations and, when forced to interact with them, to keep an even keel and avoid the kind of emotional seduction that is implicit in attendance. For all of the attempts to safeguard herself, however, Lucy seems to ignore the fact that all of her companions, many of whom engage in Villette's shadowy society, emerge unscathed. The chapter, in this section, will explore, specifically, Lucy's worries about



the corrupting influence of Labassecourien society, and while her non-engagement with it is narrated as a triumph, it may, in fact, be a marker of the story of her failure to mature. Here, the Gothic valence of juvenescence is flipped on its head, what seems to be toxic is actually a glimpse into the adult world, and engaging with it is the only way to avoid its dooming grasp. This will necessarily lead us into further discussion of Ginevra Fanshawe and her embrace of *Villette*, leading, ultimately to her escape from its confines.

There is a case to be made for the prudish, Protestant abstinence exemplified by Lucy Snowe being a kind of foreshadowing of her ultimate fate. While the primness might foreclose the entry into the world of adult sexuality, dooming her to eternal pre-adult virginity, it is not typically a binary presented in Gothic literature. Works of Gothic fiction both preceding and following *Villette* hold chastity up as a virtue for its heroines, but not eternally so. The most optimistic Gothic novels end with their heroines running off with the young strapping hero. Refusing to give in to the sexual desires of the villain is a temporary act of fortitude and defiance. Once the proper lover has been introduced, the novels expect their heroines to assent. In fact, the storied tradition of doomed, plain friends, nuns, and virginal martyrs in Gothic novels suggests that holding onto one's virginity in the face of a worthy suitor is as much a narrative sin as giving in to the carnal lust of the villain. In the case of *Villette*, one expects Lucy to give up her virtue within the proper confines of marriage to M. Paul. But there is a strong undercurrent that advocates for not only the shelf life of virginity's virtue, but also the active pursuit of sexual experiences and the immersion in the passionate, sexual underbelly of Gothicized Europe.

I am certainly not the first person to discuss *Villette* as a novel where psychological development mirrors external spaces. Liana Piehler insists that "the narrator's introduction of herself through the lens of geographic placement suggests a complexity and palimpsest of

personal elements that will emerge through her narrative over space and time” (Piehler 44). If place is a reflection of Lucy’s psychological development into adulthood, however, the results are not particularly pleasant. The portrait that Brönte paints of the country of Labasscouer and its capital, Vilette, is not a flattering one. The characteristics of a post-Revolutionary backwater, a stunted cousin of France and Germany, and the other great Western European nations are supposedly taken from Brönte’s own experiences in Brussels. Those experiences end in a nervous breakdown and are surely colored by her growing despondency over the death of her brother and sisters a few years before. Beyond the purely biographical trauma that must accompany Brönte’s vision of Labassecour, *Vilette* has a kind of leering distaste for anything associated with the place. Lucy Snowe has a heady mix of fear and contempt when it comes to her environs, and those sensations translate into some of the novel’s most searing passages.

An early description of the countryside enumerates its features as “somewhat bare, flat, and treeless [...] slimy canals crept, like half-torpid green snakes, beside the road; and formal pollard willows edged the level fields, tilled like kitchen-garden beds. The sky too was monotonously gray; the atmosphere was stagnant and; [...] a place of] deadening influences” (60). Later, the capital is described as featuring “the outline of more than one overbearing pile; which might be palace or church, I could not tell” (63). All this is not to mention its people: “Two mustachioed men came suddenly from behind the pillars [...] their dress implied pretensions to the rank of gentlemen, but, poor things! they were very plebeian in soul. They spoke with insolence [...] it was terrible to think of encountering those bearded, sneering simpletons” (64). Let us not forget that “Labassecour” means “the farmyard” and that “Vilette” has been suggested to mean “the little village” a condescending assessment of the provinciality of the capitol city. Labassecour resembles, in outline, the humid and languorous Italy made famous by

Radcliffe and Lewis's novels. Added to this mix, however, is the assessment that the people of this country as "simpletons."

A fair number of Gothic novels, both before and after *Villette*, are obsessed with the degeneration of nobility. While the sneering men who accost Lucy are well dressed, she is quick to point out that they have only "pretensions to the rank of gentlemen." She can see into their plebian souls and find them unworthy of noble trappings. Gothic villains, from *The Castle of Otranto*'s Manfred nearly a century before to the titular Count Dracula a half-century later, are rendered as object-lessons in the pitfalls of aristocratic lineages. The heroes of such novels are more humbly born (or, indeed, a part of the *bourgeoisie*), and their quality comes from a pretense-less fortitude that generations of *noblés oblige* destroys. However, *Villette* the city seems to be a space where nobility never existed in truth. Aristocratic gentility is not so much decayed as pretended at, more often than not. Lucy's delicate English sensibilities are offended by the attempt. She makes numerous references to the Labassecourienne "slaughter[ing] the speech of Albion" (65) and takes every opportunity to eviscerate their culture as either borrowed or boorish. Upon seeing the King and Queen of Labassecour, Lucy remarks:

By whomsoever majesty is beheld for the first time, there will always be experienced a vague surprise, bordering on disappointment, that the same does not appear seated, en permanence, on a throne, bonneted with a crown, and furnished, as to hand, with a scepter. Looking out for a king and queen, and seeing only a middle-aged soldier and a rather young lady, I felt half cheated, half pleased. (213)

“Half cheated, half pleased” seems a valid descriptor of Lucy Snowe’s experience of Labassecour. She is cheated of a place of beauty, of a place of charm, of a place of good English values. She is also pleased by the toothlessness of it all.

Lucy even seems to extend her critique of the underwhelming nature of Labassecour’s Gothic threat to the potential heroines with whom she might have found common ground. She says of the departed lover of M. Paul: “there were girls like her in Madame Beck’s school—phlegmatics—pale, slow, inert, but kind natured, neutral of evil, undistinguished for good” (397). It is a stark refusal of the binary of good and evil that the Gothic tends to set up and subsequently undermine. Most Gothic stories posit their heroes and heroines as exemplars of virtue and moral fortitude, in contrast to their devious villains. More thematically complex yarns can then begin to dissolve that binary: questioning if the villain and hero are all that different (both *Peter and Wendy* and *Bleak House* accomplish some form of this). In categorizing poor, departed Justine Marie as “neutral to evil” and “undistinguished for good,” Lucy removes any and all possibility that there could be a binary to unravel. Justine Marie is neither evil nor good, nor some combination of the two; she is far too formless for that. Similarly, Lucy has removed the sexualized anemia from the Gothic heroine’s list of afflictions. Rather she is phlegmatic: apathetic and listless rather than virginal and pure.

One major departure from the structure of the typical Gothic novel lies in Lucy’s ability to turn away from the society she deems so desperately unworthy. Elisha Cohn, in her article on *Villette*’s tendency towards suspended animation, opens by reminding us that the novel “infamously makes social activity unrecognizable: Lucy Snowe’s fractured attachment to the community around her has been central to criticism of the novel since its publication” (Cohn 843). Lucy refuses to participate in what she sees as a contemptible society. That feeling of being

“half-pleased” seems to be a manifestation of her contentment in remaining anti-social. It is ironic, then, that her only society prior to the second part of the novel is with Ginevra Fanshawe, who, as previously hinted, takes the exact opposite tactic in braving the city of Villette.

We have staved off discussion of Ginevra Fanshawe long enough in this chapter. She is a character and a force that cannot be ignored. While the seemingly sexual attraction that Lucy has for Ginevra is important and must be discussed, I am more interested in the ways in which the two women represent divergent paths through the novel. Furthermore, it is Lucy’s closeted attraction to Ginevra that serves as synecdoche for her prophylactic defense against adulthood. Ginevra is more than a foil for Lucy; she is the manifestation of a counter-narrative to the novel that attracts and repulses its protagonist and, ultimately, proves too convincing for its cynical narrator to dismiss.

Queerness in general and closeted homosexual desire in particular, as we have discussed in previous chapters, make for good inroads into both the Gothic and into the figure that is neither child nor adult. Given the inability for a character in a Victorian novel to embrace, overtly, their homosexuality, it is easy to confuse a refusal to enter into adult sexual relationships—a form of child-like purity—with an unrequited or unconsummated attraction or relationship. As a result, it is hard to figure whether Lucy’s active refusal to pursue sexual or romantic relationships is a function of her attraction to Ginevra or the attraction is merely a symptom of Lucy’s commitment to staying childlike. After all, an attraction that cannot be acted upon is a perfect expression of the deeply felt but ultimately sexless love of which a child is capable. These are Kincaid’s principles for pedophilia applied in reverse: Lucy, believing herself a child, invests heavily in the belief that there could be nothing sexual in her attraction to

Ginevra, and thereby can continue to fawn over her shamelessly without fear of pursuing an adult relationship.

The fawning is shameless, to be sure. As opposed to descriptions of Graham, which are always vague and have little trace of physicality, or descriptions of M. Paul, which are generally focused on his undesirable foibles, descriptions of Ginevra are lengthy, numerous and overstuffed with compliments. Curiously, they all seem to attempt some attack on Ginevra's character and wind up undermining it in favor of more praise. For example:

Never was any duchess more perfectly, radically *nonchalante* than she: a weak, transient amaze was all she knew of the sensation of wonder. Most of her other faculties seemed to be in this same, flimsy condition: her liking and disliking, her love and hate, were mere cobweb and gossamer; but she had one thing about her that seemed strong and durable enough, and that was—her selfishness. [...] Notwithstanding these foibles, and various others—needless to mention—but by no means of a refined or elevating character—how pretty she was! How charming she looked when she came down on a sunny Sunday morning. (85)

In spite of her desire to show us Ginevra as one of those dull and phlegmatic Gothic maidens in the vein of Justine Marie, Lucy is overwhelmed by Ginevra's sheer beauty. Furthermore, the critique is that Ginevra, unlike Lucy, is free of a sternness and gravity that keeps our protagonist rooted. Being able to see through the mystery of Villette to the "simpletons" underneath is part of Lucy's defense against the Gothic elements of the city. If Ginevra's convictions are "cobweb and gossamer," she seems especially likely to be caught up in the frightful masquerade that the city offers. Indeed, everyone seems to regard Ginevra with the sort of shrug and sigh of a lost cause. Late in the novel, when Lucy admits to Mr. Home that Graham was interested in Ginevra

prior to Paulina, he exclaims: “I would have given him Ginevra with all my heart; but Polly! [...] she is not his equal” (428). Mr. Home and others see fallenness: a wanton quality that makes her unworthy of or, perhaps, simply incapable of being protected from the adult forces of the world.

And yet, it is that sympathy to these adult forces that makes Ginevra well-suited to being the counter-narrative heroine of the novel. Gothic novels are at their most didactic when they have an involvement with gendered sin. The purity of the Gothic heroine is usually her abstinence (at least until the hero arrives), be it manifest in her rebuffing the sexual advances of a suitor or remaining imprisoned in solitude rather than associate with the denizens of the tower in which she is confined. She is rewarded for her efforts by being rescued. As we have discussed, *Villette* plays up this trope by giving us a Lucy Snowe who consciously refuses to engage: whose abstinence is a decision rather than an omission. In this fortitude, however, there is also a kind of torpor. Lucy, like Bartleby of Melville’s eponymous short story (ironically published the same year), prefers not to. Brontë is clear to problematize this behavior, linking it to a kind of living death: “I seemed to hold two lives—the life of thought, and that of reality; and, provided the former was nourished with a sufficiency of the strange necromantic joys of fancy, the privileges of the latter might remain limited to daily bread, hourly work and a roof of shelter” (77). Lucy lives a half-life; she is sustained mainly by joys that are not fully alive. Those joys of living, presumably, are the ones that come with socializing, going out and taking in the world around her. Ginevra is an expert at these things. She doesn’t avoid infection or fear corruption in the same way that Lucy Snowe seems to, nor does she disdain the Gothic tumor that is Labassecour with the same rancor.

Ginevra’s goals are simple: marry rich and have fun. Her mercenary aims, where having means are concerned, are apparent from the start. In their first meeting, Ginevra explains: By and

by we are to marry—rather elderly gentlemen, I suppose—with cash. [...] this is better than ‘earning a living’ as you say” (55). Lucy dismisses these comments as the fancies of an entitled brat; it proves to be a sound strategy. When Ginevra realizes that Dr. John is too bourgeois for her expensive tastes, she cuts him loose in favor of the effeminate continental Colonel, de Hamal. When it is clear that the *pensionnat* is keeping her from marrying, she devises an elaborate plan to dress de Hamal as the Black and White Nun so that he can prepare the necessary locks and egresses to spirit the two of them off into elopement.

Such actions ought to create, in the didactic world of the Gothic, a very unfortunate situation for Miss Fanshawe. Lucy herself admits as much: “In winding up Miss Fanshawe’s memoirs, the reader will no doubt expect to hear that she finally came to bitter expiation of her youthful levities. Of course a large share of suffering lies in reserve for her future?” (476). Those are readerly and generic expectations that are not to be, however. She allows herself the corruption of adult sexuality, seducing Dr. John and De Hamal, using a gender-bending trick to escape and elope with an effeminate continental rake against the wishes of her godfather. It is not merely that Ginevra is active in her pursuit of marriage; she co-opts the Gothic stories of Vilette in order to make her speedy exit from childhood. Where Lucy refuses to engage with Vilette’s Gothic elements, standing aloof from them even when it means failing to rescue M. Paul, Ginevra dives in headlong and proves successful. As opposed to the fates of Dr. John, Paulina, Mrs. Bretton, and Mr. Home, which are overshadowed by death and loss, Lucy writes, in closing, of Ginevra:

Under every cloud, no matter what its nature, Ginevra, as of old, called out lustily for sympathy and aide. She had no notion of meeting any distress single-handed. In some shape from some quarter or other, she was pretty sure to obtain her will,



and so she got on—fighting the battle of her life by proxy, and, on the whole, suffering as little as any human being I have ever known. (478)

It is a resounding success for a character in *Villette*. If Lucy feels Ginevra's happiness is undeserved, for reaching out to others, it is an inconsequential form of disapproval, as we are told Lucy and Ginevra remain close pen pals for the rest of their days.

What makes this whole episode with the Black and White Nun so integral to my argument is that it marks a moment when the torpor of arrested development can only be avoided by embracing the Gothic. Where both Peter Pan and Harold Skimpole represent amalgams of Gothic stock characters, serving as object lessons in why it is advisable to allow children to grow up, Lucy Snowe's story ends in tragedy because of her refusal to engage with what seems Gothic and corrupting.

She has had the chance previously. Madame Beck all but gives her the chance to intervene toward the close of the novel. When M. Paul and Lucy's affections for one another are discovered, Madame Beck sends her into the Gothic heart of the city of Villette to treat with "Malevola"—Lucy's name for the terrifying crone that has kept her would-be lover enslaved. The approach to Malevola's home, the inauspiciously named "Numéro 3, Rue de Mages," is as Gothic a description as we get in the novel:

Deep into the old and grim Basse-Ville [...] antiquity brooded above this region, business was banished thence. Rich men had once possessed this quarter, and once grandeur had made her seat here. That church whose dark, half ruinous turrets over-looked the square, was the venerable and formerly opulent shrine of the Magi" (387).

And later: “Hoar enchantment here prevailed; a spell had opened for me elf-land” (389). Lucy, out of professional duty, takes it upon herself to visit the very epicenter of the Gothic Villette she has so diligently avoided or scoffed at. Now, with the doors to “elf-land” open, she finds, at the center of this architectural canker, Malevola herself. Lucy describes her as “hunchbacked, dwarfish, and doting, she was adorned like a barbarian queen [...] a silver beard bristled her chin” (389). In most Gothic novels, this is the moment of revelation, where the heroine confronts the lurking terror at the center of her troubles and resolves to take action. Granted, that action is usually flight or reverie, but it is an active reaction to their circumstance, an acknowledgement that they can no longer ignore their plight.

Lucy, predictably, simply abstains, delivers the message she is supposed to deliver, and does not confront M. Paul on the matter at hand. This is exacerbated by her long sojourn to the town square on the night of the Independence Fête. There she sees Madame Beck, the corrupt priest, Père Silas, and Malevola herself—Madame Walravens—in dastardly conference with M. Paul and a young woman who bears the same name as Paul’s deceased beloved. Still, she does not confront them, waiting instead for M. Paul to come to her, days later, after the chance to set the situation right has passed. This is not an action of entrapment, as Lucy speaks at length about her motivations for such action. She is stubbornly refusing to engage rather than feeling powerless to act. If the role of the Gothic heroine is to flee, Lucy chooses instead to ignore, to refuse to acknowledge the plot in which she is embroiled. Acknowledgement would mean a crossing of the threshold into adulthood. She would be forced to either win M. Paul (resulting in eventual marriage and sexual congress), or lose him (resulting in the revelation that she wished to marry him). All Lucy can do is delay and defer, refusing to acknowledge the eventual loss of M. Paul, as that action consigns her to being a spinster (still a form of adulthood).

There is one moment in which Lucy takes action to confront the Gothic shadows and terrors around her. Upon returning from the Fête and seeing the image of the nun laid out in her bed, Lucy is determined to take action:

Tempered by late incidents, my nerves disdained hysteria [...] I had rushed on the haunted couch; nothing leaped out, or sprung, or stirred; all the movement was mine, so was all the life, the reality, the substance, the force; as my instinct felt. I tore her up—the incubus! I held her on high—the goblin! I shook her loose—the mystery! And down she fell—down all around me—down in shreds and fragments—and I trode upon her. [...] The long nun proved a long bolster, dressed in a long black stole and artfully invested with a white veil [...] to the head-bandage was pinned a slip of paper. It bore, in pencil, these mocking words:—

“The nun of the attic bequeaths to Lucy Snowe, her wardrobe. She will be seen in the Rue Fossette no more.” (470)

In her one moment of action, Lucy Snowe, ironically, only reveals the last shreds of Ginevra’s own lengthy preparations. As the Gothic spook falls “down in shreds and fragments,” Lucy has moved no closer to adulthood. She only sees the evidence that others have done so. Even more curious is Ginevra’s parting gift. The bequeathing of the nun’s costume to Lucy seems a pointed attempt to encourage Miss Snowe herself to exit the bounded, confined world of the *pensionnat* and escape with M. Paul to adulthood and happiness. As we know, none of this occurs. Lucy does not heed Ginevra’s call for action and lets both the goddess of her forbidden idolatry and her gender-normative lover slip through her fingers.

The last paragraph of *Villette* reads: “Madame Beck prospered all the days of her life; so did Père Silas; Madame Walravens fulfilled her ninetieth year before she died. Farewell” (496). Depressing and disturbing as this dénouement may be, it seems utterly consistent with the counter-narrative that *Villette* provides. Embracing adulthood, no matter the seemingly awful, Gothic valences of it, is the only way to become happy. Where Peter Pan was ultimately the trapped, Gothic “heroine” of a novel that admits to the tragedy of growing up while still recommending that it happen, Lucy Snowe has no preternatural youth to keep her from experiencing the failure more directly. Similarly, Harold Skimpole makes eternal juvenescence into an active process. He cultivates himself as an eternal youth, whereas Lucy simply abstains from adulthood, hoping for the same response.

The results are tragic. Perhaps the most tragic thing about them are how internalized her desire to refuse seems to be. Up through the novel’s end, she cannot grasp why she continues to fail to find happiness. The closest she comes is an argument about class. Paulina at one point declares that she thought “Lucy was a rich lady, and had rich friends” (286). While Lucy may not be a rich lady, she does indeed have rich friends, and as Ginevra proves, not having rich friends is no reason to consign oneself to a tragically penniless existence. The real reason for Lucy’s continued unhappiness is her refusal to enter into an adult world that necessarily means getting one’s hands dirty. Where, in previous novels, Gothic sentiments were used to express the eternal child as a figure of unutterable horror, *Villette* uses it to describe a self-defeating resistance to adulthood, the desire to remain ever a child, and the excuses for not maturing at the rates of one’s friends and lovers. The idea of a failed *Bildungsroman* is an inherently Gothic project, but what is expressed as manifestly Gothic in the novel turns out to be nothing more than growing pains, purposefully ignored and intensified in their neglect.

## Chapter Four

### Exhuming Youth: Second Childhood in Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life*

The idea of a childhood without end certainly presents itself as Gothic in the previous chapters and their attendant texts. In that presentation, however, those texts contain odd interventions. We wonder at not finding the Gothic in *Peter and Wendy*. Skimpole becomes the most reviled of villains because he is a vampiric monster in a world of social realism. Lucy Snowe's bildungsroman is cut short by a banshee's wail that is bound up in her inability to act upon an adult desire for love. There, the Gothic becomes a kind of code for issues of maturation. Its very presence in the novel tells the reader that not all is well, and to be wary, not unlike the terrifying but helpful specter, common to Gothic novels, that warns the heroine of approaching danger by manifesting and thereby making her uneasy.

The novellas that make up George Eliot's 1857 anthology, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, are full of Gothic imagery not unrelated to childhood, but no longer a complete stand-in for the nebulous transition into adulthood. While "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story" is an almost archetypal work of Gothic fiction, it is also not much of a stretch to read "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton" (hereafter referred to simply as "Amos Barton"), with its fallen nobility and tale of a man accidentally caught between a virtuous waif and a conniving widow, and "Janet's Repentance," with its often melodramatic descriptions of a bound and suffering woman, as heavily influenced by Gothic themes and imagery. What makes this collection a fitting coda for this work, the capstone of the interrelationship between the end of childhood, Gothic themes and imagery, and a socially constructed anxiety surrounding the loss of innocence that typifies

adulthood, are the ways in which Eliot strategically uses Gothicized tropes in order to tell a very different set of stories about the purity of children and the postlapsarian corruption of adults.

Where Eliot's anthology differs dramatically from those works examined in previous chapters is that its tales are not the tales of looming adulthood figured as a kind of death, but rather tales of recollecting childhood as a similarly inscrutable epoch. In both *Peter and Wendy* and *Bleak House*, adulthood and loss lie in the future. Peter manages to avoid growing up through magic, and Skimpole grows old and dies all without ever compromising his childish innocence. Though *Villette* is told in retrospect, Lucy Snowe excises the passage that might have given readers any details of the end of her distended childhood. The stories of *Scenes of Clerical Life*, by contrast, are all told from the perspective of an unnamed resident of the town of Milby, who remarks on the protagonists of the stories from a period of time either after their deaths or in their final days. Even when the youths or young adulthoods of the characters are examined, childhood is distant but central.

In "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story," we are given a Gothic romance focused entirely on the distant childhood and adolescence of the titular character. Its importance in this argument lies in its assertion that children are capable of the same kind of dark, corrupt, and murderous thoughts as adults. Eliot presents a childhood that is inherently corrupt, marking a stark departure from the Victorian child cult's belief in intrinsic innocence. By contrast, "Janet's Repentance" is an attempt to recall childhood, and a more audacious attempt to reclaim it. These endeavors are met with dark-minded ruminations on the end of childhood. Rather than the fear of an oncoming adolescence, Gothicized through dark and uncanny imagery, the novella gives us a character thinking back on the end of childhood, finding herself similarly unable to define its essential characteristics. This ends with an attempt to return to that childlike state, which is successful

only insofar as the protagonist can maneuver through a nightmarish space where she herself is described as a Gothic figure by the author. In both cases, the traditional binary of innocent childhood/corrupt adulthood, divided by a nebulous, Gothicized period of adolescence, are turned on their head, leaving us with a way back into childhood and innocence that has nothing to do with the purity osmosis that comes from spending time among children.

It is worth noting that time and focus do not allow us to look at the briefest of Eliot's tales, the aforementioned "Amos Barton." While it certainly is a worthy entry into this literature of childhood un-rememberable, there are more explicit examples in the latter two novellas. "Amos Barton," however, does have a few useful notes that can be touched upon here to better set the stage for the latter two stories. First off, in the character of the Countess Czerlaski, we see an early example of Eliot's interest, throughout the collection, in Gothic figures. Moreover, Czerlaski's Gothic-ness is mostly predicated on a strange relationship with a man who may be her brother or her lover. Though her jealousy when her brother marries is odd, most of the incestuous suggestions come from the idle gossip of the townsfolk—an unconscious, casual cruelty that inadvertently dooms the heroine. This is worth noting because it also encourages the reader to see the Gothic in these stories as a kind of obfuscating veil, a collection of suggestions, rumors and hunches, all of which are relevant, none of which are true. The second important point is the way in which the coming birth of a child is presented as a kind of dooming omen. Milly Barton's pregnancy is a growing infection that spells her doom, rather than a movement towards a happy occasion. When she gives birth and subsequently expires, the infant having been stillborn is a briefly mentioned gloss in comparison to Milly's death. Birth as a death knell hangs heavy over Eliot's stories, and it is not insignificant that the two subsequent heroines, Tina and Janet, though both married, are childless. Between these two ideas—that the Gothic is both ever-

present and also is the stuff of hearsay, and that bearing children is a self-annihilating act—the two remaining stories tell tales of the Gothic obfuscation of childhood’s end, and the ways in which the traditional, lapsarian account of maturation is subtly incorrect.

*Part I: Wicked Thoughts: Caterina Sarti and the Murderous Child*

The child in transition, who is figured sometimes as an eternal child, or else an adult playing at childhood, is certainly an uneasy figure. Peter Pan, Harold Skimpole and the inscrutably impish Paulina de Bassompierre are all described as fairy-like over the course of the texts in which they appear. This is apt, as the immortal, alien fairy makes for a figure both alluring and repugnant to adults. Faerie, the place, being a realm where time passes differently, is one component of the eternal child/fairy link, but another, equally important component is the changeling. A kind of uncanny double, or *doppelgänger*, as made famous by Freud’s essay, *Das Unheimliche*, the changeling fits well here. It has the shape of a child, often a child who has gone missing, but its intentions are more aligned with the cruelty of fairies, rather than their playfulness; it appears more or less human, and outwardly behaves as such, but has incomprehensible motives that are just as easily benevolent as monstrous. This is brought home to us with Barrie’s description of Peter Pan as “gay, innocent, and heartless;” fairies and children both might be more human than animal, but they lack some core quality of sympathy that makes them both seductive and dangerous (Barrie 154).

This trope of the changeling certainly has a place in Gothic fictions, so we should not find it surprising that the central character of “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story,” the Italian-born adoptee of the Cheverel family, Caterina Sarti, is described by those around her as a “dark, tiny [...] gypsy changeling” (Eliot 104) and a “clever, black-eyed monkey” (Eliot 101). These epithets,



incredibly, are given with affection by Sir Christopher, patriarch of the Cheverel Clan, but clearly imply the inhuman degeneracy that the Gothic often places upon the ever-untrustworthy Romanist Italians. This section looks at the ways in which Caterina Sarti is portrayed both as the monstrous and murderous creature that her nationality implies, and as a quintessential child innocent. Far from being a schizophrenic portrayal, the novella implicitly conflates the two, giving the reader the portrayal of the perfect child, adored by her guardian, as not so very different from the “clever black-eyed monkey” that is capable of murder.

### **Section 1: Gothic Ornamentation**

One almost doesn't need to prove that “Mr. Gilfil's Love Story” is a Gothic affair. It contains a wealth of common tropes: the murderous woman scorned, an Italian interloper, a heartless but beautiful man who keeps a woman in emotional bondage, a valiant hero with ties to the Church, and a vast, ruinous manor house. That said, the tale also elides many of the core features of a Gothic tale: while Caterina's desire to murder Captain Wybrow is brought to the brink of action, he is already dead of unrelated, unsuspecting causes when she finds him; the coming threat to the old patriarchal order is never upset, as Sir Christopher is able to replace the dead Wybrow with another nephew; the option for tragic melodrama that presents itself in Caterina's flight and illness resolves into a more or less amiable domestic state of affairs—one cut short without the sting of unrequited love. Essentially, while the story adopts the Gothic in ornamentation, at its foundation the story is focused on a rather ordinary tale of love lost and solace found. This Gothic ornamentation (or façade or veneer) of the story is not entirely for show, however. Insofar as this decoration is used to describe the process of children maturing (a

point made explicitly, as we shall see), it also becomes our way into understanding where it is a solid surface to look upon, and where it is an indistinct tangle.

The idea of Gothic ornamentation mirrors the central location of the novella. We must look to the renovation of the manor house as a formal move; just as an English nobleman wants to dress up his dreary Palladian home with exciting Gothic features, an English tale of why an old reverend is so lonely is dressed up in the trappings of an Italian Gothic romance, altering the feel of the space, but not fundamentally changing the foundations. Sir Christopher Cheverel's manor house is, throughout the course of the story, being remade as a Gothic ruin, in accordance with his architectural predilections and, most likely, as a conscious nod to the *pater familias* of Gothic fiction, Horace Walpole and his remodeling of Strawberry Hill (or perhaps, a more contemporary skewering of Augustus Egg). Caterina herself is all but explicitly lumped in with Sir Christopher's penchant for Gothic accoutrements. Eliot explains that within three months of her coming to reside at Cheverel Manor, "she became the favorite pet of the household, thrusting Sir Christopher's favorite bloodhound of that day, Mrs. Bellamy's two canaries, and Mr. Bates's largest Dorking hen into a merely secondary position" (Eliot 114). She is essentially another curio brought back from the Cheverels' time abroad and while "Caterina soon conquered all prejudices against her foreign blood," she does not cease to be identified as an outsider, a pale, odd monkey, or a songbird whose purpose at Cheverel manor is to perform. She falls neatly into Sir Christopher's desires for a Gothic home.

It is interesting to note that the Gothic, as represented in "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story," seems to be both a set of aesthetic values and a signifier of maturation. In a central passage that gives us a quick sketch of Caterina's late childhood and early adolescence, she is compared to Cheverel Manor, for both are being remodeled:

While Cheverel Manor was growing from ugliness into beauty, Caterina too was growing from a little yellow bantling into a whiter maiden, with no positive beauty indeed, but with a certain light airy grace, which, with her large appealing dark eyes, and a voice that in its low-toned tenderness [...] gave her a more than usual charm. Unlike the building, however, Caterina's development was the result of no systematic or careful appliances She grew up much like the primroses, which the gardener is not sorry to see within his enclosure, but takes no pains to cultivate. (Eliot 116)

The aesthetic value of the Gothic here is obvious; after all, the ten year period wherein the manor house is transformed is described as “growing from ugliness into beauty”—the Gothic being a preferable style to the Palladian. But it is in that sense of development and maturation that we are most interested here. Particularly, the idea that the artificiality of the story's Gothic interests is put on display is of great consequence. The remodeling of the manor is implied to be the “result of systematic [and] careful appliances”—a stark contrast to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century conception of Gothic restoration, where the ultimate goal is to artifice a kind of romantic ruin. In that regard, the renovation of the building is mere façade when compared with the rearing of Caterina herself, who, in not being carefully tended to, is much the same as Skimpole's children who seem to have “tumbled up” (Dickens 89) rather than grown up. She is also not dissimilar from Peter Pan here who, like the primrose, is cherished without being domesticated. And her being described as having “no positive beauty” goes along neatly with the slap-dash manner of her maturation. Even if she is not an entirely fit ornament for the home when she first arrives, the manor's renovation helps transform her into one. She may have started as a “yellow bantling,” but she becomes a “whiter maiden”—chromatically fit to be a Gothic heroine.

All this is to say that while much of the Gothic in “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story” is valued only superficially, the feral upbringing of Caterina Sarti, who, rather than being an English manor house remade into Gothic style, is an Italian with a thin veneer of Englishness, has more Gothic purchase than her environs. She is raised, but in a state of chaotic flux: brought up, perhaps, but also tumbling down, much like the Gothic ruin that Sir Christopher wishes to create.

### **Section 2: Miss Sarti’s Love Story**

This brings us to Eliot’s strange account of Caterina’s childhood. The underlying assumption in the other texts has been that children are intrinsically innocent and, even if they stray from being well-behaved, there is a joy in their harmless “naughtiness,” a separate peccadillo from corrupt wickedness. Kincaid insists that we, like the unnamed Governess of James’ *Turn of the Screw*, prefer “[our children] with the spirit to be naughty.” Eliot gives us a childhood where a lack of understanding of the adult world, what another author might term innocence, is actually the spawning ground of real wickedness: hatred, madness, even murder. Children are, far from merely being capable of naughtiness, prone to a kind of wicked monstrosity that stems from their innocence. Caterina is Eliot’s subject in this regard and it is to her we must now look.

If Caterina is another ornament in the Cheverel manor, she is also (in keeping with that home), a blended figure, neither fully child nor adult, grown up but not cultivated, Italian and English. We see Caterina falling in line with much of the climatological account of politics. As an Italian, we see her described as “hot blooded” and, later, “feverish”—traits that signify her inability to control herself. As opposed to the more temperate English who are “cool-headed,” Caterina’s foreignness is betrayed in her emotional makeup, and though she is raised in the

temperate climate of rural England, the blending can only do so much. It is worth noting, at this juncture, that Caterina's identity is a patchwork down to her very name. The Cheverels use the Italian form of her name from time to time (as opposed to anglicizing it to Catherine—though that has its own Gothic valence), but also give her the Anglo nickname, "Tina." While Tina comes from the old English "Tyna," it also represents, in Caterina's case, less of a shortening than a blending of her original moniker. While "Tina" can be a shortened form of common Anglo names like Christina, it is, in Caterina's case, also an excising of the central syllable. She's Tina, not "Rina," and, in making her so, the nickname reads as an attempt to subtly alter her Mediterranean makeup. As she is the most reliable source of the Gothic in this novella, we must look at the ways in which her character, her love story, and her childhood all intersect to create the idea of a child whose immaturity is the source of others' anxiety and whose innocence—far from restorative—allows for murderous possibilities.

As we explored in the previous section, Caterina is often compared, much like Jane Eyre, to an animal (as with her displacement of the hens, canaries, and bloodhounds as the manor's favorite pet). David Lodge, in his 1973 introduction to the anthology, is somewhat upset by these similes, insinuating that she is characterized, as a consequence, as "something less than human" (26). Alexandra Norton rejects this reading, insisting instead that the use of animal comparisons is a sign of her being in need of protection, noting especially that the repeated assertion that Caterina is a "little bird," invokes both an object of pity and personage of dubious self-awareness. But in this combination of needing protection and being unaware, Norton also manages to hit upon the essential childishness of Caterina's state. In looking at a paragraph that sees the young woman awake from fainting, Norton points out that "the dawning consciousness parallels the beginning of life itself; it is a 'birth' and Eliot describes such awakening as

mirroring the growth of infant consciousness” (Norton 221). While Norton is correct to draw the parallels between Caterina’s rise from reverie and the developing awareness of the infant, she uses this to justify the central tension of the novella as one of the unreflective and thoughtless Caterina, running up against intellectualized wisdom of Gilfil. While it is undeniable that Caterina is childishly unreflective, it seems wrong to attribute this to some kind of deficiency, rather than a feature of being, in fact, a child.

Eliot goes out of her way to call Caterina a child at every possible turn, whether it be Captain Wybrow claiming that she is “more child than woman [...] a little girl to be petted and played with” (Eliot 140), or the narrator referring to her exclusively as “child” or “poor child,” only using the term “woman” in combination with the word “little” or else to assert that she is not one. And while Norton reads this as a kind of insensibility—a mark of tragic foolishness—the novella also seems to suggest that being childlike is a deep-seated virtue.

In keeping with the precepts of the Victorian child-cult, that selfsame belief system that allows Skimpole to remain at Bleak House and urges audiences to see *Peter Pan* year after year, to be childlike is to have one’s innocence restored. And while both *Peter and Wendy* and *Villette* feature childlike characters recoiling from romantic love as a sign of corrupt adulthood, “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story” seems to venerate romantic love as the very purest expression of what it means to be a child—an idea Eliot would go on to develop in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). In first describing the deep-seated devotion that Maynard Gilfil bears for Caterina, Eliot informs us that “among the many kinds of first love, that which begins in childish companionship is the strongest and most enduring: when passion comes to unite its force to long affection, love is at its spring-tide” (Eliot 118). And later, when Sir Christopher is incredulous that Caterina might not love Maynard, he exclaims “pooh, pooh! The little monkey *must* love you. Why, you were her

first playfellow” (Eliot 156, emphasis Eliot’s). The extrapolation from the two quotes is that not only is childhood the ripest breeding ground for love and passion, but that childhood friendships necessarily are romantic. That Caterina might love Wybrow, when she played with Gilfil, simply does not make sense: he was “her first playfellow” there for she “*must* love” him.

And so it is that romantic love, quite divorced from sex without being divorced at all from marriage, is here the domain of children and the childlike. Where *Villette*’s Graham Bretton allows *his* first playfellow, Paulina, to sink to her knees and drink beer from his cupped hands in an uncomfortable mimicry of oral sex, the love described throughout Eliot’s novella consistently begins in childhood and is expected to end in marriage, all the while eliding any supposition that sexuality might be at stake. Indeed, even the term “passion”—often a Victorian euphemism for some sort of sexual interest—is mostly ascribed to Caterina in moments of childish affection or tantrums.

Images of adult love in the novella are decidedly tepid when compared with the love children bear one another. The relationship between Sir Christopher and his wife, for instance, seems utterly devoid of any sort of passion whatsoever. Eliot informs the reader that her being put upon to live in a house constantly under construction is mediated not by affection for her husband, or even belief in his principles, but because she “had too rigorous a view of wifely duties, and too profound a deference for Sir Christopher to regard submission as a grievance” (Eliot 115). While the terms “submission,” “deference,” and “duties” call up little if any marital passion, they seem positively warm compared to the utterly loveless and mercenary interactions of Miss Assher and the narcissistic Captain Wybrow. Contiguity here also seems to be important in linking love to childhood. When Lady Assher, Wybrow’s future mother-in-law and Sir Christopher’s childhood sweetheart, rambles boorishly, Eliot informs us that “for poetical

purposes, it would probably be better not to meet one's first love again, after a lapse of forty years" (Eliot 129). While it is tempting to read this statement against Eliot's previous defense of childhood romance, the final clause is telling. It is not that the childhood romance of Sir Christopher and Lady Assher was ill-advised, merely that their forty years apart have doomed it. It is adulthood that altered their depth of feeling, not childhood (this concept of contiguity between the child self and the adult will be of the utmost importance in the next section, and it is interesting to see it foreshadowed here). In short, though Caterina's love is dismissed as being that of a child, it, alongside the similarly generated and cultivated love of Maynard Gilfil, is the closest thing to true feeling in the novella.

It is important that we understand the purity of Caterina's love, as well as its essential childishness, because this is the same love that is later characterized as being full of murderous possibility. It is also the case that it is the reader's only conduit for sympathizing with the protagonist, who is rendered so otherwise "other" that one questions her intrinsic goodness from the start. The majority of the chapters of "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story" are given over to Caterina's slow, simmering anger, first with Captain Wybrow's intended, Miss Assher, and then with the vainglorious Captain himself. While Gothic literature is obsessed with the archetype of the vengeful, scorned woman—particularly if the woman is a Catholic (one need only look to Madame Hortense in *Bleak House* for a familiar example)—Eliot phrases the first manifestations of Caterina's "fevered brain," as an outgrowth of childhood tragedy:

While this poor little heart was being bruised with a weight too heavy for it,  
Nature was holding on her calm, inexorable way, in unmoved and terrible beauty  
[...] The stream of human thought and deed was hurrying and broadening  
onward. The astronomer was at his telescope; the great ships were laboring over



the waves; the toiling eagerness of commerce, the fierce spirit of revolution, were only ebbing in brief rest; and sleepless statesmen were dreading the possible crisis of the morrow. What were our little Tina and her trouble in this mighty torrent, rushing from one awful unknown to another? Lighter than the smallest center of quivering life in the water-drop, hidden and uncared for as the pulse of anguish in the breast of the tiniest bird that has fluttered down to its nest with the long-sought food, and has found the nest torn and empty. (Eliot 132)

In another stunning illustration of Eliot's tendency towards the "roar on the other side of silence," Caterina's suffering is placed against both the natural world and the world of mankind. I focus here on the metaphors concerning men, because they are universally images of work. It is the adult world deemed important in this moment. What Eliot emphasizes about Tina in this paragraph is her smallness—not only the familiar bird analogy, but the invisible workings of microscopic life in a water drop (a canny inverse to the astronomer looking out at the stars). Fitting too is the idea that Caterina is alone in experiencing an inward turn toward familiar, domestic spaces—specifically, spaces of nurturing. Though she is figured as the mother bird in this particular passage (while elsewhere in the novella she is designated as the baby), her concerns are those of maturation—the preservation of a space for childish growth. But what is most striking in this passage is the understanding of the bird's anguish. Permutations of sorrow are what we are most likely to conjure up in musing on the emotional distress of a tiny bird. The bruising of Caterina's heart is similarly expected to move her towards grief over anger. But there is something to be said for Eliot's counterintuitive acumen here.

In order to explore this, we must return to the aforementioned passage in which Eliot describes the return to consciousness as the maturation of an infant; she goes on to describe the

development of emotional response, saying “then, with a little start [their eyes] open wider and begin to *look*, the present is visible but only as a strange writing, and the interpreter Memory is not yet there” (Eliot 167). Memory is what allows the present to be anything other than transitory, and the idea of the gaily careless child, so venerated by Victorians, seems to reflect that vision of perception without sufficient memory. Children cannot experience grief because it is an emotion of long-harbored memory and knowledgeable context. The emotions of momentary passion are more suited to children, and while joy numbers among them, anger does as well. In likening the “tiniest bird” to a child, in its stature and relative insignificance, Eliot opens up the possibility that anguish could reside rather easily in the child’s breast, just as it does in the bird. And sure enough, the uncomprehending Caterina, in her blinding rage, looks much like the infant who sees the visible (i.e. Wybrow’s heartlessness and the inevitability of his marriage to Miss Assher) without the benefit of a memory that might turn it to grief.

Caterina is portrayed as a child whose inability to process sorrow is a result of her youth, and whose Gothicized, Italian heritage excites angry passions. This comes to a head in the strangest analogy of the tale, wherein Mr. Gilfil links vengeance to childishness and argues that murder, like love, is the domain of the child. After discovering a despondent and nearly catatonic Caterina at the home of her childhood friend, Dorcas, Maynard Gilfil, who knows that Caterina approached Wybrow with a knife on the afternoon of his death, confirms that the object of his affection meant to kill him and not harm herself. Caterina laments, “But I had such wicked feelings for a long while. I was so angry and I hated Miss Assher so, and I didn’t care what came to anybody” (Eliot 185). To this, Gilfil replies:

You have seen the little birds when they are very young and just begin to fly, how all their feathers are ruffled when they are frightened or angry; they have no

power over themselves left and might fall into a pit from mere fright. You were like one of those little birds. Your sorrow and suffering had taken such hold of you, you hardly knew what you did (Eliot 185)

While Gilfil also tells Caterina that he is confident she could not have actually gone through with the murder had she encountered Wybrow alive, the tale he tells her is not one of tragedy avoided, but of the innocence of children manifesting as an inability to control their actions. Just as the baby bird “might fall into a pit from mere fright,” so too might Caterina have murdered Wybrow as her “suffering had taken such hold” of her. Note too, that Caterina’s account of her murderous intent is that it is wicked, a term of adult corruption, but later, she worries that Sir Christopher would be angry with her for the attempted murder of his heir: “O how naughty he would have thought me” (186). Caterina’s near-murder of Wybrow is both described as an adult failing and couched in the language of the child who cannot exhibit self-control—the very sort of child that Kincaid argues we like best.

“Mr. Gilfil’s Love-Story” is, ultimately, a tale of the childhood trauma, dressed up in the trappings of the Gothic. It takes on Gothic tropes usually reserved for adults—romantic love and murder—and makes them the natural actions and inclinations of children. Though Gilfil and Caterina eventually marry, Eliot is quick to point out that neither truly becomes an adult. Motherhood is figured as Caterina’s best chance for survival, and would mark her transition into adulthood for good. But Eliot tells us that “the delicate plant had been too deeply bruised, and in the struggle to put forth a blossom it died” (Eliot 193). The wounds of childhood, wounds that, according to Eliot, occurred as an outgrowth of childhood’s natural inclinations, prove too grievous to allow Caterina to enter adulthood. To drive the point home, Eliot repeats a version of this story with Gilfil as well:

“But it is with men as it is with trees: if you lop off their finest branches, into which they were pouring their young life-juice, the wounds will be healed over with some rough boss, some odd excrescence, and what might have been a grand tree, expanding into liberal shade, is but a whimsical, misshapen trunk” (Eliot 193).

Gilfil also is not given the chance to become an adult, though, unlike Caterina, he does age. His “young life-juice” all spent on a dead bride, Gilfil has no ability to live a semblance of an adult life, and the rest of his days are spent handing out sugarplums to children.

In Eliot’s estimation, childhood romances are the most lasting, and children are capable of murder as a natural consequence of their lack of emotional development and calm. Caterina and Maynard behave as children do and end up wracked by guilt and loneliness, ushered into an early grave, and outliving their reason to live. There is no progression into adulthood available in this tale, not because either character refuses to grow up, but because childhood itself is a space for the Gothic and has its own threats and dangers.

## *Part II: Peering Through the Sundered Mirror: Janet’s Repentance and the Childless*

### *Restoration*

Our exercise in exploring the indistinct Gothic as it relates to adolescence has mostly looked out from childhood into the amorphous haze of transition. Peter Pan finds stasis in Neverland, and culls maturation from his presence in order to remain a child. Harold Skimpole feeds off of youth, vampirically, in order to be the beneficiary of childhood generosity he has long since physically surpassed. Lucy Snowe fears the oncoming moment of adulthood and so refuses to narrate her actual transition, hinting at tragedy but leaving concrete details out of it. In

each case, the attendant Gothic imagery serves as replacement for the answers to the nagging, unanswerable questions of the Victorian child-cult: how precisely does a child become an adult? Is the corruption of adults something that occurs through acts (such as sex or work), or is it the corruption a force unto itself? How precisely does an adult become purified through their interactions with children? As these Gothic interventions are equal parts anticipatory dread and evasion of the kind of considerations that would cause the underpinnings of the child-cult to unravel, adulthood is mostly figured as an oncoming event: a patch of thick, black mist obscuring the road ahead and, in the cases of eternal children like Peter Pan, or maturation failures like Lucy Snowe, retarding movement and arresting development. In this last chapter, we turn our gaze backwards: to see the obfuscating Gothic as an impediment to a proper recollection of transition.

“Janet’s Repentance,” the final story Eliot’s *Scenes of Clerical Life*, uses the perspective of an adult woman seeking an escape from her marital miseries to attempt to figure out precisely how her childish wonder turned into an adult life of violence-punctuated woe. While much of the criticism related to this short story has focused, and rightly so, on the pervasive and explicit themes of religious reform, alcoholism, and domestic violence, this chapter seeks to provide a reading of the novella as a futile struggle both to understand the moment of childhood’s end and to rediscover innocence on the far side of the aforementioned Gothic haze.

The eternal children of the previous three chapters are all figurations of an other, specifically one that appears to belong in a very different sort of novel from the one it is written into. Peter Pan becomes the outlier in a novella about growing up. Harold Skimpole reads as secret villain or even more secret hero in a novel where work is both curse and salvation. Lucy Snowe is the developmentally arrested heroine of a *Bildungsroman*. Likewise, Janet Dempster

and her monstrous husband appear at first to be minor characters in a story about the battle for the religious future of the town of Milby, with dissenting pastor Edgar Tryan at its center. As the marital strife and woes of Janet Dempster are introduced, however, she and her husband take center stage, with Janet ending up as the prime example of spiritual salvation, the only lasting monument of a spiritual leader whose legacy is otherwise obscure.

Their tale, itself a *Bildungsroman* of sorts wherein Janet Dempster comes into spiritual maturity (and childlike innocence) through the dissolution of her marriage and her embrace of Tryan's reform, centers largely on her attempts to understand how it is that she came to be in her current, miserable situation. As previously stated, the novella's obsession is not with the delay of adulthood, but rather with the return to childhood. What is most worthwhile in our understanding of the novella's handling of this concept is the idea that it is done entirely from the perspective of the adult seeking a recollection of the moment when innocence is lost and, likewise, figuring the moment when innocence is regained. While the search for these instances obsess the titular character, they are proven to be completely elusive in a world where the transition from child to adult is still described only by its indescribability, as we will see in the next section.

### **Section 1: The Veil of Adolescence**

Insofar as the story of Janet Dempster is a *Bildungsroman*, it tracks her spiritual journey from joy to sorrow to anger, ending with forgiveness. But the majority of Janet's arc is spent in her inability to track her own growth. Karen B. Mann, in her exploration of the language of nature in the works of Eliot, tells us that "Janet's Repentance" emphasizes "the forward direction of time, the irreversibility of the process from birth through growth to maturity and then decay [...] External conditions can alter or halt the process, but they cannot reverse it" (194). While

this assessment is correct, given Eliot's propensity for the language of temporal progression, it is worth noting that much of the occasion for this language of progression comes in moments when a character reflects on the desire for it to be otherwise, or attempts to pinpoint the exact moment when one stage of life became another. In short, Eliot's language of inexorable withering, as identified by Mann, is not a reinforcing of the inevitability of aging, but rather an object lesson in attempting to divine the roots of that inevitability.

The novella attempts to give us some of Peter Pan's anxiety in reverse. Where the characters of *Peter and Wendy* look ahead to the dysphoria of aging (be it read through signs within themselves or in their children), Janet Dempster looks back with the same kind of dread. She seeks to understand the process by which her life came to be in its miserable state and, in doing so, highlights how the end of childhood and the transition into adulthood is recalled, not as an unbroken line, but as a series of instances, the narrative connections between which are tenuous.

The way in which Janet perceives time (especially where time and narrative combine to create causation) is certainly a continual subject of examination in the novella's critical history, though one that must be re-examined here through the lens of contiguity as it relates to the child becoming the adult. Carl R. Kropf notes the inability for Janet to have an uninterrupted narrative, saying that, "time and timelessness play important largely unexplored roles in [...] Eliot's earlier fiction [...] where the author finally arrives at a method of depicting human experience in terms which transcend mere human time as experienced sequentially" (Kropf 420). Though Kropf lists this as a triumph of *Adam Bede* (1859), and goes on to discuss an earlier experimentation with the concept in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, it should be noted that, when placed in the context of maturation, this non-sequential "timelessness" works to interrupt our understanding of the child's

transition into adulthood. Kropf articulates that the obsession with time is, in fact, an obsession with causation—a search for the historical roots of one’s present situation and an endeavor that tackles the fear of childhood’s end from the other side of the timeline. If one fears a child losing their innocence and becoming an adult, then one must work to pinpoint when precisely that innocence was lost: where in the personal arc of maturation is the moment when things go sour? And, by extension, one must ask where, in said narrative, is the place where an intervention could keep the corruption from occurring? Or, as Kropf suggests, what if one “could know that a given pleasing action at the present moment [will] invariably lead to misery in the future?” (Kropf 433). That kind of future projection is, in part, the goal of this veneration of children, and is responsible for the fantasy of the eternal child. Stop childhood from ending and one can stay young forever. In asking the obverse question, Eliot seems less concerned with keeping children in a state of arrested development and more concerned with an understanding of the mechanics. It is a meditation on the question of how a child becomes an adult, but freed from the anxiety of attempting to pinpoint that pleasing action that leads to misery.

Alexandra Norton, in her work “The Seeds of Fiction: George Eliot’s ‘Scenes of Clerical Life,’” continues in this line of inquiry, looking for the redemptive moment that Janet craves. Of particular interest here is Norton’s notion that Janet’s desire for “one spot in her memory” that is capable of providing “an untried spring, where the waters might be sweet” (Eliot 292) is a recapitulation of the functions of memory in Wordsworth’s prologue, wherein the poet “asserts that the ‘spots of time’ of ‘renovating virtue’ by which ‘our minds/ Are nourished and visibly repaired,’ are ‘scattered everywhere’ though ‘taking their date/ From our first childhood’” (Norton 229). While Norton uses the example to show how sympathy might be generated through the common experiences of childhood between individuals who do not share such



memories, the idea that Janet conceives of her past in a particularly Wordsworthian manner, where the earliest memories of childhood become a basis for adult patterns of thought, is useful to understanding her difficulty in escaping or understanding her husband's tyranny.

The rub in this kind of understanding of oneself in relationship to childhood lies in the lack of a contiguous understanding of oneself in relationship to the past. In "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story," time is a kind of endless, monotonous repetition. Caterina continually pursues Wybrow and is continually rebuffed, continually derided by Miss Assher, and continually advised to be careful by Maynard. Her fevered passions do not escalate or subside. She has them, they continue to bedevil her, and when she is about to take action, that action is interrupted by Nature accomplishing what she was just about to do. The pattern of Caterina's life is utterly unchanging. As a result, she never looks forward to the problems of an adult life and never reaches adulthood. But when presented as singular instances, cut off from a legible, unbroken narrative of a child's transition into adulthood, they also do not give Janet the kind of solace promised in Wordsworth's prologue. Janet, in searching for a moment of clear transition from happiness to misery, finds mostly a lack of explanation. As Eliot puts it, "the morning light [...] seemed only to throw its glare [...] on a hideous blank of something unremembered, something that must have made that dark bruise on her shoulder" (Eliot 277). The abuse itself is unremembered, but Eliot voices both Janet and the reader's concern by asking (and here note the use of the singular instance) "what offence Janet had committed in the early years of marriage to rouse the brutal hatred of this man?" (Eliot 277).

Though the question to the eyes of the modern reader is rhetorical—why should one ever think that domestic violence is traceable to some sin on the part of the abused?—it haunts Janet, leading eventually to a vision strikingly similar to that of Esther Summerson in her fever dream

at the midway point of *Bleak House*. In this pivotal passage, Janet sees herself, just after she has been thrown out of her home by her husband, in numerous, momentary stages of life spanning adulthood and childhood:

When Janet sat down shivering on the door-stone, with the door shut upon her past life, and the future black and unshapen before her as the night, the scenes of her childhood, her youth and her painful womanhood, rushed back upon her consciousness and made one picture with her present desolation. The petted child taking her newest toy to bed with her—the young girl, proud in strength and beauty, dreaming that life was an easy thing, and that it was pitiful weakness to be unhappy—the bride, passing with trembling joy from the outer court to the inner sanctuary of woman’s life—the wife, beginning her initiation into sorrow, wounded, resenting, yet still hoping and forgiving—the poor bruised woman, seeking through weary years the one refuge of despair, oblivion:—Janet seemed to herself all these in the same moment that she was conscious of being seated on the cold stone under the shock of new misery. (286)

This is the moment of searching: Janet’s attempt to pinpoint the instant at which her life was plunged into misery. Like Esther, she cannot fully reconcile her different stages of life into a linear narrative, rather she seems to be “all these in the same moment.” But of especial interest to us is the utter lack of an explanatory transition. Like Wordsworth’s “spots of time,” Janet sees herself only in fragmentary, simultaneous form. She is a child, a young woman, a new bride, a young wife, and an abused victim, but in being them all at once, neither she nor the reader sees any relationship between them. Where, for instance, is the courtship between Janet and her husband? We move from young woman to bride without so much as a mention of their having

met. Where is the understanding of her moral development from toy-coveting child to sorrow-scoring adolescent? Janet is judged by her peers as being too proud to admit her mistake in marrying Dempster, but we do not see the root of that supposed pride. And finally, where is the moment where she first endured her husband's abuse? Though true misery has not set in by the time of her role as "wounded" young wife, the previous instant is one of her nervous, joyous wedding night and her initiation into sexual adulthood. The point here is that Eliot has given us precisely the kind of Wordsworthian moments that might be restorative—moments that are not immediately portentous—but without a clear intervening narrative, they do not give Janet solace or even allow her to better understand the tragic turn her life has taken. In her attempts to understand her transition from child to adult, all contiguity is missing, and what remains is a collapsed time in which memories of no import abut one another, creating that sense of "something unremembered"—the cause of a bruise as black as her future. Her transition from child to adult is marked by static memories, and her current development is arrested by an inability to properly understand the past.

As much as the above vision is a play on Esther Summerson's inability to chart her own age or understand a continual self, the lack of information regarding Janet's contiguous past is also the inverse of Lucy Snowe's despair in the face of oncoming adulthood. Where Brontë asks her readers to "picture union and a happy succeeding life" (Brontë 496), Eliot asks "what offence Janet had committed?" The former is a plea to the reader to see only happiness ahead of Lucy, rather than the painful transformation into adulthood (in *Villette* marked by M. Paul's death and Lucy's spinsterhood). The latter is a request of the reader to picture Janet's painful transition from childhood to adulthood and attempt to discover some root cause of her misery therein. In both cases, a true understanding of how a child becomes an adult is left unknowable. *Villette* uses

an appeal to fantasy and the wail of the Banshee as Gothic interventions that stand in for the already unclear epoch between childhood and adulthood. In “Janet’s Repentance,” the figuration is one of a black tide:

The drowning man, urged by the supreme agony, lives in an instant through all his happy and unhappy past: when the dark flood has fallen like a curtain, memory, in a single moment, sees the drama acted over again. And even in those earlier crises, which are but types of death—when we are cut off abruptly from the life we have known, when we can no longer expect tomorrow to resemble yesterday, and find ourselves, by some sudden shock, on the confines of the unknown—there is often that same sort of lightning-flash through the dark and unfrequented chambers of memory. (286)

Eliot’s extended metaphor serves here to illuminate the lack of understanding available to Janet, even in moments of deadly clarity. Where one might read the well-worn trope of a dying man’s life flashing before his eyes as a complete understanding of what has come before, Eliot gives us a murkier vision. The lightning-flash is not illumination in any structured, helpful way; rather, it is a brief, sudden occurrence—a moment that selectively enlightens and simultaneously blinds the viewer. That it should occur in “dark and unfrequented chambers of memory” furthers this notion of the unintelligibility of the recollection. Barely examined instances are lit up for an instant before descending into the deeper darkness and non-understanding of the blinded witness. The above paragraph precedes the passage in which Janet imagines herself at all ages, staring out into the darkness of her future. Where one might expect to see complete revelation—an apocalypse of what it means to be Janet Dempster—there is only more confusion. The vague suggestion of dark times ahead is a lived reality for Janet, though she is no clearer on the exact

events that precipitate such things. Her misery is metonymic with her bruise: painful and extant, but with an unremembered past.

While Janet's futile attempt to account for her current misery by searching through her past is a paramount concern, both within the novella and within this chapter, it is important to understand that she is certainly not alone in what Peter Fenves has noted is a "Feurbachian" moment of alienation, wherein she "stands outside and apart from herself" (436). If Janet's relief from misery comes with an evacuation of self—a process begun by being unable to account for a contiguous life—then the kind of sympathy that is typical of Eliot's style, moving in and out of characters' internal monologues, is interested in more than just Janet's conception of self. The novella highlights the strangely similar characterizations of both Mr. and Mrs. Dempster as they reflect on the miserable state of their marriage. While Eliot is clear to fault Robert Dempster and his alcoholism for their matrimonial horror, she nonetheless chooses to remind us that he too was a child whose transition into brute is unknowable. Upon being introduced to Dempster's mother, whom he childishly refers to as "mamsey" (Eliot 241), we are given some of the narrator's musing on the interrelationship between adult and child:

In the man whose childhood has known caresses, there is always a fiber of memory that can be touched to gentle issues, and Mr. Dempster, whom you have hitherto seen only as the orator of the Red Lion, and the drunken Tyrant of a dreary midnight home, was the first born darling son of a fair little mother. (Eliot 241)

It is usual for Eliot to ask that we sympathize with her greatest monsters, but what is striking here is that the narrator's identification with Mr. Dempster is through that "fiber of memory" that ties the adult tyrant to the "darling son." It is telling that there is no description of Dempster that

gives us any specifics of his childhood. Furthermore, his greeting his mamsey warmly is the only occasion for us to see anything of that beloved child. Though the audience is reminded that such a fiber of memory exists, it is not one that can be described beyond its mere existence. We are told that he had “known caresses” and that he could be “touched to gentle issues” but anything beyond seems out of his or Eliot’s or the reader’s ken.

Our bafflement at the relationship between the young and old Mr. Dempster is echoed by Mamsey Dempster’s inability to sympathize with Janet, seeing her only as a collection of faults that drive her son to violence. We are told that, in her estimation, “the hard, astute, domineering attorney was still that little old woman’s pet, as he had been when she watched with triumphant pride, his first tumbling efforts to march alone across the nursery floor” (Eliot 242). As with Brontë’s assessment of Paulina Home—“the child of seven years lives yet in the girl of seventeen” (Brontë 276)—we are given a clear link between the individual on either side of the transition into adulthood. Unlike in *Villette*, however, the statement is made without a clear understanding of what part of the toddling Dempster is still alive in the domineering attorney. Mamsey Dempster sees her “first born darling son” in the brute she comes to visit, but does not remark either on the change that has been wrought within him, or upon what part of his adult personage reflects the innocence of the boy he was.

Furthermore, she justifies her inability to see his faults in thinking to herself “See what a good son he is to me [...] Never gave me a harsh word. And so he might have been a good husband” (Eliot 242). This passage gives the reader the closest they will come to an understanding of Dempster’s callousness and brutality. Mamsey Dempster sees that he was capable of being an obedient son, and so she cannot account for his behavior to his wife. This

leads her to blame Janet for the behavior; after all, having been such a good boy, “he might have been a good husband,” if only he had an adequate wife.

We do not have the luxury of this blindness. In understanding Janet to be the victim and not the aggressor in the Dempster household, we, as readers, are left knowing that Mamsey Dempster’s assessment is incorrect. But there is nothing to replace it, or to refute the first half of her opinion. Mr. Dempster was, as a child, a good son and he is, as an adult, a terrible husband, but there is no narrative as to why that should be. The “fiber of memory” that links boy and adult exists, but it has no character and cannot be assessed. We may have a fleeting moment of sympathetic understanding of Mr. Dempster, but Janet’s problems with time are ours as well, and this sympathy fades quickly when Eliot provides no reason for his abuse. That may be the point. Though Dempster is a human being, his actions are indefensible.

The reflection on the discrepancy between the child and adult Robert Dempster comes to an end with the passing of Mamsey. When old Mrs. Dempster is buried, Eliot narrates a “prognostication of evil” in which Dempster’s final shreds of decency are cast aside:

When the earth was thrown on Mamsey’s coffin and the son in crape, scarf and hatband turned away homeward, his good angel, lingering with outstretched wing on the edge of the grave, cast one despairing look after him and took flight forever. (Eliot 280)

Here Dempster is seen, not just in transition, but also in a confused kind of coexistence with his younger self. He is described in the middle of the sentence as Mamsey’s “son,” which suggests to the reader that some part of the child yet lives in the man—that he can still be identified as being someone’s child. Immediately afterwards, however, he is identified namely by his adult

clothes: “crape, scarf and hatband.” The reader is given a portrait of an adult man, dressed as an adult, while simultaneously being reminded that he is, in fact, Mamsey’s child.

This pathetic image is followed by the narration of Dempster’s much-maligned good angel departing. What might be most incredible about the passage, at least from the reader’s perspective, is that a good angel existed in the first place. Just as Mamsey spoke of Dempster having been a good son while failing to provide any examples of such, Eliot frames the scene as a momentous one in which the last bits of good in Dempster flee forever, but has given the reader no examples wherein the good angel won out. The angel despairs before departing, as though it tried to save him but could not—and yet all the reader can surmise is that the angel was profoundly derelict in its duties. So too with the innocent Dempster child, who departs, dressed as an adult, from the funeral. His last connection to his childhood—the mother than still thinks of him as a boy—is buried, and with her, the potential of that boy who was always such a good son.

To the reader, the complete lack of similarity between the child and adult versions of Mr. Dempster suggests some kind of tale to be told—one about the transition that drove him to drink, or made him into a brute. But we have nothing. Just as Janet cannot account for the very moment at which their marriage went sour, so the reader cannot account for how Dempster went from child to monster. That Eliot should suggest a narrative with no elucidation as to what it might consist of helps to adumbrate the hazy darkness of adolescence. At what point did Dempster, the innocent, lose his innocence? Why ought the reader even be made aware of that fiber of memory? Eliot cannot tell; she can only say that the monster was once a boy, and that some still believe him to be one. That there are no answers provided gives us a sense of the futility of Janet’s attempt to figure out the offense that made her husband hate her. It is no clearer than the reasons behind Dempster’s brutality.



Eliot asks the reader to engage in Janet's anxious travails, asking, "Do you wonder how it was that things had come to this pass?" (Eliot 277) just before launching into Janet's attempt to remember what moment had ruined her adult life. Similarly, she asks the reader to imagine the child Dempster, provoking the same question of how a monstrous, violent, unworthy adult grew from an innocent child. The indistinctness of the transition between childhood and adulthood is critical, as it keeps us from being able to disprove that Janet's own self-assessment—being responsible for her husband's abuse—might have the merit that the townspeople of Milby seem to give it. In lacking contiguity, Eliot forces the reader to feel the anxiety of Janet's search for self. Janet seeks to uncover the transition from childhood to adulthood, which, as we have seen, cannot be done for longer than the length of a lightning flash. The next section, which details her successful transition from adulthood back into childhood, builds upon that nebulous, Gothicized veil, naming it not only an impediment to understanding adulthood, but also the necessary route to a second childhood.

## **Section 2: Second Childhood and Gothic Rebirth**

Unlike the previous texts analyzed, "Janet's Repentance" ends with a successful break from the darkness of adult life and the perils of eternal childhood. Peter Pan looks with mournful countenance upon the one pleasure he is denied by his decision to remain without parents or a future; Skimpole succeeds in cannibalizing Richard and dies happy and unmolested; Lucy, like Esther before her, leaves her story incomplete, unable to give us the resolution, tragic or otherwise, of her *Bildungsroman*. Janet, on the other hand, achieves a kind of impossible transcendence: she regains her childhood. By the end of the novella she is a figure of childlike gaiety and purity, respected by the townspeople of Milby in a way that seems unimaginable at

the start of the novella. As a result, she breaks the cycle of Eliot's previous two stories, wherein the female protagonists die, unable to surmount the corruption that, either perceived or real, sullies their households. Janet's scandal is far more public, the facts better known, and yet she is much better able to return to a state of innocence—all without encountering a child whose purity she must absorb.

We have thus far spoken about the Gothic valence of Janet Dempster's attempt to account for her life history, and the plea to the audience to consider Mr. Dempster in unclear relationship to his own child-self. Eliot builds upon precisely what Gothic imagery means for her narrative, however, by setting it apart from the perceptions of an adult. For Eliot, adolescence is a shrouded path full of Gothic tropes, but the banality and mundanity of adulthood is an altogether more unpleasant state of being. Eliot describes the difference between the two in an incredible passage where Janet takes stock of her new environs after fleeing from her front porch and spending the night at Miss Pettifer's:

The daylight changes the aspect of misery to us, as of everything else. In the night it presses on our imagination—the forms it takes are false, fitful, exaggerated; in broad day it sickens our sense with the dreary persistence of definite measurable reality. The man who looks with ghastly horror on all his property aflame in the dead of night, has not half the sense of destitution he will have in the morning, when he walks over the ruins lying blackened in the pitiless sunshine. That moment of intensest depression was come to Janet, when the daylight which showed her the walls, and chairs, and tables, and all the commonplace reality that surrounded her, seemed to lay bare the future too, and bring out into oppressive

distinctness all the details of a weary life to be lived from day to day, with no hope to strengthen her [...] (Eliot 291)

Here we see an odd turn from pattern of use that the Gothic has seen in previous texts. Where the Gothic has existed in other texts as a space whose indistinct and nebulous nature makes it an object of fear, we see Eliot using it to be productive rather than arresting. Though the nightmare landscape of the night is full of “false, fitful and exaggerated” forms, said vista also is what allows the man to look on with “ghastly horror” at his burning home, but is removed from the “sense of destitution” that lies in the “pitiless” daylight. While this may seem at first, to be an experience that is more exciting than the daylight but no more productive, we must remember that it was in this state of ghastly horror that Janet herself fled her front step and went to Mrs. Pettifer. Compare that flight to her daylight assessment of her new environs where the “commonplace reality” of the furniture causes her to despair over not just her present, but the future as well. So much of this depression can be traced to what Eliot refers to as an “oppressive distinctness.” If it is distinctness that oppresses, then the indistinct is liberating. We see in that ghastly horror not paralysis, but the ability to transform.

It would make sense that the Gothic mists of adolescence are both fearful and transformative. It similarly makes sense that it is this obfuscation that allows for some of the more outlandish deeds of eternal children and child mimics. Harold Skimpole, for example, can only be so productive because his industriousness is unseen, a part of his neither-child-nor-adult eccentricities. Similarly, Peter Pan, who forgets all his faerie consorts and all his rivals each time new ones take their places, is incredibly active in recreating Neverland over and over again. It is a kind of work that would unravel under the “oppressive distinctness” of remembering each opponent and the circumstances of their demise. For Janet, however, who is not in that indistinct

state of childhood's end, the Gothic darkness can be productive and performative, allowing her to regain her childlike innocence. She reflects on where her life took its near-fatal turn, but the reflection ends with a flight into the dark, one that leads her away from her old life to a way station in the form of Mrs. Pettifer's, where she is able to live, temporarily, in the ghastly terror of her flight, rather than the oppressive distinctness of her home life. And while, the morning light brings a moment of "intensest depression" to Janet, it illuminates, for the reader, the positive uses of Gothic indistinctness; uses that Janet will be caught up in only a few chapters later.

Thus far, we have an account of Janet's mad flight under cover of darkness, trapped in the impossible remembrance of her maturation, and Eliot's account of the paralysis that comes from the illumination of previously shadowy events. But Janet's progression through the story is not the linear progression from child to adult, as we saw in the previous section. Her looking back upon her maturation, attempting to place where in her transition into adulthood she stumbled, is the first moment of her unshackling from that adulthood. And, just as her flight came from the vision of a black tide, her return to childhood is achieved by passing through a Gothic veil.

When she returns to her husband, now slowly dying from a drunken carriage accident, the Gothic is not in her thoughts but his. His ranting refers to Janet upon her entry: "she's coming... she's cold... she's dead... she'll strangle me with her black hair [...] her hair is all serpents... they're black serpents [...] she wants to drag me with her cold arms... her arms are [...] great white serpents [...] she wants to drag me into the cold water... her bosom is cold... it is black... it is all serpents" (Eliot 321). It is not simply that Mr. Dempster is in the midst of a Gothic fantasy, it is that his vision specifically is of a monstrous Janet. Where she likens her inability to

remember her youth to a man drowning in a black tide, he sees her as a gorgon-like hag, the alluring features of her youth—namely her hair and bosom—re-imagined as dark snakes snatching at him and threatening to drag him down.

Janet's travails take her through darkness and into the oppressive light of day, but her return to her home sees her as a manifestation of that darkness. One might read many things into Dempster's vision—his guilt, his fear of his wife, his inability to grant her humanity—but our concern here is with Eliot's choice to paint Janet as a monstrous figure, just as she returns, ostensibly, to the adult life that was to be so oppressively distinct. Her despair upon awaking in Miss Pettifer's home is at her inability to escape her husband's cruelty: "[Mr Dempster] would never consent to her living away from him: she was become necessary to his tyranny; he would never willingly loosen his grasp on her" (Eliot 292). But in the moment that she does finally return to the home that had served as her prison for most of her adult life, she is the warden instead of the inmate and, more importantly for our purposes, the monster instead of the victim.

The culmination of her role as Gothicized figure lies in her final embrace of her husband. After days of his incoherency and her care of him, there is a final moment of clarity and Eliot tells us that "As she was bending to kiss him, the thick veil of death fell between them, and her lips touched a corpse" (Eliot 328). In this moment, Janet is both reaper and heroine. Her last show of marital affection ends with his death, fulfilling, on some level, the vision of Janet-as-Gorgon that Mr. Dempster experienced upon her return. It is in the embrace that he is pulled beneath the waters. And yet, Eliot is clear to tell us that the veil of death falls between them before their lips touch. Though it appears that she is finally dragging him beneath the Styx, Janet herself fulfills the role of Gothic heroine, bending to kiss a lover and finding that she has kissed something darker—no longer human. This transition—Janet both fulfilling and escaping her role

as man-drowning hag—is the final step in her return to childhood. She is freed from the one obstacle of her adult life in the same moment that she is once again the innocent heroine. At her husband’s funeral, in the gossip mill of Milby, the same rumor-mongering crowd that pronounced the Countess Czerlaski an incestuous succubus, people say of Janet: “That woman has a tender heart [...] There’s a great deal of good in [her]” (Eliot 329). This sudden shift away from the account of Janet Dempster as a haughty, palavering prig, combined with Janet’s sorrow, expressed as her “sad sweet gravity” (Eliot 330), are the final signs of her transformation back into an innocent. There is a death of childlike joy in the months after her transformation, but she has achieved a kind of saintliness. Having, in similar manner to Ginevra Fanshawe, charged into the Gothic night, away from the malaise of post-maturation oppression, and become, if only in the imagination of her husband and the description of the author, the very monster that we metaphorically know her husband to be, she emerges on the other side, innocent just after the moment when she would appear to be most corrupt.

All this brings us to the mechanism of Janet’s restoration. It happens within a veil of the Gothic: a writerly flourish of corpse-kissing and husband drowning that signifies her movement back into the indistinct space of adolescence, but there is no getting around the fact that Janet’s restoration is the result of her interaction with the dissident Reverend, Edgar Tryan. It is noteworthy that, while Reverend Tryan is the most religiously well-developed clerical figure in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (Amos Barton and Maynard Gilfil being clergy in name only), the content of his interactions with Janet Dempster contain no concrete details of religion. Though the town of Milby is divided between the more traditional supporters of the curate Mr. Crewe and the so-called “Tryanites,” quite little is made of Tryan’s religious convictions, save that they are strong and they are somehow intertwined with both espoused and practiced compassion. Specifically

for Janet, Tryan's positive influence seems to stem from "a simple appeal for help, a confession of weakness" (Eliot 275) that is proffered when visiting a dying girl. In other words, the doctrinal interests of Tryan are neither Janet nor Eliot's interests. Instead, his efficacy comes from a willingness to admit to his shortcomings, bizarrely expressed here in his asking a dying girl to "pray for [him]" (Eliot 274) so that he might have the strength to eventually die with similar dignity. While Janet may be saved by Tryan on some level, she is not saved in any sort of religious way, nor does his religious sentiment seem connected in any way to divinity.

Perhaps this is why some early critics want to insinuate a romantic tension between the two. Thomas Noble suggests, in his seminal work, that the Janet-Tryan relationship is a prefiguring of Dorothea and Ladislaw in *Middlemarch*, but that does not give enough credit to the nature of Janet's post-Dempster awakening. Where the bonds of love were mutually destructive in "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story," it is the bonds of regret and despair that seem to tie Janet to Tryan. After all, her redeeming innocence is captured in her willingness, on the other side of her Gothic travails, to beg her husband's forgiveness and grieve genuinely at his passing. Tryan, on the other hand, arrived at his clerical life as a way of running from his terrible guilt over inducing a country girl, Lucy, to leave her father's house before abandoning her when his studies were over, all the while having "never contemplated marrying her" (Eliot 301). He becomes a clergyman, in part, because he discovers that she has become a prostitute in his absence.

This is why the notion that Janet and Tryan have an unconsummated (or maybe even secretly consummated) romance seems ludicrous. Both are purified by a dereliction of their marital duties—Janet in running from Dempster, Tryan in sleeping with Lucy without any intent to marry her. In essence, both perceived sins (though Tryan's here seems far more dire) are adolescent, fearful reactions that keep them from acting in an adult manner. If the duty of the

adult is to marry and stay married (as both Wendy Darling and Ginevra Fanshawe might attest), neither is able to remain in the adult world and both are made innocent, not in rectifying the situation (Janet returns only after Dempster is on his deathbed), but in bearing guilt for it. Janet passes through a nightmarescape in order to reach that (paradoxically innocent) guilt, and Tyran creates one by forcing Lucy into a life of post-coital prostitution and poverty.

Previous iterations of the return to childhood have suggested that it might be done through either proximity to a child or refusal to become an adult. Jaryndyce is burdened by the suicide of his brother, and instead makes his house the playground of children (though, in picking Esther, Richard, Ada and Skimpole, he chose his children poorly), leaving only one room, a sometimes-dismal growlery, to contain adult troubles. Peter Pan murders his lost boys when they show signs of infectious maturity. Skimpole disposes of his rivals in order to remain a child charity case. Lucy Snowe banishes the moment of her failure to mature from the page. All these solutions are painted as convoluted, tragic, or reprehensible, and (with the exception of Skimpole) none of them work. Innocence is lost, or else painted as tragic, and the corrupting adult world does not provide an opportunity to return to second childhood. But, in embracing the indistinct veil of the Gothic—Tryan by accepting his role as rakish cad, Janet in becoming, temporarily, a gorgon—both are able to return to a state of innocence that Victorian child cultists would envy. The closest we see to this phenomenon elsewhere in this dissertation is the flight of Ginevra Fanshawe from the *pensionnat* by embracing the Gothic that is already all around her in the city of Vilette. The major distinction, however, is that Ginevra does this in order to reach adulthood, rather than to return to childhood. Eliot is arguably the author examined in this dissertation who has the greatest commitment to social and psychological realism—with Barrie being given over to the fantastic and both *Bleak House* and *Vilette* dwelling on the “romantic



side of familiar things”—but there is the most optimism in her prose for the transformation that is viewed as futile and fantastic by the other authors. One must think on Barrie’s admission that Peter Pan must be barred from the joys of family in order to remain forever a child and place it against Eliot’s suggestion that, in embracing adulthood and in embracing the Gothic, one can return to childhood, enjoying it better than if one had remained in it all one’s life.

There is one last parallel between Tryan’s travails and Janet’s journey through darkness. As Tryan succumbs to the illness he acquired in his dedication to living among the poor, we are told that “[Janet] lifted up her face to his, and the full life-breathing lips met the wasted dying ones in a sacred kiss of promise” (Eliot 348). It is a fascinating comment on Janet’s earlier kiss. While her final kiss with Dempster saw her “bending down,” here her face is “lifted up.” The relative positioning is suggestive of many things, but for our purposes, it is useful to consider them the kiss of an adult and the kiss of a child. The adult Janet bends down to kiss Dempster, and, in doing so, mimics the drowning phantasm that Dempster believes her to be. In lifting her head up to kiss the equally deathly Tryan, she has returned to a state of childhood, reaching up to kiss a parent. She even seems to have taken on some of the qualities of childhood in her rebirth. Her lips are “life-giving.” The detail is incorrect from a plot standpoint; the sentence ends the penultimate chapter and the following one picks up on the day of Tryan’s funeral. But the concept that Janet’s lips, pointed, childlike, up at the recipient of their kiss, should be life-giving maps onto the child cult idea that children are somehow restorative. She is not merely an adult who benefits from childlike connection: she has gained the restorative, life-giving powers of an innocent child.

Perhaps this life-giving kiss is also the reason for Tryan's continued remembrance. In the final chapter we are told that his headstone is unadorned and largely forgotten. However, Eliot notes that:

There is another memorial of Edgar Tryan, which bears a fuller record: it is Janet Dempster, rescued from self-despair, strengthened with divine hopes, and now looking back on years of purity and helpful labor. The man who has left such a memorial behind him, must have been one whose heart beat with true compassion, and whose lips were moved by fervent faith. (Eliot 350)

The memorialization of Tryan through Janet reads as nothing so much as a parent's legacy left in the form of a child. Janet herself, though old now and childless (but surrounded by children—the progeny of an adopted daughter), looks back on “years of purity.” Like Gilfil, who in his old age has sugarplums for the children of his village, Janet has not grown up. She is old, but nonetheless possessed of purity and a childlike spirit. And as to the last sentence, we might take the assertion that Tryan's lips were moved by fervent faith as having a double meaning. After all, when we last read about the living man, he was being kissed by an adult child with life-giving lips. Seeing as Tryan's manifest faith seems to derive from compassion forged in guilt and the abandoning of an adult life, we might also say that the faith that moves his lips comes in the form of another pair of lips: those belonging to a child restored to purity after a trip through the darkness of a second adolescence. The oppressive distinctness of the day, wherein Janet sees an adulthood full of miseries projected out in front of her, is abated. Instead, Janet returns to childhood not through time spent absorbing the innocence of children around her, but through the recognition, Gothicizing, and rejection of her adult life.

### *Part III: Growing Pains*

Eliot's vision of this stretch of English countryside—where childhood can contain murderous volumes, and adults can achieve childlike purity only in acknowledging their adult corruption—depicts quite a bit of suffering. Where earlier texts saw the end of childhood as the root cause of adult suffering, be it Mrs. Darling's lamentation of her daughter aging or Lucy Snowe choosing not to narrate her own loss of innocence in the death of her beloved, Eliot depicts both children and adults suffering in relation to maturation, but with no explanation of the exact cause. While it is clear that it is Caterina's childishness that causes her to suffer such fevered passions, it is less clear how Janet's sorrow relates to her childhood, where something occurred that brought her into a horrible marriage, but she cannot quite grasp it. The stories are inverses of one another (corrupt childhood versus adult purity), and they are also counter-narratives to the Victorian child cult's insistence that it is only through the simple innocence of children that one can become pure and untroubled again. In pairing them, Eliot seems to come to a similarly ambivalent understanding of the magic of childhood and the anxiety over its loss. But unlike previous narratives, Eliot's provides an adumbration of why this ambivalence persists. In narrating, not just the story of three tragic clergymen, and three complicated, childlike women, but also the history and development of a region and, particularly, the maturation of the town of Milby, we get some satisfaction with regards to the merits of neither fully upholding nor fully abandoning the sacrosanct state of childhood.

The second chapter of "Janet's Repentance" opens with the closest thing to an actual transition from nascence to maturity that we have seen thus far. In asking us to look back on the time in Milby when the events of "Janet's Repentance" take place, Eliot gives this description:

More than a quarter of a century has slipped by since then, and in the interval Milby has advanced at as rapid a pace as other market towns in her majesty's dominions. By this time it has a handsome railway station, where the drowsy London traveler may look out by the brilliant gas-light and see perfectly sober papas and husbands alighting with their leather bags after transacting their day's business at the country town. [...] The conversation is sometimes quite literary, for there is a flourishing book-club, and many of the younger ladies have carried their studies so far as to have forgotten a little German. In short, Milby is now a refined, moral, and enlightened town; no more resembling the Milby of former days, than the huge, long skirted, drab greatcoat that embarrassed the ankles of our grandfathers resembled the light paletot. (Eliot 202)

The lengthy description above paints Milby as a place of both moral and industrial enlightenment, where the town of ages past has disappeared all but completely. But throughout the chapter, Eliot describes little vignettes of Milby life that give us a slightly different understanding of the process. We are told that while "many of the middle aged inhabitants [...] found it impossible to keep up their spirits without a very abundant supply of stimulants [...] several substantial men [...] had a reputation for exceptional sobriety, so that Milby habits were not as bad as possible" (Eliot 204). All this is to say that despite Eliot's insistence that the town is unrecognizable, there is quite a bit to be said for virtually no change at all. While there is overall less sobriety in the Milby of twenty-five years ago, the sentiment is undercut by the explanation that the habits "were not as bad as possible" and Eliot's further suggestion, a sentence later, that the disappearance of the curate would not have caused the town to morally collapse. Peter Fenves tells us that "Twenty-five years have not, for example, changed the

linguistic abilities of the town's inhabitants. In the Milby of Dempster's time, the young girls learned enough French to mispronounce it, whereas twenty-five years later, 'the younger ladies have carried their studies so far as to have forgotten a little German'" (Fenves 429). In essence, Eliot shows us maturation that brings no essential change save ornamentation. Much like Cheverel manor, the only changes are cosmetic. Eliot may be making this point explicitly when she tells us that the town is no more like a greatcoat than a paletot. While the garments differ in length, they do not differ in function, or even in basic form. For Eliot, Milby's transition from provincial backwater to bustling market town has only the most superficial marks of change.

This would, in many ways, reconcile the problem of maturation being, ambivalently, both socially important and socially ruinous. The intervening years when the town is industrialized show that there is not a clear difference in essential properties. The child who goes through the Gothicized indistinctness of adolescence is thought to emerge on the other side fundamentally changed. The lack of clarity and the use of the Gothic's unsettling mood are employed in these texts in order to avoid directly observing that change. If the changes are purely cosmetic, or only slightly improve or degrade the individual, then anxiety over how change occurs is rendered far less important. In giving us counter-narratives to childhood's necessary corruption into adulthood, combined with a vision of town that remains in a kind of arrested development, unaltered save in outward appearance, Eliot undermines the central principles of the child cult. Where Barrie sought to destabilize the fantasy of eternal childhood by giving his readers a fulfillment of that fantasy that simultaneously plays as tragic, Eliot tells us that, while a return to childhood is possible, the difference between a child and adult is not very significant.

Milby is a town where external change belies a fundamental stasis. This is also apparent in its residents. Up until this point, the ages of Eliot's characters in the collection have either

been elided or else unimportant. Janet's age is never given, and the only clue we can rely upon is that her hair is dark during the bulk of the story and that it is gray "a quarter of a century later." Seeing as she is childless, we cannot determine a relative age by any other reckoning, and given Janet's eventual transition back into a child, the technicalities seem not to matter. In contrast, we know that Caterina is sixteen, but Eliot indiscriminately refers to her as a child both at that age and ten years earlier. This too, is a sign of Eliot's lack of concern with age as it relates to whether a character is a child or an adult. All that matters is whether they are staring forward into the darkness of adolescence or reflecting on it after the fact. Early on in "Janet's Repentance," however, Eliot gives a detailed account of the relative ages of three spinsters: the Misses Linnet and the older Miss Pratt. Eliot describes them in terms of their clothing, features, and relationship to nature:

Miss Pratt was an old maid; but that is a no more definite description than if I had said she was in the Autumn of life. Was it autumn when the orchards are fragrant with apples, or autumn when the oaks are brown, or autumn when the last yellow leaves are fluttering in the chill breeze? The young ladies in Milby would have told you that the Misses Linnet were old maids; but the Misses Linnet were to Miss Pratt what the apple scented September is to the bare, nipping days of late November. The Misses Linnet were in that temperate zone of old-maidism, when a woman will not say but that if a man of suitable years and character were to offer himself, she might be induced to tread the remainder of life's veil in company with him; Miss Pratt was in that arctic region where a woman is confident that at no time of life would she have consented to give up her liberty, and that she has never seen the man whom she would engage to honor and obey.

If the Misses Linnet were old maids, they were old maids with natural ringlets and embonpoint, not to say obesity; Miss Pratt was an old maid with a cap, a braided 'front,' a backbone and appendages. (Eliot 216)

What is most noteworthy in this exquisite passage is both the need to distinguish between the several stages of old-maidism and the dismissal of such distinctions, with Eliot claiming that, no matter the difference, "the young ladies in Milby would have told you that the Misses Linnet were old maids." But, regardless of the futility of the exercise, Eliot is very clear in saying that there are, in fact, differences between old maids.

Miss Pratt is the somewhat easier case. She is not only in the autumn of life, but a "bare, nipping," and "arctic" autumn. She fits our mental image of an old maid, donning the cap and braided front, and her state is not transitory. She will die an old maid, and though she will never marry, thus formally entering into adulthood, she has renounced any claim to childhood or even nebulous adolescence. The Misses Linnet, on the other hand, both possess some trace of youthful beauty, be it their ringlets or embonpoint, and the evocation of their "orchards fragrant with apples," suggests they are still fertile, if fleetingly so. The girls of Milby may not distinguish between them and Miss Pratt, but they nonetheless are not comfortably entered into adulthood. They do, in fact, seem to be in that nebulous adolescent stage, their actual age aside, described as the neither hot nor cool "temperate," and prefacing their desire for marriage with the ridiculously convoluted verbal arrangement, "will not say but that if." Miss Pratt is stoic, in hindsight, that she would never have married. The Misses Linnet are hilariously and indecipherably unable to voice whether or not they have convictions on the matter. In short, Eliot sees incremental transition and contiguity in the lives of these old maids who stand apart from but parallel to the maturation of the child into the adult. Time can be measured, if it is divorced from defining

childhood's end, just as the progress of Milby can be marked, if divorced from the content of its character.

The end effect of reading *Scenes of Clerical Life* seems to be one of relief after suffering. The first two tales of the collection are almost unbearably miserable. And while “Janet’s Repentance” ends on a hopeful note, it comes after much agonized suffering on the part of the protagonist and the slow wasting deaths of both Dempster and Tryan. That Janet should, in a world where retrograde motion—diving back into the Gothicized horrors of wasted youth—is the only solution to suffering, return to childhood, allows the reader to see a way out of the inevitable, unintelligible moral lapse that the Victorian child-cult augurs. Skimpole’s ability to remain a child is predicated on monstrous, inhumane behavior. Lucy Snowe’s emergence into adulthood cannot even be written, so miserable is she at the death of her childhood dreams. Janet’s second childhood most resembles what Barrie provided at the end of *Peter and Wendy*—a bittersweet acceptance of youth lost, and the promise of a future brighter for having left such regrets behind. But where Barrie had to accomplish this by splitting hope and tragedy between the novella’s two titular characters, Eliot combines the two. Janet is a childhood lost and a childhood regained, an adult who laments and an adult who divests herself of regret. She is not an eternal child, but she is free from fearing childhood’s end.



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