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Literary Anxieties Over Gender and Power in Adult-Child Relationships

I want to consider the modern child as an always-already feminized and thus colonized object. My methodology entails readings and theoretical analysis of related sections in three novels: *What Maisie Knew* by Henry James, *Peter Pan* by J. M. Barrie, and *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov. I contend that dominant Western culture tends to render children as feminine and thus own-able. These novels show how these constructions serve to control and manipulate children's capacity for autonomous action and thought. Such freedoms are ultimately linked back to their constructed relationship to a generalized "feminine" objectification and the reproductive abilities associated with that category. While children are feminized as property in all three novels, they are usually treated as non-biologically reproductive. Nonetheless, these novels' children present constant and terrifying threats of what we might call "figurative reproduction" through alliances with other children, with adults or through auto-didacticism. The aims that incur the most anxiety in adults include children's projected desires to become emancipated (*Peter Pan*), to act as intermediaries in adult sexual relations (*Maisie*), and to induce deviant desires in adults (*Lolita*).

Children's figurative reproductive capacities, (or their ability to "make" things and "make" things happen) cause fissures in adult-"child" relations. Children's abilities ironically justify their need to be under the total control of adults. This control is necessary for an idealized future that proceeds not from the imaginations of children but from their adult masters. In all three examples,

the metonymic relationship between “guardianship” and “ownership” is key. What appears in all cases is the implicit quality of “protector” in guardianship easily translates to imply “owner”. Property is legally defined when “the ownership of a thing is the right of one or more persons to possess and use it to the exclusion of others. In this Code, the thing of which there may be ownership is called ‘property’” (*Property*). Likewise, a “guardian is a person lawfully invested with the power, and charged with the duty, of taking care of the person and managing the property and rights of another person, who, for some peculiarity of status, or defect of age, understanding, or self-control, is considered incapable of administering his own affairs” (*Guardian*).

Key in these definitions are the limitations placed on children as a protected category, through which they can only be emancipated by aging. Until a determined age, their rights and property become manageable only by another and are at the disposal or use of that other who has power over them. Having no control over person, property or rights arguably renders the child as property despite the distinction between “owner” and “guardian,” which seem to be primarily differentiated here by the way in which their “object” may be used, rather than *if* it may be used. Laws of guardianship demonstrate the discourse of child-control is not unlike the control over women in past American (and other) marriage laws; indeed they limit human action by limiting agency. Children, then, are rendered “feminine” and controllable in the context of the history of the patriarchal family and its domestic spaces. Accordingly, our cultural view of children as vulnerable is partially inflected and reified by a desire to determine, and thus “own,” their futures and to control what they produce.

The questions of own-able futures and the high stakes of children-as-property are central to J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, a narrative where “lost boys” separate from their parents in a quasi-utopia where they don’t age and thus largely remain in control of their own lives because no one has age-power over them. The looming threat is, of course, Captain Hook whose phallic hook-hand is a

reminder of the violent potential of controlling adults. Hook's frightening prosthetic is also a reminder that children can menace with adult power, especially sexual power. Recall that Peter fed Hook's hand to a crocodile. A goal in Neverland, for Peter and the boys, is to keep a strict boundary between predatory adults and children. Hook's obvious threats are kidnap and injurious control-of-life. But age-power is also associated with reproductive maturity, as the bearded pirate reminds us. Thus age-power equates to a type of sex-power, or contamination of child sexual space with that of adults. Hook's intrusion into a child-space is thus sexualized violence. As Jacqueline Rose paints it in her analysis of *Peter Pan*, "If there is widespread sexual abuse of children, then it is not so much the innocence of childhood as the boundary between adult and child that starts to shake" (xi). This is not to say that we should see Pan (who bears an obviously sexualized name himself) as desexualized. To the contrary, as Rose explains, "The child victim is desexualized—necessarily—for there does not seem to be readily available language with which one can talk of childhood sexuality and insist on the reality of childhood sexual abuse at the same time" (xi). Accordingly, "Peter Pan is a front – a cover, not a concealer for what is unsettling and uncertain about the relationship between adult and child. It shows innocence not as a property of childhood but as a portion of adult desire" (xii). Keeping with Rose, then, we might see the boys' aggression in Neverland toward Hook as a defense of child sexuality, however difficult it is to articulate what child sexuality may be, and an attempt to preserve it from transforming into an adult, and potentially-reproductive, sexuality. Violent segregation of those whose sexuality is non-reproductive (children) from those whose sexuality is reproductive (adults)—is the tension that keeps Neverland as a place where you "never grow up" into a "reproductive future," fantasies of which Lee Edelman warns us in his book *No Future*, where "reproductive futurism" is tactic of "a political order that returns to the Child as the image of the future it intends" (3). Deviating from normative images of the child, it is therefore not the case that Neverland's child space is without sexed-talk or innuendoes. But it is fraught with

anxiety over reproduction.

In the novel, Wendy and her brothers create a faux-family with Peter and the lost boys. This is a difficult task in Neverland, since, “it was only in Peter’s absence that [the lost boys] could speak of Mothers” (51). Yet, the boys want a motherly caretaker. Ironically, upon flying into Neverland, Wendy is shot down by the lost boys who mistake her for a bird. Strangely, the boys cure Wendy by building her a house, which heals her gaping wound. Thus curiously cured, the boys ask Wendy to be their mother despite her protestations that “I am a little girl and have no real experience ” (65). Thus literal experience in reproduction is not essential to motherhood in Neverland. With Wendy as girl-mother, Peter acts as boy-father and guardian over the queer family of children. The domestic play fleshes itself out: Peter welcomes the children when he comes home from an adventure after Wendy has spent her day darning socks. Peter may well act as family guardian. But such domestic mimicry also terrifies him. He warms himself by the fire, and has a mock discussion with Wendy about which “parent” the children resemble more. Then somewhat frightened, he asks her to confirm: “it is only make-believe that I am their father?” (92). He adds in apologetic lament: “it would make me so old to be their real father” (92). Wendy’s assurance of the “fantasy” is not helpful when she follows it with, “but they are ours, Peter, yours and mine” (92). This contradiction only fuels Peter’s fear, and he nervously persists, “But not really, Wendy?” (92). Peter’s reluctance is foreshadowed in an earlier passage where this boy-father was guarding his family at night, but he “fell asleep, and some unsteady fairies had to climb over him on their way home from an orgy” (66). Thus Fairy-clan debauchery *is normative* in Neverland, but a heterosexual family is *completely performative*. Plus, its performance holds the threat that make-believe “reality” can spoil freedom in a Utopia of youth. For Peter, a pretend family may well be as dangerous as encountering Hook. Both interactions can bind him to mature and potentially reproductive masculinities.

Childhood imagination and its productions are also at odds with adult sexuality in Henry James's *What Maisie Knew*. James's novel is a tortuous drama of overlapping domestic relationships. It begins with a divorce and follows numerous permutations of sexual liaisons that result. At the center of these adult relationships is Maisie, a precocious child-character who is also central as unwanted property in her parents' divorce. According to James, "the little girl [was] disposed of in a manner worthy of the judgment-seat of Solomon. She was divided in two and the portions tossed impartially to the disputants. They would take her, in rotation, six months at a time" (2). Worse, a potential claim to the child by another family guardian is denied since Maisie's use value became her worth as a mechanism for parental dispute. James explains:

What was clear to any spectator was that the only link binding her to either parent was this lamentable fact of her being a ready vessel for bitterness, a deep little porcelain cup in which biting acids could be mixed. They had wanted her not for any good they could do her but the harm they could, with her unconscious aid, do each other. She could serve their anger and seal their revenge. (3)

Key to this treatment of Maisie is that her use as property is anticipated to be unconscious. But this isn't how the story works out. Maisie's father marries her former governess, and she feels she has facilitated the match. Her mother takes a new, young husband, Sir Claude. Both of her biological parents then take on other extra-marital lovers. Maisie's precociousness, and her appeal to each of her stepparents, helps bring their mini-triangle together into a queer family inset, a family made in reverse and child first, where Maisie happily plays their pseudo-child. As a tool for her parents' anger and revenge, Maisie is an object. Maisie is also an alibi for connection between her stepparents. At one point she even serves as a confidant for another of her mother's lovers. But Maisie's role as victim is complicated when she claims her own life-agency and orchestrates multiplications of love-relations. She is property, but she is property out-of-control.

As medium for her family's seductions, Maisie is a powerful producer of sexual relations and her *products* pleasure not only her guardians, but also Maisie. Sitting in her nursery at her *father's* house with her visiting *stepfather*, Maisie is aware of her productive power. She tells Sir Claude of her stepmother (and former governess) that "I have brought you together," and she then delights in the parallel she uses to explain to the seemingly obtuse man that this action is parallel to her union of her father and that same governess in their own recent marriage. Maisie tells Claude it is: "Just as I had brought papa and her" (67). Maisie's story works similarly to *Peter Pan* through what Rose describes as a "front" for the "unsettling" relationships between adults and children. In the text, Maisie is hyper-conscious of her power as a motivator in adult relations, for better or worse, but it is her conscience that must develop over the course of the novel for it to come to a socially-acceptable end. None of the sexualized adults are in salvageable relationships. Maisie goes to live with an older governess, Mrs. Wix, who is interested in Maisie's moral development. In the end, generating attachments to and between unhappy adults showcases Maisie's power as a precociously productive child. But it also showcases the moral threat that such a child may constitute; she is as troublesome as any adult and must be controlled. Plus, this adult potential in the child must be denied, defamed, or redeemed. Despite attempts at redemption, the child's relationship to sexualized "knowledge" remains mysterious. As they set sail together, "Mrs. Wix gave a sidelong look. She still had room for wonder at what Maisie knew" (470). As Kathryn Bond Stockton argues in *The Queer Child*, we may see every child as queer, partly because they are not yet straight (2). Maisie's enmeshed matchmaking (her third-party role in multiple two-party relationships) is obviously quite queer. When James gives us a child behaving as strangely as Maisie, we must face the reality that Stockton describes: "We cannot take innocence straight...one does not 'grow up' from innocence to the adult position of protecting it" (12).

The third type of problematic child appears as Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, who combines the troubles of Peter Pan and Maisie. *Lolita* is more foreboding than Peter Pan in a desire for freedom and Maisie in her carnal knowledge. As she is predominantly read, *Lolita* is the ultimate passive-aggressive threat to adult sexual decency. Of course, her lover/stepfather/captor Humbert Humbert first views her in her mother's garden when, a traveling academic, he is looking for a room to rent. The garden scene and the first glimpse of *Lolita* is too easily read as a play on the Garden of Eden, with the child as forbidden fruit and temptress in one. As Humbert explains, "I find it most difficult to express with adequate force that flash, that shiver, that impact of passionate recognition. In the course of the sun-shot moment, my glance slithered over the kneeling child...the vacuum of my soul managed to suck in every detail of her bright beauty" (39). Humbert's glance may "slither" but responsibility for his lust falls, sadly, on *Lolita*. As Humbert describes his attractions to young girls earlier, "years of secret sufferings had taught me superhuman self-control" (27). If Humbert is super-human in self-control, this girl-child must then take on something of the demonic in his seduction. His slithering gaze, then, seems to suggest Humbert is enchanted. Rendered in quasi-mystical terms, his vision of *Lolita* functions as the novel's first epiphany. The defined lines between physical versions of childish sexuality and adult sexuality that we see in the stories of Peter Pan and Maisie are transgressed with *Lolita*, but the transgression begins with two projections. First, it consists of Humbert's self-canonization, and second, of his projection about *Lolita*'s desire for and understanding of adult sexual contact. The latter we see in his dilemma over the character of a category of sexually precocious child he calls the "nymphet." Humbert explains of *Lolita*, who is not "the fragile child of a feminine novel," that "what drives me insane is the twofold nature of this nymphet, every nymphet perhaps; this mixture in my *Lolita* of tender, dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity stemming from the snub-nosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures" (44). Clearly, Humbert has *Lolita* cast, but it is according to his scripted eroticized roles, and *Lolita* (or

anyone of her “type”) doesn’t quite fit the imaginary position. Thus what is projected about Lolita’s seductive character motivates Humbert to take up residence in her mother Charlotte’s home, and to ultimately marry her. Marriage to Lolita’s mother is a means of property-acquisition and a means to control and own whatever it is that may be sexual about this child. When Charlotte is accidentally killed, Humbert becomes Lolita’s stepfather, guardian, and, thus, her new figurative owner. Lolita is legally acquired by Humbert much in the same way that Maisie is divided between her parents.

Summing up these dangerous children, Peter Pan presents a child who vies to be liberated. Maisie represents a child-as-matchmaker for productions of vicarious pleasure. Lolita might be seen as the sad fulfillment of what can be hypothesized about Peter Pan’s and Maisie’s combined threat to adult control through the subjugated category of child and its inaccessible sexuality. These three child protagonists and their stories demonstrate how the child’s sexualized power is a crux in adult-child relations. What children produce around the category of sexuality is profoundly threatening, whether it is freedom, pleasure from relations between adults, or accidental evocation of adult sexual desires.

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