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Victorian Restriction, Restraint, and Escape in the Children's Tales of Beatrix Potter

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Victorian Restriction, Restraint, and Escape in the Children's Tales of Beatrix Potter

Mandy L. DeWilde

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Mandy L. DeWilde
Abstract:

The fantasy works of Beatrix Potter have entertained children of all ages for decades. Many children are familiar with the stories of Peter Rabbit, Tom Kitten, The Flopsy Bunnies, and the dreamy prints of fuzzy little animals in jackets and aprons that accompany them. The characters of Beatrix Potter’s beloved children’s stories have transcended the written page and been marketed on infant layettes, children’s dinnerware, stationary, bedroom linens, and even on cartons of infant formula. However, beneath these cheery stories, which seem to imply that children should perhaps heed their parents’ advice concerning socially accepted conduct, Potter’s tales suggest something darker. Themes of morality are overshadowed by images of physical bondage, parental domination, and near death experiences.

Potter was notoriously private during her adult life, even at the height of her literary career, and it was not until after her death that we have discovered how her Victorian childhood had influenced her children’s tales. The emotionally restrictive nature of Potter’s childhood trickles down into the physically restrictive quandaries in which her animal characters find themselves. The parental characters in Potter’s works often use physical force to control and admonish their children; the child characters of the tales are constantly attempting to escape from the confines of clothing and smothering spaces.

In order to understand the restriction and escape found in Potter’s tales, it is essential to consider Potter’s own life. From an early age, it was clear that she was a talented child. By age nine, she was drawing and sketching with the precision of an advanced artist. She spent most of her young life separated from her parents in the third-floor nursery of their home in London. Potter had little interaction with other children, and her only escape from the confines of her nursery were family holidays to Scotland and the Lake District. It is clear that Potter had an immediate connection with the natural surroundings she found during these rural holidays. Later in her life, Potter would make the Lake District her permanent residence and use the royalties earned from her publishing career to preserve the use of the Lake District properties in a National Trust.

Using Potter’s life—including her childhood, adulthood, and her legacy—as the basis for her children’s stories, I have examined the forms of restriction, confinement, and escape in five of her tales, ranging from the most famous to some of the lesser-known titles: The Tale of Peter Rabbit, The Tale of Benjamin Bunny, The Tale of Tom Kitten, The Tale of Samuel Whiskers, and The Tale of Pigling Bland.
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Introducing the Victorian Restriction, Restraint, and Escape in the Children's Tales of Beatrix Potter

Popularity

Sitting in the library one afternoon, I witnessed a young boy on the verge of a meltdown, obviously impatient with having to wait for his mother to choose a book. Rather than give a reprimand, she leaned over her discontented son and asked, "Would you like to get one of those little Peter Rabbit books?" The flaxen-haired boy immediately stopped fussing and paused to ponder his mother's question. Seemingly satisfied with her suggestion, he gently tugged at her hand and happily led her toward the children's section.

Since the publication of the first story in 1902, the tales of Beatrix Potter have entertained both children and adults for generations. Potter, who had complete control over the layout and aesthetic of each story, knew that the little white books would be the perfect size for small hands, though the thoughtfully composed prose of each story is anything but elementary. It is such qualities, and the fact that her illustrations and stories go beyond the written page, which make Potter's literary empire so enduring. With millions of devoted readers across the globe, Potter's works have been borrowed, pirated, manipulated, and marketed in every imaginable way. Storylines have been condensed and set to new illustrations, published both separately and in compilations. Various illustrations, especially those from *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and *The Tale of The Flopsy Bunnies*, have found their way onto an assortment of children's products, such as cans of infant formula, baby clothing, nursery bedding, calendars, and stationary. Even other countries—Japan, in particular, where Potter's Sawrey farm house, Hill Top, was replicated so
that devoted fans would not have to travel to England to see the birthplace of their favorite characters and stories—have adapted Potter’s life and made it part of their own tourism.

With such popularity, it is no wonder that the stories continue to be read and shared. A superficial examination of any children’s story often provides its reader with varying degrees of adventure, and if not colorful illustrations, dazzling diction for the imagination to construct into scenes. From the birth of *Aesop’s Fables*, animal-characters have often been included in children’s literature and used as a medium for morality tales. It is upon further consideration and exploration that these stories provide readers with more than just good old-fashioned entertainment and finger-wagging warnings, but often a deeper, more thought-provoking social and cultural commentary. Potter’s tales do exactly this.

**Biographies and Criticism**

During her lifetime, Beatrix Potter sharply admonished anyone who criticized her work. When praised for her meticulous attention to detail and compared to other great illustrators of the 19th century, such as Palmer, Bewick, and Calvert by journalist Janet Adam Smith, Potter assumed the comparison hinted that she had copied these artists and retaliated with a harsh criticism against the misunderstood compliment. In 1933, Graham Greene was the first to attempt to apply psychoanalysis to Potter’s children stories, linking their somewhat circumstantial and dangerously mischievous tones to Potter having perhaps experienced “an emotional ordeal which changed the character of her genius. It would be impertinent to inquire into the nature of the ordeal,” he states, as “her case is curiously similar to that of Henry James. Something happened which shook their faith in appearance” (236). He was the only author to
psychoanalyze Potter’s tales prior to her death. Because Potter was incredibly private about her life, literary critics would not have had access to information concerning her childhood; Greene was only able to speculate about her life as the stories following *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* seemed to darken in tone and theme. Potter, of course, denied any such emotional disruption and sent Greene a searing letter of disgust and disapproval over his hypothesis.

Since her death, many biographies on Beatrix Potter’s life and criticisms of her works have been published. Mr. Leslie Linder, in 1966, was the first to transcribe Potter’s secret-coded journal and publish the detailed history of her writings. It is because of Linder that we have access to the details and events surrounding Potter’s early life. Margaret Lane’s *The Tale of Beatrix Potter: A Biography* was the first biography published in 1946 by Potter’s own publisher, Frederick Warne & Co. LTD. In an article following the publication of the biography, Lane recounts the privilege of speaking directly with Potter’s husband, Mr. William Heelis. Because Heelis was a man of extreme reserve, Lane found that the only way to retrieve any information from him regarding Potter’s life was with firm demand. She writes that “when I approached her widower, the gentlest of men, who received me with a trembling blend of terror and courtesy, it appeared that he considered himself under oath to conceal the very facts that he had in his possession...what he did know he was unwilling to divulge” (*Purely* 284).

Lane continues: “She would not have wished it, he said; what was more, she would never have allowed it; and here he looked over his shoulder again...”as if Potter herself was lurking somewhere in the shadows ready to admonish William for speaking of her so personally (285). Out of frustration and desperation, Lane surprised herself by pounding her fists on the table, demanding that Mr. Heelis disclose information about Potter’s literary life. This display of
feminine control seemed to resonate with him and, relaxing a little, he obligingly continued with
the interview (Lane Purely 285). Written in gentle prose, it is easy to understand why The Tale
of Beatrix Potter: A Biography has been one of the most popular biographies written on Potter.
For my project, Lane's work was particularly useful in providing the first published account of
Potter's life. Other biographies on Potter have since followed, each revealing additional
information about her life and works, and most importantly for my analysis of the tales, details of
her sequestered childhood.

Judy Taylor and Linda Lear have also published biographies on Potter. In the same vein
as Lane's work and using both her research and Linder's publications as a foundation, Taylor's
1986 publication of Beatrix Potter: Artist, Storyteller and Countrywoman provides in-depth
details about Potter's life, complete with previously unpublished photographs, sketches, and
personal history. Taylor's work, though not as lighthearted or artistically structured as Lane's,
provides many photos and specific details missing from the first biography, such as pastoral and
natural sketches from Potter's childhood. These sketches help us to understand the early and
deep connection Potter had with nature. Both Lane and Taylor portray Potter as a thorny though
lovable woman, and depict her life with the lightness and warmth of a bedtime story. Lear's
biography (the most recent, published in 2007), Beatrix Potter: A Life in Nature, is not
necessarily warm-hearted. It is written with a seriousness that portrays Potter and her life in less
sentimental and more business-like terms. Lear gives readers the sense that Potter was not a
woman not to be trifled with and that upon crossing her one could expect to be treated more like
an intruder than an innocent inquirer. Beatrix Potter: A Life in Nature provides us with essential
information surrounding the acquisition of Potter’s land by the National Trust, details which have been slighted in previous biographies.

There is much literature concerning the criticism of Potter’s life and works. In the late 1980’s and into the early 1990’s, literary critics Barbara Wall in her book *The Narrator’s Voice: The Dilemma of Children’s Fiction*, and Ruth MacDonald in her article “Narrative Voice and Narrative View in Beatrix Potter’s Books” and book *Beatrix Potter*, discuss the narrative style in Potter’s tales. This is particularly important when discussing Potter as a character in her own tales. Virginia Lowe, in her article “Little Fur Coats of their Own: Clothed Animals as Metafictional Markers and Children as their Audience” and Carol Scott in “Clothed in Nature or Nature Clothed: Dress as Metaphor in the Illustrations of Beatrix Potter and C. M. Barker,” explore the effects that clothing animal-characters has on the characters’ situations and the reader’s perception of the story. Their argument is that children respond better to the underlying message of the tale if the characters are sympathetic, and that one way to make, say, a kitten relatable to a child is to dress her in a pinafore and give her the responsibility of keeping it clean. Still critics Mark A. West in his article, “Repression and Rebellion in the Life and Works of Beatrix Potter,” M. Daphne Kutzer in her book *Beatrix Potter: Writing in Code*, and Alex Grinstein in *The Remarkable Beatrix Potter* explore Potter’s life and childhood as the basis for her tales. All of these works provide the foundation for exploring the themes found in the life of—and then in the works of—Beatrix Potter.

*Themes*
The themes of restriction, most particularly in the forms of strangulation and physical bondage, and themes of escapism are especially apparent in the children's tales of Beatrix Potter. Restrictive mothers and constrictive clothing cause the most trouble for Potter's child animal-characters, though they become trapped by garden walls, tree trunks, barnyard equipment such as troughs and barrels, natural predators including humans, and of course clothing. It is through this unnatural use of clothing that animals are kept from acting as instinct allows. The restrictive mothers, fashioned after the upper-middle class Victorian mother, want to domesticate their children and force them to confine their base instincts in the clothing they wear. These themes can also be found in Potter's accompanying illustrations. Using Potter's life as a text to discuss the themes of the tales, I will examine the underlying themes of various forms of restriction and escape found in the texts and illustrations of her children's tales. As exploring all the published works of Beatrix Potter would exceed the parameters of this paper, I will focus on five of her most well-known and lesser-known tales: *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*, *The Tale of Tom Kitten*, *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* or *The Roly-Poly Pudding*, and *The Tale of Pigling Bland*.

In her stories, Beatrix Potter creates an entire world where animals mimic human behavior. Parental characters often work outside the home. They also clean, dress, and admonish naughty children. And all her characters, children in particular, deal with very frightening life or death situations. Wall argues that as the storyteller, Potter "created a very different kind of narrator, one who brought to the slight tales to be told a manner of deep seriousness. She offered children, however small, her own insights into the difficulties and dangers of living. If her plots were trivial, her subject was not" (158). Instead of light-
heartedness throughout the entire tale, Potter’s stories are filled with life or death situations and realistic outcomes for the animals found in nature. Drawing from her own life experiences, she is trying to show children that the outside world is sometimes a scary and fatal place. Experiences like those in the tales clearly influenced Potter’s work, and her stories provide a commentary on Victorian society’s opinions, particularly those surrounding the art of parenting.

Potter’s own childhood provides the perfect foundation for her nature-based stories about constriction, restraint, and escape. The circumspect complaints about her parents and the restrictions they placed upon her life surface in the small children’s books she has published (Kutzer 48). By documenting her experiences in letters and a secret-coded journal, along with family holidays in the countryside, the young Potter was able to put her frustrations about what she could not control into wonderful and timeless little children’s books. In her critical work, titled simply Beatrix Potter, Ruth MacDonald claims that “when she found the appropriate outlet for the material, and when she could confine this energy, both within her own home and between the covers of a small book, the result was a remarkable intensity and clarity of vision” (22). Potter was able to combine her love of illustration, her keen knowledge of animals and their characteristics, and her less than idyllic childhood to create an exceptionally pure and accurate medium of entertainment. In the compilation Purely for Pleasure, Margaret Lane comments that Beatrix Potter, “to the mature eye, reveals felicities and depths of irony which pass the childish reader by...her animals, for all the anthropomorphism of their dress and behavior, show an imaginative fidelity to nature, a microscopic truth that one finds in the hedgerow woodcuts of Thomas Bewick” (279). Potter’s adoration of the countryside and of the natural elements stemming from her early childhood appears warmly replicated in the settings of her tales.
Furthermore, West comments that psychologist Alice Miller could easily have cited Potter among the examples of people who have used their talent and creativity to break free from the prison of their childhood (132). Miller asserts “that ‘gifted’ people often use their creativity as a way to deal with psychological problems” and that Potter was one such person who used her imagination and artistic ability as a way to escape the constraints of her own childhood (cited in West 132). Even though there is no evidence that Potter was formally diagnosed with any psychological problems, she certainly used her artistic talent as a creative outlet to combat loneliness and depression, which she alludes to in her personal writings.

Grinstein asserts that Potter almost certainly suffered from chronic and extreme bouts of depression, based exclusively on the tone of her private journal entries. For example, he suggests, around the mid-1880’s, “the most central theme that pervaded this period of Beatrix Potter’s life was her depression and [the] various ways in which it manifest[ed],” which was mainly through monochromatic sketches of her nursery and letters to cousins (27). Potter had suffered many illnesses as a child, including rheumatic fever, which afflicted her physically and mentally, often leaving her confined to bed. With her younger brother and sole playmate, Bertram, away at school and her parents on social calls, it is not difficult to imagine Potter’s loneliness—perhaps depression—and desire for playmates and entertainment, all of which she chronicles in her journal.

Potter kept a journal from the time she was fourteen until she was thirty. An entry dated Saturday, July 28th, 1883 concerning Potter’s birthday reads: “I, seventeen. I have heard it called ‘sweet seventeen’, no indeed…” (Journal 47). Potter wrote another entry depicting the end of adolescence and the beginning of young adulthood, stating that at seventeen, “I have
begun the dark journey of life...will it go on as dryly as it has begun?” (Lane *Purely* 297). These entries, just a sample of many, are distinctly melancholy in tone. Letters and sketches were not the only way for her to stave off feelings of sadness. Potter developed a written code until she became completely fluent in her own language of writing (see Appendix A). Potter recorded almost everything: the most mundane goings-on in the nursery, both interesting and insipid snippets of adult conversation, nearly every trip taken by either of her parents, detailed accounts of the events published in the London newspaper, and brief personal criticisms of famous pieces of art and published works. With the certainty that the manuscript would be of interest to no one, the coded journal was a way for her to write anything and everything that she could, knowing that it would be protected.

Miller suggests that “as the child grows up, he cannot cease living his own truth and expressing it somewhere, perhaps in complete secrecy. In this way a person can have adapted completely to the demands of his surroundings and can have developed a false self, but in his perversion of his obsessions he still allows a portion of his true self to survive…” (*Drama* 89). Beatrix went along with her parent’s wishes, acting as the obedient daughter, all the while keeping her true interests—her “true self”—alive in her secret journal. Potter was a curious and creative child; through the prose practiced in her journal and numerous correspondences with the children of family friends, these writings would eventually become the foundation for her children’s books. Pen, paint, charcoal, paper, and imagination became Potter’s escape from the confinement of the nursery walls.

To survive the drudgery of the nursery and the demands of her parents, it was imperative that Potter find a way to express her feelings. Lane suggests that Potter probably saved herself
from insanity and other psychological illnesses, so common among women in the Victorian era, by creating a world through her sketches, letters, journal writings, and eventually through her published works. West suggests that individuals dealing with such uncontrollable restriction in their lives “need to recognize their parents’ shortcomings; they need to break away from the idealized and internalized image of their parents and allow the repressed anger they feel toward their parents finally to surface” (West 131). Of course, feelings of anger often surface in behavioral problems. Luckily, in Potter’s case, frustration surfaced as art. Miller, using an artist as an example, explains that “he may express his repressed rage toward his parents in a painting, rather than in an act of violence” (cited in West 132). Potter’s illustration of Pigling Bland’s mother wrapping the orange scarf tightly around his neck was perhaps Potter’s gesture of feeling strangled by her own constricting and egocentric mother. Other forms of mothers constricting and confining their children are abundant in the illustrations for her tales.

Practically imprisoned on the third story of Bolton Gardens and without the company of other children, a young Beatrix Potter turned her interests to recounting and recollecting the tiny creatures she saw in the countryside during family holidays. It is Miller’s assertion that children who are isolated from their parents and their peers often develop a curiosity and affinity for nature. It is here that the child can find “the pleasure of observing and interacting with nature...without hurting the tenuous relationship with their parents” (10, cited in West 131). Instead of acting out against the restrictions put on her by her parents, she could create an alternate world through what she saw in the natural world, much like little girls do while playing with dolls. Along with the flawlessly detailed sketches of fungi, mosses, plants, and insects, Potter refined her sketches of amphibians and mammals—rabbits and mice being among her
favorite warm-blooded subjects. Slowly the sketches began to reveal a tiny world that mimicked human life. In this world, mother rabbits were fitted with aprons, little kittens wore flowing pinafores, and dignified toads sported dinner jackets and tailored trousers.

Anthropomorphized animals such as these are abundant in children's literature. Certainly Potter was aware, through her own knowledge of nursery rhymes and of *Aesop's Fables*, of animal-characters adopting human behaviors and personalities. The fantasy world in which animals speak, act, and live as humans do, presents a discourse for discussion which allows the author to reflect and comment—consciously or otherwise—on societal habits. Potter's “child animals have the carefreeness, the ignorance and insouciance of young human children; her adult animals, however entertaining and amusing as characters, are penetrating, even sometimes scarifying, embodiments of human follies” (Wall 158). One such adult folly Potter criticizes is that of discipline.

As a child, she and Bertram would sneak small animals, bones, plants, insects, and other contraband from the countryside into their nursery. The “treasures” were ultimately discovered and the children reprimanded. The adult characters in Potter's tales, often mothers, are constantly admonishing the child characters, it seems, for wanting to be and act in ways that seem natural to children. Victorian culture, especially in the 1890's, primarily viewed children as being continually naughty in nature and in need of being molded into obedient and domestic citizens (Grinstein 51). Grinstein suggests that “the anthropomorphic attributes with which Beatrix Potter invests her animals are based on her perception, not only of the animals themselves but also of their similarities to human characteristics, and specifically to traits that were pertinent to her own personal life experiences,” such as curiosity and creative energy (69).
Potter’s own childhood involved the occasional interaction with her other female cousins, one in particular, Caroline, with whom she would keep a lifelong correspondence. Potter had no interaction with any other children; therefore, without a playmate, she was forced to create her own entertainment. Inventing fantasy worlds with her favorite subjects became an outlet for the frustration she must have felt towards many things in her young life. In her article “Little Fur Coats of their Own: Clothed Animals as Metafictional Markers and Children as their Audience,” Virginia Lowe suggests that by utilizing her talent for illustration, Potter clothed her realistically drawn animals as a way to create her characters and give them a personality all their own (43). For example, in *The Tale of Jemima Puddle Duck*, Mr. Tod is clothed as a gentleman. His vestments and intellectual demeanor (he is often reading a newspaper) are so convincing that Jemima Puddle Duck is innocently unaware of the fox hiding in the man’s clothing. Lowe suggests that “the convention of clothed animals often foregrounds the differences between [the] worlds” of reality and make-believe (41). A child would know that, realistically, a fox does not wear a suit or read a newspaper and that a duck does not don an apron and cap. However, clothing does play a particularly important role within Potter’s children’s stories as a commentary on Victorian society. The clothing, like the society, often restricts the animal-children’s movements, preventing them from physical activity, genuine play, and escape.

Forcing children to wear clothing and accessories in Potter’s stories is nothing but a burden, as Lowe notes that clothes within Potter’s stories “become lost, are damaged, need washing or repair, and sometimes even lead to near disaster” (43). In the *Tale of Peter Rabbit*, Peter’s clothing nearly prevents him from escaping Mr. McGregor’s garden. Peter is wearing clogs and runs from Mr. McGregor on his hind legs. As Mr. McGregor gains on him, Peter
discards his shoes and “after losing them, he ran on all four legs and went faster, so that I think,” Potter writes, “he might have got away altogether if he had not unfortunately run into a gooseberry net, and got caught by the large buttons on his jacket…” (Potter 13). The illustration shows poor Peter caught up in the net. Earlier that morning, Mrs. Rabbit, Peter’s mother, warns the little rabbits not to go into Mr. McGregor’s garden, “‘Your Father had an accident there;’” she cautions, “he was put in a pie by Mrs. McGregor’” (Potter 9). It seems that because of his clothing, Peter may meet the same unfortunate fate as his father; however, Gooseberry nets are not the only cause of strangulation in Potter’s stories.

Mother characters are constantly fastening fabric around the necks of their children. Middle- and upper-class Victorian mothers, with the best of intentions and in strict obedience of social graces, required their children to dress the part of the obedient and domestic Victorian child. Scott has suggested that for Potter, clothes “and the social self they represent, are imprisoning; they mar and hide the real, natural self, rather than provide a means to express it” (79). The pretentiousness of over-dressing was something which Potter despised, though we are told in Lane’s biography that “she submitted patiently to the starching and brushing and tying up with ribbons, the lacing of boots and the carrying of muffins, which was a part of well-to-do childhood in the [eighteen] ‘seventies….” However, all the fuss surrounding dressing was something which Potter could have done without as she did not want to be a “part of that stagnant life which went on in the drawing room, and which laid it down that little girls, except when in pinafores, should be booted and dressed as though they were going to church” (Beatrix 17). This annoyance with clothing is clearly portrayed in Potter’s stories as her characters, especially the animal children, become extremely burdened by their clothing.
The irony here is, of course, that animals should not be wearing clothing at all; a clothed animal is an unnatural animal, and clothing will restrict that animal from being able to protect itself as nature has intended. For example, Kutzer suggests that “Peter gets caught in the net not because he is a rabbit, but because he is a rabbit in human clothing” (44). Before Mrs. Rabbit leaves the children, Potter’s illustration shows Mrs. Rabbit fastening the top button of Peter’s jacket. It is Mrs. Rabbit’s desire to domesticate her children by insisting that they wear human clothes. Kutzer also proposes that the illustration of “Mrs. Rabbit buttoning Peter into his jacket so tightly he looks nearly strangled” adds to the irony of Potter’s story, as it is his blue jacket with brass buttons which nearly strangles him in the gooseberry net (44). Peter’s problem is not, after all, the clothing he wears, but the constrictive mother who insists he act unlike a rabbit and more like a domesticated child.

When exploring Potter’s tales, it is crucial to recognize her as both a writer and an artist, and to acknowledge the restriction she felt in her own childhood, which can be seen in the illustrations of her tales. As explained above, using art as an outlet for emotions often reflects the intensity of those emotions. In fact, the act of illustrating parallels the restriction and confinement Potter may have felt in her own life. Interestingly, Potter chose to miniaturize the size of her books, not only to fit in the hands of children, but to confine the medium of the material to a small and manageable space. Art in itself is self-expression and is also a way to capture an image ad infinitum. Any form of art based upon real life—painting, drawing, sketching, sculpture, needlework, etc.—permanently transposes an image from reality to the confinement of a given medium. The image is replicated, immortalized, and possessed as it was at one moment in time. By drawing and painting landscapes, sketching fungi and small animals,
and including images of Hill Top and surrounding Lake District areas as the backgrounds in her stories, she has given the world snapshots of British pastoral scenes from the 1900’s.

Not only has Potter preserved landscape and animals through her illustrations, but by the power of purchasing. Through her early written work, she was able to comment on social constraints; when she escaped from life in London and became a farmer, she no longer needed her “art” as an outlet and used the monetary gains from her tales for the consumption of property. Potter procured much of the land in the Lake District, buying up farms and fells as they came on the market. In her later life, Potter controlled both her livestock and her land, tying the rights to the land in a Trust, restricting the future use of it so that, like her images, it would be preserved. As a farmer, she “kept” animals, just as she was “kept” in her nursery. As a landowner, she restricted the use of the property, preventing development of the fells, meadows, hill sides, and woods just as she was prevented from interacting with other children so as not to spoil her properly cultivated upper-middle class Victorian character. Ultimately, Beatrix Potter has significantly influenced the geography of Northern England and made a major contribution to the canon of children’s literature.
Early Life

The theme of restriction found in Potter’s children stories is also a theme found in her childhood, and it is important when discussing the tales to consider the experiences Potter had in her early life. Helen Beatrix Potter was born July 28th, 1866, to an upper-middle class family in London, England. Her father, Rupert Potter, son of the wealthy Jessie Crompton Potter from Lancashire, held the title of a barrister though he never practiced, and her mother, Helen Leech Potter, was the daughter of a prominent English family whose fortune came from cotton. Residing at Number 2 Bolton Gardens, the Potter family was considerably wealthy and strove to raise their children by the values that most upper-crust Victorian parents upheld during this time—modesty, moral earnestness, filial duty, and propriety. Lane writes that Potter was “born into a period and a class which seemed to have had little understanding of childhood,” and for the first six years of her life, she was an only child (Lane Beatrix 15). She spent most of her time in her nursery, on the third floor and in a separate wing of the Potter household while her parents often entertained away from home. It was common during this time for her parents to be separated from her for most of the day, as most young children growing up in upper-class Victorian households were cared for by nannies and educated by governesses.

Victorian houses were constructed to hold a large family, complete with architectural additions to restrict the servants and children to certain areas of the home so not to disturb the adults with childish banter and behavior. Young Potter had a structured and orderly regimen. Her daily routine seemed an incredibly monotonous and lonely one, though Lane suggests that it was “endured with fortitude, since [the routines] belonged to the way of life her parents accepted” and she was in no position to question their habits (Beatrix 30). Mr. and Mrs. Potter
took their breakfast promptly at the same time each morning. There was no conversation over the breakfast table, and Potter was not present. Then around one o’clock in the afternoon, a small meal was sent up to the nursery through the servant’s quarters. There was no snacking between meals, and rarely was she given sweet treats. Later in the day after a short walk about the grounds, Potter would be bathed, dressed, and summoned to visit briefly with her parents once they returned from their separate outings (Lane *Beatrix* 14).

Potter was cared for by a nanny, McKenzie, until she was six years old when her nanny was replaced by a governess, Miss Hammond, who was qualified to provide home-schooling. Nurse McKenzie’s position in the Victorian household was as a servant and required little education. She was with Beatrix from birth. McKenzie did everything a mother would do: bathed and clothed the infant, encouraged Potter to toddle into her first steps, and taught her to pronounce her first simple words. McKenzie’s main role was to ensure that Potter received an adequate amount of exercise with a daily walk, weather permitting, and made sure that she was dressed and pressed when summoned to the dining room to join her parents for dinner. Whether at home in London or summering in Scotland, “life as the Rupert Potters understood it,” according to Lane, “held little interest in the solitary child upstairs [in the nursery], and it would perhaps have surprised them if anyone had suggested that life might conceivably be made interesting to one so young” (*Beatrix* 14-15). They provided Potter with an attentive nurse and a generous amount of material comforts, including toys and books. They never imagined that a child could possibly want more in the sense of entertainment, and Potter, being the ever-dutiful daughter from the earliest age, never seemed to complain.
She did, however, seem rather lonely. Associating with neighborhood children was out of the question. Though Potter lived in an upscale neighborhood, within the city streets of London, gangs and juvenile crime was everywhere. Children of the poor were often forced to work at an early age or left to tend to themselves while both parents found employment, and though many children attended public schools, countless were left to run rampant in the filthy London streets. It was this kind of influence that the Potters ensured their young daughter would never experience. Though she had a number of cousins around her age, Potter never became intimately acquainted with them as their visits were intermittent. Instead she created a world of her own behind the barred windows of that third-floor nursery. At long last, in 1872, six year-old Potter became the elder sister to Walter Bertram Potter, more affectionately known simply as Bert. She finally had a sibling and perhaps more importantly, a playmate. Sadly for Potter, when Bertram was old enough, he was sent away to school, as was common practice for boys in upper- and middle-class Victorian families. Bertram rejoined the family only for holidays and vacations.

As was customary for many affluent families, the Potters—children, domestic staff and all—often summered in Scotland or in the Lake District. For months at a time, the Potters would make their home in the country away from their residence in London. The family’s household, along with the servants, was literally moved to the new temporary vacation home. The summer holidays taken by the Potter family “usually lasted for three months, and provided a long stretch of idleness and boredom for everyone except the servants, whose attention was focused on the problem of reproducing the life of Bolton Gardens in a foreign setting” (Lane Beatrix 14). Even after settling in the countryside for holiday, Mr. and Mrs. Potter retained their rigid schedules
and hardly strayed from their London activities. Separated from their parents and uninterrupted by school work, it was during these family retreats to the countryside that Beatrix and Bertram Potter were able to discover the wonders, miracles, and mysteries of nature.

The freedom provided by the countryside allowed Potter to exercise both her body and her mind. Physical recreation of any kind was generally reserved for boys, but the Potter children, especially Beatrix, found the barnyard animals and open pastures stimulating, much more so than the stagnant atmosphere of Bolton Gardens or the strict rules of boarding school. For the first few weeks the children were left to spend the days as they pleased. Miss Hammond would be absent from the family, most likely taking her own brief holiday, and would rejoin them once they were settled in their summer residence. Without the constant supervision of adults, the siblings would spend hours gathering small animals, leaves, fungi, rocks, insects, and bones. The children, both possessing an exceptional artistic hand, would then sketch and draw their natural treasures, even smuggling some back to the nursery in London.

Potter kept a number of small pets in the nursery, some of which were hidden from the adults. Some small lizards were housed in an old box; a few birds fluttered in a cage; a small tortoise, which she depicts in a sketch of the hearth and corner of her nursery, was left to roam around the nursery; and field mice caused mischief by chewing holes in her bed sheets. Bertram even left a small bat in her supervision while he was away at school. Once Bertram was gone, she turned to the company of the animal friends she harbored in the nursery.

Lane perhaps describes it best when she writes that Potter "had made friends with rabbits and hedgehogs, mice and minnows, as a prisoner in solitary confinement will befriend a mouse" (38). In fact, the dedication of her first published tale, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, was to a pet
rabbit she kept for nine years until his death in 1901. “Whatever the limitations of his intellect,” Potter writes in the dedication, “or outward shortcomings of his fur, and his ears and toes, his disposition was uniformly amiable and his temper unfailingly sweet. An Affectionate companion and a quiet friend” (Linder History 110). Alone in her nursery, where there were no restrictions on her creativity, clearly her main interests were recapturing and recreating the beauty of nature she had observed in northern Britain. The inspiration of the imaginary place to which Potter escaped through her sketches and writings was undoubtedly influenced by the fresh air of the countryside and the little animal friends she had acquired.

Around the age of nine, Potter began to study biology, entomology, mycology, and botany with a rigor and focused passion (see Appendix B). Over the years, she created beautiful watercolors of landscapes, seasonal changes, and tiny animals she had seen on holiday. She meticulously sketched kittens, horses, rabbits, colored beetles, butterflies, spiders, and fungi. Rabbits were among her favorite mammalian subjects, and she was not at a loss for models as she had many furry friends living in the nursery. Later in life, Potter would study and sketch every action and angle of two beloved and tamed rabbits, Benjamin Bouncer and Peter Piper, who were forever immortalized as the characters Benjamin Bunny and Peter Rabbit. The accuracy and precision with which Potter’s illustrations capture the movements and expressions of her animal models is extremely impressive for someone of such a young age and with somewhat informal training. Isolating one part of the body, the head of a rabbit for example, she would sketch and re-sketch the animal from all angles, making sure to capture a twitch of a whisker, or the rigidity of an ear and the widening of an eye when a rabbit became panicked (see Appendix C).
When Potter was able to draw these small creatures almost to the degree of accuracy one finds in a photograph, bits of fantasy began to make their way into her drawings: “mufflers appear around the necks of newts, rabbits walk upright, skate on ice, carry umbrellas, [and] walk out in bonnets and mantles like Mrs. Potter’s” (Lane *Beatrix* 33). Ravens pose with chimney sweeps tucked under their wings and fat little moles sport much-needed spectacles. Also included in her accumulation of pets were a small tamed mouse affectionately called Hunca Munca and a little hedgehog named Tiggy-Winkle, who of course inspired the tale about the fastidiously domestic seamstress of the same name and likeness. If Potter ever travelled, these companions came along with her; carrying them in small boxes and cages, she always travelled with a menagerie of animals. It is in this way that she ensured she would never be without company or companionship again.

Potter recorded many details of family holidays and daily events—even the most mundane—in a secret journal, which she diligently kept from the time she was fourteen until she was thirty. She used this journal as an outlet for her frustrations and to practice her writing and drawing skills. Potter meticulously chronicled the weather patterns, every bout of illness, every letter received and written, and every outing taken by Mr. and Mrs. Potter, of which there were many. She carefully recorded events taken from the local London newspaper and snippets of an overheard conversation or two. Though she rarely wrote explicitly about her feelings towards her parents, she was quite honest in her criticism of art, such as being disappointed at the close proximity of the stones when viewing Stonehenge for the first time, and being unimpressed and unmoved by a very famous piece of artwork in one of the London museums. Much like the juvenile writings of the Brontë children, young Beatrix recorded entries in an almost
indistinguishable font. More importantly, she developed her own language of writing. “Why did she write in code? Originally,” writes Lane, “we know, out of a youthful admiration for Pepys, but also for the sake of creating a world of her own, away from supervision and interference. She had possessed a private world in childhood, when she lived in a fantasy of fairy tales and the lives of her pet animals, and the end of childhood had come as a frightening shock” (Purely 297). Or perhaps anticipating an accidental discovery, this secret code was to ensure that the journal’s contents—all 200,000 words of it—would remain confidential. And it did until 1958 when Mr. Leslie Linder deciphered and transcribed her journal in its entirety.

Until she was eighteen, Potter had a series of governesses who not only provided her with friendship but with a degree of attention to her developing talents that would have gone unnoticed by her parents. Because she had little interaction with her mother, these women acted as surrogate mothers to young Beatrix Potter. According to Lear, Miss Hammond was one of Potter’s favorite governesses. By all accounts, she was a kind and gentle woman, providing that essential positive female model of which Potter was so in need. It was Miss Hammond who recognized Potter’s artistic potential, and it was she who approached Mr. and Mrs. Potter about hiring an art tutor for their daughter. Potter began formal drawing and painting lessons at the age of twelve. Eventually, after eleven years as governess, Miss Hammond again recognized seventeen year-old Potter’s advancing academic potential, and professing that the child had outgrown her teaching capacity, resigned from Bolton Gardens in 1883. After leaving the family, she and Potter would continue their correspondence through letters; she was even permitted to visit Miss Hammond on occasion. Shortly after the governess’ departure, the Potter family hired Miss Annie Carter to instruct their daughter in German. Miss Carter was only three
years older than Potter and became a fast friend. Though she was always referred to as “Miss Carter,” there was an instant friendship and closeness between the young women that resulted in a relationship more like that between two girlfriends or sisters. One year later, Miss Carter married, leaving Bolton Gardens to raise a family of her own. Miss Carter, who became Mrs. Moore, and Potter would remain friends indefinitely. This friendship is most significant in that it was in a letter to Mrs. Moore’s son that Potter first penned the basis of Peter Rabbit.

After Miss Carter’s departure, Potter began filling her days with letters and sketches. She would sometimes accompany her father on short visits to the studio of Mr. John Millais, an artist friend of the family, or to museums in order to practice her drawing. Potter made frequent trips to the Natural History Museum of South Kensington, just a short walking distance from Bolton Gardens. This was the only place she went alone. It was here at the museum where she intensified her study of fungi and lichens. In 1896, Beatrix submitted a research paper titled: “On the Germination of the Spores of Agaricineae.” Accompanying sketches were also submitted to the Royal Botanic Gardens. Though the committee was impressed with her work and ability, and her paper was read to the Linnean Society of London, her efforts at publication were unsuccessful, and her research was ultimately rejected.

Potter could have let defeat squander any hope she had of becoming known for her artistic skills, but Canon Rawnsley, a family friend from the Lake District, encouraged her to put together a story of her own. She recalled writing a letter to one of Annie (Carter) Moore’s sick children, Noel, back in 1893. Noel was then five years old and suffering from a confining illness. Potter had a great affection for the Moore children. Remembering exactly what it was like to be a child of five and separated from playmates, she sent letters to Noel about the goings-
on at Bolton Gardens, often including tiny explanatory illustrations. She was still living in the third-floor nursery in the company of her animals, and to entertain Noel, she made up a story about a little rabbit named Peter who was continually getting into mischief (See Appendix D). Luckily, eight years later, Noel had kept the letter, so Potter was able to get it back in order to copy the images and the story. She submitted a black and white copy of her very first tale entitled *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* to Fredrick Warne & Co., a notable publisher of children’s stories.

Unfortunately, Fredrick Warn & Co. rejected it. Determined, Potter decided to publish it herself with a small amount of savings she had from her early work of illustrating greeting cards. In 1901 her story was bound into 250 copies, which she sold to family and friends for one- and-two pence a copy. With the popularity she received on her own, she decided to submit the story to Fredrick Warne & Co. again. This time they were impressed. With a few modifications—such as having the pictures in color—they accepted her submission, and in 1902 offered to publish *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*.

It was a huge success. Suddenly, at the age of 36, just as Potter was attempting to form a small amount of independence from her parents, they became, for the first time, directly involved in her life. Mr. Potter took charge of handling the royalties and often accompanied her on visits to her publisher on Bedford Street. It is likely that she was not always pleased about having his company, as she recorded in her journal that he was a generally disagreeable man regarding publishing business, especially if things were not explained in minute detail. There are numerous letters between Potter and her publisher where she, anticipating a business meeting, apologizes ahead of time for his “formal” and somewhat inimical behavior, the result of being
trained as a barrister. One such letter states, "If my father," [Potter] writes, 'happens to insist on going with me to see the agreement, would you please not mind him very much, if he is very fidgety about things. I am afraid it is not a very respectful way of talking and I don't wish to refer to it again; but I think it is better to mention beforehand he is sometimes a little difficult" (Lane Beatrix 74). In the late 1940's, after Potter's death, her cousin Caroline, with whom she had retained a long-distance correspondence, admitted that Potter's parents were probably too restrictive. Caroline writes:

[Beatrix] was delicate & her Mother tried to keep her as a semi-invalid far too much.... I do not think her mother was much help to her: it was her brother first, then her father whom she cared for. She was the reverse of strong, & then found great happiness in her farm, & got much stronger—... Her father was very proud of her and her books but like many fathers of his time, did not realize that she had the right to her own life. (Lear Beatrix 443)

Regardless of her father's behavior, the monetary benefits were Potter's alone, and she was finally beginning to establish her own independence.

As Potter was working on her next book, The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin, which was published in 1903, she began spending a large amount of time at Bedford Square. Her friendship with publisher Norman Warne—son of the founder Frederick Warne—which had commenced with the publishing of Peter Rabbit continued to develop. She soon became warmly welcomed among his immediate family and its various extensions. By 1904, when The Tale of Two Bad Mice was published, Potter was immersed in her writing career and in her kinship with the Warne family. Consequently, Mr. and Mrs. Potter, perhaps realizing that there was some danger
of their daughter and Mr. Wame developing more than a friendship, started to make objections that she was spending too much time on her hobby-writing, was away from Bolton Gardens too often, and was becoming too independent. They never spoke about marriage to her directly, but it is certain that they would never support a marriage between a woman in their daughter's social class and a man whose family's finances were the result of being in—and completely dependent upon—a trade.

Despite her parents' social prejudices, Beatrix Potter and Norman Warne, who were both 40 years old, became engaged in the summer of 1905. While the Warne family was thrilled, Lane explains that "the idea of a union with a publisher affronted the Potters, and they set the whole weight of their authority against it" (Beatrix 83). They refused to acknowledge their daughter's engagement, which meant no public announcement. Potter struggled between remaining the ever-dutiful daughter and becoming her own individual. Beginning her writing career and accepting Norman's proposal were two significant events in her search for independence. Though she still resided at Bolton Gardens, as another declaration of her independence, she quietly defied her parents by wearing an engagement ring. The excitement of celebrating the engagement soon came to an abrupt end, when Norman suddenly fell ill. He was diagnosed with an advanced stage of leukemia. The illness was brief, the result terminal. Potter was devastated, and because it could not be mentioned at home, and few of her friends knew of the engagement, she most likely harbored the loss in silence. She could, however, find solace in the Warne family, especially Millie Warne, Norman's unmarried sister. It was in the Warne family, having almost become a part of it, that Potter had established a loving and indelible friendship.
Around the time of the engagement, Potter accompanied her family to a holiday in the Lake District where she heard about the sale of Hill Top Farm, in Sawrey. Her family had first visited Sawrey in 1896, and she had come to know the area and the villagers well. She had made many farmer-friends, and the children of the village loved her stories. Using a now well-established amount of savings, Potter purchased the small compound and surrounding land without delay. Hill Top Farm was to be the first of many Lake District properties she would own in her lifetime. Lane writes that “once she had deliberately set her foot there, and the little farm called Hill Top was her own, she fell more wholly in love with the Lake Country, and her feeling for it became passionate and possessive” (Beatrix 88). With the desire to preserve the happiness she experienced as a child while vacationing in the Lake District, Hill Top was purchased with excitement and adoration, and was intended to, one day, become her permanent home. Finally, Potter was able to loosen her ties to life in London. Allowing her the freedom to roam in the open air and serene countryside, Hill Top represented the exact opposite of the stagnant and stuffy life of Bolton Gardens; though she was unable to break completely from the duties brought on by being an unwed daughter, the purchase of Hill Top relaxed the intense grip that her parents had on her life. At the age of 40, she would finally be free from the confinement of the third-floor nursery at Bolton Gardens.
The Tales

The tales of Beatrix Potter can be found on book shelves in nurseries and personal libraries around the world. Their popularity is enduring, as the story books are handed down from generation to generation. Potter would have been pleased to know that her tales and illustrations have provided entertainment for both children and adults alike for over 100 years, though Potter, an incredibly private person, would not want to be approached about them. In fact, even she herself did not understand the lasting impression that her characters have made on the world of children’s literature. In a letter to a friend, dated 1940, Potter writes:

I never understood the secret of Peter’s charm. Perhaps is it because he and his little friends keep on their way; busily absorbed in their own doings. They were always independent....The earlier books (including the late printed Pig Robinson) were written in picture letters of scribbled pen and ink for real children; but I confess that afterwards I painted most of the little pictures mainly to please myself. The more spontaneous the pleasure, the more happy the result. I cannot work to order; and when I had nothing to say I had the sense to stop. (Linder History 92)

And she did stop writing as her interest in being a wife and raising livestock increased. When asked later about Peter Rabbit’s success and longevity over the other tales, Potter insists that it was because it was the first and only story written for a young boy, not a group of middle-aged publishers. “It is much more satisfactory to address a real live child;” Potter writes, “I often think that that was the secret success of Peter Rabbit, it was written to a real child—not made to order” (Linder History 110).
MacDonald suggests that Potter’s longevity and enduring popularity is due to her “unwillingness to compromise the truth in order to shelter young readers.... Adults sometimes use language that children do not quite understand, the meaning of which they can still derive from context....Her animals, especially the rabbits, glance fearfully out at the reader, as if admitting the frank terror with which human presence inspires them” (Beatrix 132). There are many scenes where Potter, as the narrator of the text, is addressing her readers as if the animals in the illustrations can hear her. The intrusion of the narrator into the story adds an element of secrecy and excitement, as if Potter herself is leting the listener or reader peek into her little world and know things that are unknown even by the characters. This is what makes both the literal and figurative themes and contexts of her work so successful.

The Tale of Peter Rabbit

What started out as a simple letter to a sick boy, who was bedridden and bored, eventually became one of the most popular children’s tales ever written. In 1893, Beatrix Potter sent an illustrated letter to Noel Moore, the ill son of her former governess. The letter consists of a short tale about a naughty rabbit named Peter who, having disobeyed his mother, trespasses into a local farmer’s garden, loses his new clothes, and barely escapes the same fatality as his father. It was seven years after writing the get-well letter that Potter wrote again to Noel in hopes that the letter was spared so that it might be used as a template for a children’s book. Since 1893, Potter had found success illustrating holiday greeting cards and was encouraged by a friend to try her hand at publishing. Potter immediately thought of Noel’s letter. Thankfully, the letter had been saved and Potter transcribed its contents into a little book. After two private
publications, it was finally picked up by Frederick Warne & Co. in 1902, where the layout was altered and the illustrations were redrawn in color.

In the opening illustration, there is a large brown rabbit pictured with three young rabbits. The larger rabbit, presumably the mother, is looking straight at the audience, as if we happened to stumble upon the furry family while strolling down a pleasant wooded path. None are wearing clothes and, upon first appearance, they seem to be just simple rabbits. The accompanying text suggests otherwise; it states each rabbit’s name—all pet names—with the exception of Peter who, along with his mother called “Mrs. Rabbit,” is the only rabbit to have a human name. We later discover through an illustration in Peter Rabbit’s sequel, The Tale of Benjamin Bunny, that her first name is Josephine.

Providing these characters with human names holds them responsible for certain actions within the text as the main characters. They are also the animal characters who wear the most pieces of clothing. In 1940, when questioned about the origins of the names of characters, she states she did not know why ‘Peter’ was named Peter. “I do not know how it came about.… There is difficulty in finding or inventing names entirely new…[For example,] a small boy in church once inquired audibly whether the Apostle was Peter Rabbit?” (Linder History 92). Interestingly, as I was typing up my notes on the analysis of Peter Rabbit, I kept inserting “Potter” for “Peter” and vise-versa. Perhaps Potter really created Peter Rabbit after herself, knowing full well that a male protagonist in a Victorian story was more likely to succeed than a female, thus making the character of Peter a Potter-like protégé.

The next illustration depicts all four rabbits standing on their hind legs. Mrs. Rabbit appears in a full dress and apron, the three smaller rabbits in red riding hoods, and Peter in a blue
jacket with large buttons. The three cloaked rabbits attentively gather around Mrs. Rabbit while she gives instructions: “'Now, my dears,' said old Mrs. Rabbit one morning, 'you may go into the fields or down the lane, but don't go into Mr. McGregor's garden’” (Potter Peter 8). Peter is facing away from the group. “Your father,” she warns, “had an accident there; he was put in a pie by Mrs. McGregor” (Potter Peter 11). Like a defiant teenager, one can almost imagine him rolling his eyes during his mother’s lecture. Potter is indicating to the audience, through Peter’s body language, that he will ultimately disobey his mother. In the illustration found on page 13 of the first edition, Mrs. Rabbit is fastening the buttons of Peter’s jacket, and by page 22, Peter’s jacket is completely open. The unfastening of the jacket also signifies to the reader that Peter disobedys his mother and foreshadows that he will soon cast off her warnings as a rabbit would cast off his jacket.

Like a child who is constantly readjusting his new glasses or regularly misplacing the matching mate to her mitten, Peter is a repeat offender when it comes to losing his clothing. Potter narrates, “It was the second little jacket and pair of shoes that Peter had lost in a fortnight!” (Peter 64). As unnatural as it is for animals to wear clothing, it is even more restrictive to the natural movements of Potter’s characters, especially to the young animals who must endure the transition of becoming acclimated to wearing something new. MacDonald asserts that “Potter’s stories answer for the reader not only what animals are like, but also function as fairy tales do in telling us human beings what we are like” (135). As one moves through the stages from child to young adult, the rules and boundaries concerning the acceptability and unacceptability of clothing becomes even more significant. By casting off his
clothing, Peter,—the human-named, disgruntled teenager—is not only rejecting the responsibility that comes with growing up, but also his mother’s power and influence over him.

Clothing is also used as a signifier; it is by clothing that one can distinguish a character’s social status. As in the human world, there is a hierarchy found in the natural world as well. For example, Mrs. Rabbit wears an apron, signifying that she is in a domestic trade. Her children are all dressed, thus the audience presumes that the Rabbit family is not impoverished since the children are clothed; however, they are not upper-class either because Mrs. Rabbit must work to support her family after the death of her husband, which shows that she is not independently wealthy. In the five tales examined here, not only does fashionable dress often identify class, but the increase in both quantity and detail of an animal’s clothing signifies the importance and survival of the character’s role in the tale. Peter’s clothing is described in great detail, right down to the material of his jacket buttons; he is the main character of the tale. Yet, ironically, the more clothing an animal wears the more physically restricted he or she becomes; clogs, jackets, pinafores, suits, etc., all provide trouble for the animals in Potter’s tales and threatens physical survival.

Besides the more obvious aspects of clothing, such as practicality or aesthetic purpose, incorporating these details into her tales, Potter “communicates to both adults and children important, often subliminal or barely recognizable, messages about who they are, who they would like to be, how others view them, and what is expected of them” (Scott 71). Scott’s assertion regarding Potter’s intended message about “what is expected of them” is exactly the message that Potter’s young animal characters protest. The clothing the children are forced to wear is cumbersome and often uncomfortable as is the social etiquette that their mothers wish
them to adopt and exercise. The children want to escape from the confinement of the clothing and the expectations that come along with wearing them. Stripped from clothes, leaving them literally naked, they are free to move and play with the gracefulness that Nature has intended, not with the stiffness that Nurture has implemented.

Furthermore, in Potter's tales, the animals that do not wear clothes are not personified; the total absence of clothing means the absence of rational thought or personality. Potter "wished to be subtle about the dehumanizing nature of animal nudity" (MacDonald Beatrix 26); thus clothing assures that Potter's characters are not just another bunny, cat, or mouse, but specifically a named Peter, Tom, or Mrs. Rabbit. The white cat stalking goldfish in the garden pond is not clothed, neither is the black dog pictured with the McGregor family, nor the little old mouse by the locked garden door. None of these animals has a name or a voice, and they are not responsible for adding significance to the text as are Mrs. Rabbit and Peter's siblings. Another example is found in The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck. Jemima is rescued from the sinister advances of a well-dressed fox by two fox-hound puppies from the village. The puppies do not have clothes; therefore, they do not have the ability to speak, but rather bark, bay, growl, and howl—all noises that puppies naturally make.

Back in the garden as Peter rushes away from Mr. McGregor, he loses "one of his shoes among the cabbages, / And the other shoe amongst the potatoes" (Potter Peter 31-32). Once barefooted, Peter runs "on four legs and went faster..." (Potter Peter 35). Rabbits are known for their incredible speed and agility; without the restriction of his clothing, Peter increases his chances of a successful escape by relying on his natural defenses. The audience senses the freedom Peter gains by casting off his shoes and wriggling out of his jacket—freedom from the
confinement of the net, but also from his mother’s warning and the societal obligations of how he must act while in his nice clothes. Peter is, according to MacDonald, “now no longer [a] naughty boy, but has reverted back to his rabbit nature, [which] is obvious from the pictures, where in the jacket he is upright and in nakedness he is four-legged” (Beatrix 27). By literally stripping down to his natural self, Peter is temporarily released from the restrictions which his society—most acutely his mother—has placed upon him.

Lane argues that Potter often preferred to be in the nursery in order to stave off the need to put her hair up and dress formally in layers and corsets like young ladies in the drawing rooms and parlors downstairs. Lane also suggests that on the occasions when summoned to meet with her parents, the young Beatrix stood obediently, but sullenly while being primped and curled, laced and tucked, unhappy with the frivolous attention (Beatrix 17). According to MacDonald, Potter is showing that there is a need for clothing in her animal world in order for a rabbit to be a complete rabbit and not just a wild and unthinking creature (Beatrix 27). In reality, animals usually deal with two realities: life or death. Find some greenery, feast and live another day; find no food, starve and die. Run faster than the predator and one might live; run too slowly and become prey. However, by clothing her animals, Potter has created a world quite the opposite from reality, a world in which the animals are responsible for human actions and deal with consequences more complicated than life or death. Peter escapes and ends up safe and warm in his bed.

The human world from which Peter escapes acts much like a noose. Before Peter has shed his clothing, he becomes entangled in a gooseberry net. Potter writes, “…I think he might have got away altogether if he had not unfortunately run into a gooseberry net, and got caught by
the large buttons on his jacket” (Peter 35). The illustration on page 34 shows Peter hung up in
the netting, both his foot and his button caught on the lattice. The scene actually looks quite
hopeful, and Peter seems unharmed. However, as Peter’s hope of untangling himself
dissipates—he “gave himself up for lost, and shed big tears”—the seriousness of the situation
intensifies. Potter’s next illustration shows Peter from a different perspective, lying on his side
with the illusion, or assumption, that the net is twisted around both the buttons and wrapped
around his neck. Another form of strangulation appears in an illustration near the beginning of
the tale; Mrs. Rabbit is fastening the very top button of Peter’s jacket, almost as if squeezing him
into submission. Potter pairs this illustration with Mrs. Rabbit’s warning: “...don’t get into
mischief” (Peter 12).

The image of mothers tying or tightening fabric around their children’s necks is abundant
throughout the collection of tales. In The Tale of Pigling Bland, Pigling’s mother ties a blue
scarf around his neck. In both tales, the mothers have the sense of force, as if threatening their
children to behave as they should. There is even something a bit eerie about these illustrations,
as if Potter is stressing the ultimate power relationship of the mother over her child; as the saying
goes: she brought the child into the world, and she could certainly take him out if it. We know
from both the journal, and from letters to family and friends that Potter’s mother was not a warm
and comforting presence in her life. In fact, she barely mentions Mrs. Potter in the journal at all.
It seems Potter preferred keeping silent rather than discussing, even with herself, her feelings
toward her mother. It was common practice in upper- and middle-class Victorian households to
remain separate from one’s mother, and Potter found surrogate mothers in temporarily employed
nurses and governesses. The absence of the mother might encourage a child to respond in many
ways, from idolizing her to resenting her. In *Peter Rabbit*, one sees the resentment Peter has for Mrs. Rabbit through his disobedience.

Resentment can also transform into dread. When Peter returns home after his adventure, exhausted and naked, he falls upon the floor and shuts his eyes. "His mother was busy cooking; she wondered what he had done with his clothes" Potter writes (*Peter* 64). The illustration on the opposite page depicts poor Peter’s body lying on the sandy floor, suspiciously resembling carrion while Mrs. Rabbit casually glances over her right shoulder, still stirring the pot she has taken off the stove. Though she might simply be heating the cream for Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cottontail’s supper, the image of cooking next to the image of outstretched Peter is potentially threatening. In contrast, the illustration of Peter given chamomile tea and tucked into a warm bed that is situated in a womb-like area of the burrow, suggests that he has returned to the safety of his mother (see Appendix E). Peter has escaped the perils of the outside world and acknowledges disobeying his mother; back in the comfort of the burrow he knows his mother will take care of him.

West draws upon the work of psychologist Alice Miller and fellow critic Grinstein to assert that Potter undoubtedly "experienced a long period of repressed anger toward her parents, especially her mother, punctuated by increasingly successful incidents of rebellion against her parent’s authority" (West 130). In this case, the character of Peter seems all too much like Potter herself. If Potter did create Peter based upon herself, the rebellion is made more successful by making the protagonist a male, as sexism was at an extreme during the Victorian era. The restriction Potter felt as a child, consciously or not, made its way into her tales. Potter is masking her aggression in tales about animal-characters, instead of humans. MacDonald

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chooses to give a more cheerful analysis of the characters, suggesting that “in her criticism of human manners and society, Potter openly attacks human prejudice and presumption, and yet by using animals as her vehicles of criticism, she also shows the way to human improvement: be like animals, honest, straightforward, even violent, but always truthful and true to nature” (Beatrix 135). When read from McDonald’s perspective of acting naturally, the impression the audience gets is that one must be who one is meant to be, not who others want one to be.

Masking her social criticisms with animal-characters instead of humans is similar to a reason for creating the code for her journal entries; by using animals in her tales, Potter has permission to successfully express her feelings without fear of it being discovered or linked to her life when read by close family and friends.

However, it seems that it was necessary for anthropomorphized animals to be the characters of her stories. Potter’s depictions of humans are less refined and far less realistic than her animals. Illustrating people was always a struggle for her; in fact, her publishers cut many of the close-up frames of humans that were found in her stories. If they were not cut, she was asked to redraw them with the revision showing a minimal amount of the human body, particularly the face. For example, in illustrating a scene where a human was present, instead of drawing the whole person, she would change the perspective to focus on only the hands and forearms. The illustration on page 10 of Peter Rabbit depicts a scene in the McGregor household. The first version of this illustration featured Mrs. McGregor presenting her husband and a child with a pie; presumably, this is the pie in which Peter’s father has been baked. Potter’s publishers sent back a number of edits—including one which did not feature a child present in the scene, but a big black dog—challenging the message of the picture and complaining that the face of Mrs.
McGregor looked "too old" (Linder History 111). In a letter dated May 2, 1902, Potter exclaims her frustrations with producing human figures for *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*: "My brother is sarcastic about the figures," she writes. "What you and he take for Mr. McGregor’s nose, was intended for his ear, not his nose at all" (Linder History 103, my italics).

At the close of the tale, the final illustration is of Peter’s three little sisters enjoying "bread and milk and blackberries for supper" (Potter *Peter* 68). They are oddly holding spoons in their paws, gobbling up their berries and cream. It is interesting that Potter chose to end her tale with the three obedient rabbits eating their well-deserved dinner. Lane states that the "results of too great innocence or rashness, in fairy tales or Beatrix Potter’s stories, are much the same. The stories point to no moral, unless it be that the helpless and simple, if not very careful, may make a meal for somebody else" (*Beatrix* 126). The tale, after all, is about Peter; yet, on page 66, he is cast in a darkened corner, peering out from under the covers and nearly forgotten. Perhaps this was done to prove, contrasting with Lane’s assertion about being mindful and obedient, that it is essentially a morality tale. The good rabbits get a scrumptious supper while the bad rabbit gets only tea. However, the tales goes beyond sending a simple morality message, because what the audience knows that Mrs. Rabbit and his sisters do not is that Peter has come out victorious. He has feasted in the forbidden garden on succulent lettuces, luscious French beans, and plump radishes until he made himself sick. And though he has acquired indigestion from his gluttonous behavior, he has also successfully wriggled out of the restriction and restraints of his rabbit world—his sisters wear white bibs tied around their necks, a symbol that they are still under the restriction of their mother.
M. Daphne Kutzer, in *Beatrix Potter Writing in Code*, agrees with this interpretation: “in the end, Peter manages to escape where his father did not. He taunts both his mother and father and ends up, I will argue, triumphant in the end, despite the chamomile tea” (43). Peter triumphs by gaining the attention of his mother. Though he only gets tea while his sisters enjoy a full meal of milk and blackberries, they are eating alone. Mrs. Rabbit is busy attending to Peter who is monopolizing his mother’s time and energy. While Mrs. Rabbit lavishes her attentions upon him, she is rewarding him for his bad behavior.

*The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*

*The Tale of Peter Rabbit* continues in *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*. Benjamin, Peter Rabbit’s human-named cousin, is hopping, skipping, and jumping his way “to call upon his relations, who lived at the back of Mr. McGregor’s garden” (Potter *Complete* 55). We are then reminded that Mrs. Rabbit is a widow and must earn her living by way of domestic services such as knitting and selling herbs. Benjamin’s character is a sharp contrast to our friend Peter’s. Benjamin is street-smart and incredibly observant. He stumbles upon Peter, who sits alone sheathed in a scarlet handkerchief. The color scarlet is a traditional literary symbol that can denote societal exile, and Potter uses it here to convey to the audience that Peter has been or at least feels ostracized from the rest of his family because he has lost his clothes. Potter depicts Peter sitting in what looks like a hole or divot in the ground, his countenance facing downward in embarrassment with only the tips of his toes peeking out from under the kerchief. Peter’s body language reveals that he is feeling low.
Benjamin tells Peter that he has seen the McGregors leave for the afternoon in their gig, so the delicious treasures of the garden, including Peter's clothing, would be open for the boys' taking. All traces of Peter's former confidence and ego have dissipated, and his sullen reply to Benjamin's solicitation is that he hopes it will rain. With the loss of clothing, Peter feels unnatural in his natural fur. The scene suggests that without his clothes, Peter is not a fully thinking, feeling, or articulate character. With the misplacement of his clothing, Peter has lost his self-assurance. What once was a haughty and conceited teenage rabbit with an attitude is now a sheepish and regretfully sad one.

To demonstrate just how apprehensive Peter has become, Potter illustrates Benjamin leading Peter away from the divot in the ground by the paw; Peter has to be pulled from his depression—literally. Benjamin is also depicted in the previous illustration sitting down in the divot, beside Peter, to comfort him while patting his paw. In *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, Potter's use of the Victorian moral may have been somewhat accidental; the real significance of the story was that Peter, having escaped death and delaying his punishment, wins the comfort of a warm bed and some soothing tea. Here, in *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*, Potter's attempt at providing a moral is deliberate, so much so that she provides the reader with the moral in the opening of the tale, rather than at the conclusion: Lose your clothing and you shall be ostracized, not fit to be included with decent society—which is why Peter sits outside of the borrow.

Peter and Benjamin approach Mr. McGregor's garden. Once inside, the two rabbits find a scarecrow wearing the discarded clothing from Peter's first encounter with Mr. McGregor in the garden. They retrieve the clothing only to discover, however, that Peter's jacket is "somewhat shrunk" (Potter Complete 60). His jacket no longer fits him; that is, he no longer fits
into the old jacket because he has psychologically and emotionally outgrown what it used to represent. Peter has had a near-death experience and has significantly changed during the time of the jacket’s absence. He has simply outgrown who he is supposed to be, according to the expectations of his mother and his society.

In addition, we are told that “there had been rain during the night” and that “there was water in the shoes” (Potter Complete 60). Water, another traditional literary symbol, reveals itself in the tale. Peter mentions earlier in the tale that he hopes it will rain perhaps wanting to cleanse himself of the guilt he feels at having lost his new jacket and clogs. The rain signifies rebirth: a new Peter, a cautious Peter. This new Peter appears in the following paragraph: “Peter did not seem to be enjoying himself; he kept hearing noises” and is illustrated as being anxious and wide-eyed, a complete contrast to Benjamin, who is comfortable and feeling “perfectly at home” (Potter Complete 61). Potter’s beloved Hill Top Farm was purchased in 1905, one year following the publication of The Tale of Benjamin Bunny. Like Benjamin in the garden, Potter was starting to feel more “at-home” in the Lake District. This is evident by the increased scenery in the tale’s garden illustrations than she had previously incorporated in The Tale of Peter Rabbit. Benjamin is shaped around someone who is learning independence, and he is becoming confident in himself and his man-(rabbit-)of-the-world knowledge. Potter certainly could have used her own experience, as she was slowly gaining a sense of independence through the financial and personal gains afforded by her publishing career.

Back in the garden, Peter is incredibly uneasy, twitching his ears at a slight sound and turning his head in all directions. This time, Peter does not eat anything and is so nervous that he keeps dropping the contraband onions they have gathered in the handkerchief. This uneasiness
can be felt by the reader and foreshadows an approaching dilemma for this mischievous pair. Sure enough, the two rabbits come upon a lazy garden cat barring their path, and instead of leaving the garden directly take refuge under a basket. Though the tabby does not see the rabbits, she does recognize a perfect spot for a nap and props herself directly on top of the overturned basket, trapping the rabbits underneath. The two are imprisoned for five tedious hours.

As the boys await an escape from under the basket, Benjamin’s father, Old Mr. Bunny, is introduced into the story. He is a dapper gentleman, dressed in a fine tawny vest, neck scarf, and aubergine overcoat, smoking a pipe and carrying a switch. Potter implies that “he was looking for his son,” but the illustration contradicts Potter’s text (Complete 64). Mr. Bunny’s body language is leisurely; his head is held high with pipe firmly set in jaw and he is strolling along the top of the garden wall, as one is ought to do while he or she is admiring a late, sun-drenched, summer afternoon. He does not seem to be in much of a hurry to find young Benjamin. Is not a parent usually frantic to locate a lost child? Or perhaps Mr. Bunny knows this son’s tendency to sneak into the McGregors’ garden and is plotting his reprimand when Benjamin finally appears?

It is unclear to the reader if Old Mr. Bunny knows that his son and nephew are under the basket, but we are told that he has a general distaste for cats. When he notices the tabby, he attacks her with his switch and locks her in the garden shed. Cats are known for chasing rabbits, so the act confining the cat to the shed signifies Old Mr. Bunny’s power as an anthropomorphized rabbit over a simple unclothed garden cat.

Potter repeatedly revisits the theme of careless and often forceful parents in her tales. Old Mr. Bunny, however, may represent the wish for an effective and present parent. Not all
parents portrayed in the stories are purposefully neglectful, but most end up leaving their children unsupervised. Upper- and middle-class Victorian parents—and Potter's parents in particular—were absorbed in their own daily routines. Though this tradition does not necessarily brand them as bad parents, it does seem to establish a physical and emotional distance between parent and child. Potter portrays this Victorian attitude within her stories. In *Peter Rabbit*, Mrs. Rabbit leaves the burrow and her children unattended because she must go out to buy supplies for her domestic work; she neglects to find supervision for her young rabbits, and Peter inevitably gets into mischief. We will explore the idea of neglectful parents more fully in the next story, *The Tale of Tom Kitten*. Upon finding his son, Mr. Bunny took “Benjamin by the ears and whipped him with the lithe switch. Then he took out his nephew Peter” (Potter *Complete 66*). Admonishment is a typical human practice, and it is recorded that the Victorians were very strict and physical with punishments. Old Mr. Bunny then “marches” out of the garden, pipe returned securely in place, with the somber rabbits following behind.

*The Tale of Tom Kitten*

*The Tale of Tom Kitten* was published in 1907 and is another of Potter’s works exploring neglectful parents and escape from constriction. This tale also showcases her appreciation of the Lake District, especially the garden, paths, and ponds surrounding Sawrey. This time Potter shifts her work from rabbits to cats. Like her other human-named, male protagonists, we are introduced to Tom Kitten, big brother to Moppet and Mittens. Potter writes that although the kittens “had dear little fur coats of their own,” their mother, Mrs. Tabitha Twitchit, “fetched the kittens indoors, to wash and dress them” as she was having guests over for an afternoon tea.
(Complete 149). Tabitha, a typical mother cat, cleans her kittens diligently and almost obsessively; cleanliness is of the upmost importance to the feline species and parallels the grooming habits of upper- and middle-class Victorians.

Potter’s illustrations tend to show superior physical force as a means for control. We see this with Old Mr. Bunny switching Benjamin and Peter and with Tabitha cleaning her kittens. “First she scrubbed their faces” Potter writes, with the adjoining illustration depicting Tabitha standing over a kitten, smothering her clean with a sponge over her mouth, the kitten’s eyes wide as if being suffocated (Complete 150). Potter portrays Tom as a naughty kitten because in the midst of being combed and patted he has scratched at his mother. Tabitha’s insistence on dressing the kittens is futile; no sooner does she have them bathed and dressed in “all sorts of elegant uncomfortable clothes[,]” she “unwisely turned them out into the garden, to be out of the way while she made hot buttered toast. ‘Now keep your frocks clean, children!’” she chides (Complete 151).

Just as Peter had outgrown his jacket, Tom Kitten can no longer fit into his clothing either. In fact, he literally busts out of them, ripping seams and breaking clasps: “Tom Kitten was very fat, and he had grown”; when his mother wrestles to fasten the tight jacket, “several buttons burst off” (Potter Complete 151). Yet, determined to clothe her son, Tabitha reattaches the buttons, sewing Tom tightly into his suit. In Potter’s illustration, Tom is being squeezed into his little blue jacket and pants; the bewildered expression on his face describes exactly what he thinks of being tucked, jammed, and stuffed into the fabric. This is not the last time Potter fans will witness Tom Kitten being “stuffed” into something.
The problem that the uncomfortable clothing poses is the same problem with the commands that Tabitha gives her children as she turns them outside: the requests are unreasonable. Waving her paw, Tabitha warns the kittens, "you must walk on your hind legs" (Potter Complete 151). Tabitha is expecting her kitten-children to act like children, not kittens. This is clear by the way Potter begins the tale describing the kittens' natural fur coats, yet stressing the desire to cover them up with clothing. Potter uses verbs such as "skip" and "jump" to describe Moppet and Mitten's human-like movements instead of animal-like words such as "pounce" or "stalk." "Moppet and Mittens walked down the garden path unsteadily," on their hind legs, a task made more difficult by the flowing pinafores they have been forced to wear. In fact, the clothing impedes the kittens' safety by restricting their movements; "Presently," Potter adds, "they trod on upon their pinafores and fell on their noses" (Complete 152).

Tom Kitten's elaborate outfit is the most confining of all. When he is summoned by his sisters to sit with them upon the garden wall, he can barely move and is "quite unable to jump when walking upon his hind legs in trousers" (Complete 153). Tom is pictured struggling among the ferns with his jacket unfastened, his trouser seams let out, and his furry belly exposed. Instead of being able to exercise his natural kitten curiosity, he is left to waddle like a duck in tight trouser pants. Abandoning their responsibility and ignoring their mother's expectations, the kittens cast off their clumsy and constricting garments, and freely roll and play like kittens are ought to do.

It is here in the story where Potter introduces three puddle-ducks, who then try to wear the kittens' discarded clothing. If the clothing was not right for the kittens, surely it will not be right for the ducks. Potter attests to this when Mr. Drake Puddle-duck tries on Tom's clothing:
“They fitted him even worse than Tom Kitten” (Complete 155). The criticism that a person cannot be someone or something that he or she is not is abundantly clear; in her tales, clothing does not and often cannot make the man. Self-awareness and being true to oneself is the right and natural way. Presently, Tabitha discovers her children “on the wall with no clothes on,” and exclaims that they are “‘not fit to be seen’” as public nudity is relatively unacceptable in most societies, especially the Victorian hyper-conservative attitude concerning dress and decorum. Like Old Mr. Bunny in The Tale of Benjamin Bunny, Tabitha resorts to corporal punishment. Potter uses this physical force as a way to signify that the parent’s power over the child is absolute and that if the child does not exercise propriety and decorum he will be punished. Tabitha “pulled them off the wall, smacked them, and took them back to the house” (Complete 157). With the same amount of force she exercised while washing their faces with the sponge, Tabitha holds one kitten by the scruff and raises her angry paw, while another kitten cowers behind her full skirt, and the third covers her head by Tabitha’s feet, anticipating and fearing their mother’s admonishments.

However, as she did in Peter Rabbit, Potter allows the disobedient kittens to be triumphant in the closing of the tale. Suggesting that children should be allowed and encouraged to be curious, explore, play, and get dirty, Potter uses the kittens as a way to speak out against the confinement of her own childhood. In an effort to hide their socially-inadmissible behavior from her guests, Tabitha shuts the kittens in an upstairs bedroom, explaining to her friends that the children are ill. In the end, Tabitha’s dishonesty gets the best of her; upstairs the kittens cannot ignore their playfully intrinsic nature and ultimately resist being rigid in their behavior. They are pictured making an absolute mess of the bed curtains, cradling in the canopy, and
playing with their mother’s clothing—all of which “disturbed the dignity and repose of the tea-party” taking place downstairs (Potter Complete 157). Potter ends the tale before the kittens can be reprimanded. Furthermore, the ducks’ attempts to wear the kittens’ clothing were also unsuccessful, for as soon as they entered the cool water of the pond, the wet clothing simply slid off the ducks’ slick bodies and sunk to the gloomy bottom—exactly where Potter (and the kittens) think they belong.

Potter uses The Tale of Tom Kitten to address a number of Victorian social conventions. The children, who are not particularly naughty, seem disobedient because their natural instincts are being restricted by ill-fitting societal expectations, represented by the clothing and enforced by the figure of the mother. Potter also comments on how clothing does not make the man; the puddle-duck cannot properly wear the kitten’s clothing, especially when the kittens cannot properly wear the clothing themselves. A person cannot necessarily wear another’s clothing and find success. Through Potter’s tales, one can see the struggle for an authentic self that frees one from social and parental programs.

The Tale of Samuel Whiskers or The Tale of the Roly-Poly Pudding

The Tale of The Roly-Poly Pudding was inspired by Potter’s own problems with rats when she purchased Hill Top Farm. In a letter to Millie Warne dated April 5, 1906, Potter wrote, “I have had an amusing afternoon thoroughly exploring the house. It really is delightful—if the rats could be stopped out! There is one wall four foot thick with a staircase inside it. I never saw such a place for hide and seek and funny cupboards and closets” (Linder History 191). Potter uses the almost the exact description from the letter in the tale: “it was an old, old house,” she
writes, “full of cupboards and passages. Some of the walls were four feet thick, and there used to be queer noises inside them, as if there might be a little secret staircase” (*Complete* 175). Since *The Tale of Tom Kitten*, Potter was now frequently turning to her own properties for settings and backdrops; it is speculated that Potter regarded this tale in particular as a tribute to her very first purchase and beloved farm house, Hill Top. First published in 1908, titled of *The Roly-Poly Pudding*, the tale was eventually renamed *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* in 1926. In fact, Potter dedicated the story to a tame pet rat, “Sammy,” about whom she writes, “the intelligent pink-eyed Representative of a Persecuted (but Irrepressible) Race! An affectionate little Friend, and most accomplished Thief!” (*Linder History* 193).

As we have witnessed in the previous the tales of *Peter Rabbit, Benjamin Bunny,* and *Tom Kitten*, Potter commences the story with a restrictive and somewhat distracted parent. We are reacquainted with Tabitha Twitchit, who, after throwing an extremely unsuccessful tea party and probably offending her friends with her dishonesty, attempts to keep her children out of mischief—and accounted for—by locking them in a cupboard. She “was an old cat…” Potter reminds us, “who was an anxious parent. She used to lose her kittens continuously” (*Complete* 175). The accompanying illustration shows Tabitha holding a kitten by the scruff of the neck, with the intention of confining her in a dark cupboard with her sibling. Before she can turn to Tom, he rightly scrambles to find his own hiding place as he “did not want to be shut up in the cupboard. When he saw that his mother was going to bake, he was determined to hide” (Potter *Complete* 182). This last line gives the audience a sense that shutting the kittens in the cupboard was not such a rare occurrence in Tabitha’s home.
Just as Victorian parents did not often include young children in daily activities, Tabitha shuts the children in the cupboard so she can do some uninterrupted baking. As a child, Potter was kept in the nursery and away from the daily schedules of her parents. This tale suggests that this kind of arrangement was not favorable to the well-being of the children; as in *Tom Kitten* and *Peter Rabbit*, Tabitha’s irresponsible and aggressive way of dealing with her children is unsuccessful and they inevitably triumph over their mother’s poor attempts to restrict their curiosity and play. The kittens ultimately escape from the cupboard; “while their mother was searching the house [for Tom], Moppet and Mittens had got into mischief. The cupboard door was not locked, so they pushed it open and came out” (Potter *Complete* 176).

Tabitha’s parenting troubles are far from over, as she realizes that she has lost her “dear son Thomas; I’m afraid the rats have got him” (Potter *Complete* 177). Tom is labeled as “a bad kitten” not because he is intentionally mischievous, but simply because he is a curious kitten (Potter *Complete* 177). Tabitha’s desire to keep the children confined leads Tom to be nearly roasted in the kitchen. We are told that, though the fire had been lit, it was still kindling and to Tom, the warm chimney was a great place to hide from his mother and the cupboard. However, as the fire started to catch, “Tom coughed and choked with the smoke; and he could hear the sticks beginning to crackle and burn in the fire-place down below” (Potter *Complete* 184). Realizing that his only chance of surviving is to continue up the chimney, Tom climbs higher, scampering from flue to flue. It is here where Tom stumbles upon mutton bones and smells the rank odor of rats. Hoping to safely escape from the chimney, “he squeezed through a hole in the wall, and dragged himself along a most uncomfortably tight passage where there was scarcely any light” (Potter *Complete* 186).
As in previous tales, Potter uses many confining spaces to demonstrate the rigidity and restriction in the lives of Victorian children. These characters are put into places (including clothing) where they do not quite fit. While Tom is left struggling through the narrow passage, the two escaped kittens fear being caught out of the cupboard by their mother; Moppet jumps into a barrel of flour while Mittens hides in an empty dairy jar. The theme of smothering spaces runs through a number of Potter’s other stories as well and seems to intensify in seriousness. In *The Tale of Timmy Tiptoes*, published in 1911 and written for Potter’s growing American audience, “a little fat comfortable grey squirrel” named Timothy, gets stuffed down the trunk of a hollow tree by his fellow squirrels for confiscating their nuts. “The hole was much too small for Timmy Tiptoes’ figure,” Potter explains. “They squeezed him dreadfully, it was a wonder they did not break his ribs” and Potter’s illustration depicts the gang attack (*Complete* 241). Much like a scene from A. A. Milne’s *Winnie-the-Pooh*, where Pooh gets stuck in the honey bees’ tree, Timmy is trapped for a fortnight. The threat of starving to death became a reality, had it not been for a gust of wind that conveniently knocked off the top of the tree, setting Timmy free.

Another example can be found in the opening of *The Tale of Pigling Bland*, where a little piglet named Alexander “had squeezed inside the hoops of the pig trough and stuck” (Potter *Complete* 283). He has to be dragged out by Potter herself, who makes a cameo in the story. Potter provides a black and white sketch depicting the scene: a piglet bound in the metal arches of the trough, mouth open in “fearful squeals” and eyes wide with fright—looking eerily similar to a pig intended to be roasted waiting for an apple to be popped into its mouth. The use of smothering spaces not only demonstrates the restriction felt by child-characters, but the feeling
of being trapped in a society that pushes and pulls one to fit a certain and often confining mold; there is an uneasiness of being placed in a society where one’s jacket is too small, where one is publicly scorned for one’s actions and ideas, or where one has to escape from one’s own mother.

As Tom gropes for the end of the passage, like Peter falling from the pear tree, he free-falls into a room where, luckily, he lands in the ragged bed of Mr. Samuel Whiskers and his wife, Anna Maria. Samuel is a fat rat with an appetite for little kittens, and it is his intention to dine on kitten pudding for supper. From this scene, Potter’s illustrations contain a gruesome tone. With a menacing look, Anna Maria rushes upon a frightened Tom, rolling and tying him up with string. Potter writes that “before he knew what was happening—his coat was pulled off, and he was rolled up in a bundle, and tied with string in very hard knots” (Complete 187). Potter first presents a black and white image of Tom bound by his paws. He is facing away from the audience, as if to spare young readers from seeing the horror on his face. An even more disturbing illustration follows—in color and from a different vantage point—depicting poor Tom lying on his back, head back and mouth gagged with his paws bound tightly to his body (see Appendix F). The rat couple then covers him in a thick layer of dough.

The rats are discovered, and a butter-smeared Tom is returned to a nervous Tabitha before the baking of the kitten pudding can commence. Potter ends the tale with more ghastly images, though this time only through her text, not her illustrations, allowing the audience to conjure the scene in their own imaginations: “Moppet and Mittens have grown into very good rat-catchers….They hang up the rats’ tails in a row on the barn door, to show how many they have caught—dozens and dozens of them” (Potter Complete 195). Darker and more extreme images of bondage and confinement increase in Potter’s stories. As she advanced in her
publishing career, she was advancing in her own independence as well. As she was slowly making her escape from her parents and life in London, she was able to strengthen the social criticisms in her tales. She was also able to strengthen the expression of her distaste for childhood oppression. In *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers*, Potter presents the future talents that Moppet and Mittens perfect by escaping from the cupboard and living in a home with rats. Interestingly, she does not provide explanation or resolution to Tabitha’s behavior, perhaps as a way of protecting her own mother. Potter found success in writing and farming by escaping the confines of her own childhood, and the kittens eventually become successful hunters upon escaping the confinement of the cupboard.

*The Tale of Pigling Bland*

In *The Tale of Pigling Bland* an old sow named Aunt Pettitoes is raising a brood of eight piglets. Aunt Pettitoes is severely outnumbered by the children, and the piglets get into the garden, nip at people, and gobble up incredible amounts of milk and slop. The underlying issue of this tale deals with the realities of keeping (or not keeping) livestock; however, with Potter, it is never that simple. By anthropomorphizing the animals—Aunt Pettitoes is in full dress and bonnet and, walking upright, brings buckets of food to feed the children—one cannot help but interpret the tale as an overwhelmed mother kicking some of her unruly kids out of the house. The overwhelmed sow decides that her piglets are getting out of hand; her solution is to send some away to market. The agriculturally-conscious reader knows what that means for the future of the young pigs: ham steaks, bacon, BBQ ribs, ham-hocks, roasts, chops, Christmas dinners, and split pea soup for rainy afternoons.
Potter inserts herself more into this tale than she has in any of her previously published work. This may be in order to validate the decision to send the piglets to market. Potter, as a character, actually assists Aunt Pettitoes in amassing and reprimanding her eight naughty piglets. “I went into the garden,” Potter explains to the reader, “there I found Cross-patch and Suck-suck rooting up carrots. I whipped them myself and led them out by the ears. Cross-patch tried to bite me” (Complete 284). In fact, it is Potter who brings the extremely disagreeable dispositions of the piglets to Aunt Pettitoes’ attention. She ultimately decides to send all but one away—Spot, who will stay to do the house-keeping—as “there will be more to eat without them” (Complete 284). Perhaps for fear that her readers will believe naughty children are sent away from home by their mothers, Potter inserts herself into the text as a way of justifying sending the livestock to market; this, after all, is the action of a real farmer. It could be that aunt Pettitoes really does not want to send her children away, but that the outside world—the farmer’s reality—intervenes and she has not the choice. The accompanying illustration depicts Potter and Aunt Pettitoes preparing the children for the Lancashire market. Reassuringly to the audience, Potter’s forearm appears in the top left corner, shaking the hand of a piglet. This minor detail of Potter’s presence sends the message that because Miss Potter knows about farm life and she approves sending the pigs to market, it must be the right thing to do.

As we have previously seen in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, when Mrs. Rabbit tightly buttons Peter into his jacket while warning him about staying out of mischief, Aunt Pettitoes twists a scarf around Pigling Bland’s neck before she sends him from the farm. Mrs. Rabbit’s actions foreshadow Peter getting almost strangled in the gooseberry net; in this tale, the sow’s actions provide another foreshadowing of what will happen should Pigling Bland make it to
Lancashire. However, part of Potter’s charm is that she intentionally creates her child-characters—with the exception of poor Tom Kitten—as escape artists, especially when their natural instincts supersede the strictures enforced by their mothers, or more largely, their society.

In all of Potter’s illustrations for this tale, we see Pigling Bland walking on his hind legs, a chubby pink piglet in a dull brown overcoat. He becomes distracted along his journey and, unfortunately, ends up stuffed into a hamper with six pecking and clucking hens by a Mr. Piperson. Pigling Bland is “nearly scratched to pieces” by the “dirty kicking cackling hens” that have been dumped in on him (Potter Complete 294). Once he is taken from the hamper, Pigling is left alone in the man’s home and is given an outline of his punishment should he try to escape: “I’ll come back and skin ye!”; yet another prediction of what may also happen should Pigling reach the market (Potter Complete 296).

This I’ll-eat-you-up-theme is a constant refrain in children’s literature, as seen in such tales as Hansel and Gretel, Little Red Riding Hood, Jack and the Beanstalk, and previously in The Tale of Samuel Whiskers. Hansel and Gretel are not to dawdle as they walk through the forest, and end up enticed by the sweet-looking house of the old witch who intends to bake them. Little Red Riding Hood tries to bring her grandmother some treats and meets a wolf along the way who wants to gobble her up too. Tom, who stumbles accidentally into the rats’ bedroom, is rolled in baking dough and intended to be served as kitten pudding. This theme seems to act as the standard outcome for a child who does not obey the rules.

We soon discover that Pigling is not the only creature trapped in Mr. Piperson’s house. Pigling can still hear the chickens clucking and scratching in the hamper, and discovers that there is another piglet locked in a closet. Pig-wig, as she is called, has been “stolen” and is well-
aware that she will be turned into "'bacon'" and "'hams'" (Potter Complete 299). The two make plans to escape from Mr. Piperson's house at daybreak. Pigling awakens her, but Pig-wig, who is afraid of the dark, begins to cry and must be persuaded out of the house. It is here that one might wonder why this tale was not written about one of Pigling's sisters.

In these tales, the protagonist must be a male, as female decorum in the Victorian era prevented females from acting out, making a tale about a mischievous female less successful. This is perhaps why we see the noncompliant females (Moppet and Mittens, for example) as sisters to the protagonist, not the protagonists themselves. It is much more likely that a male protagonist will be forgiven—by the mother and by society—than a female. Girls in Potter's era, were not only supposed to be, but were expected to be polite and obedient. If we revisit The Tale of Peter Rabbit, we witness that domesticity works best for the female characters: Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-tail. They will one day have burrows, families, and domestic responsibilities of their own. If we look at the tale from their perspective, the home is a warm and cozy place, providing safety and nourishment. Peter inevitably finds this too, when he escapes the dangers of the garden and is tucked into bed. Though he is alone in a darkened corner, it is still a safe corner.

Once Pig-wig and Pigling Bland escape from the Piperson Farm, he admits that all he wants in life is "'to grow potatoes'" (Potter Complete 305). Like the authoress herself, Pigling’s hope is to become a farmer. Other themes of the tale parallel the events in Potter’s life at the time. Around the time of the story’s development, she was making preparations to marry William Heelis and was in the process of moving her permanent residence from Hill Top Farm to Castle Cottage. Many critics have speculated that this tale is their story and that the two pigs
running away together in the end are none other than representations of Beatrix Potter and William Heelis; she denied all such assertions. Potter chooses to end the tale without actually providing a spot of land for Pigling Bland’s potatoes, but readers are left with a sense that it will happen as it assuredly did for her.

Like her child-characters, she escaped from her confining world. However, unlike her characters, she was not a child when she found her freedom. She was thirty-six when her first book was published, thirty-nine when she purchased her first property, and forty-seven when she married. Potter’s critique of Victorian society and the standards upheld by upper- and middle-class families found in *Peter Rabbit, Benjamin Bunny, Tom Kitten, Samuel Whiskers*, and *Pigling Bland* are most certainly influenced by her own experiences. The story of her childhood, her marriage, her rejection of her Potter identity, and her taking up a farm life further deepens our understanding of the meaning of the tales.
Later Life and Legacy

By the time Beatrix Potter reached her early 40's, her writing career was flourishing and so was her interest in farming. Though she was still somewhat under the domination and obligations of her parents, her financial earnings did allow her some independence from them. She would visit the countryside and her property often, all the while spending less time at Bolton Gardens. The property in Sawrey provided Potter with the life and home she had always wanted but was unable to have in London. Potter became so enamored with the farming community of Sawrey that as her earnings from the books increased, she slowly began to increase her land holdings in the area, one of which was a larger house and surrounding pastures known as Castle Cottage. It seems that Potter became possessive of the Lake District, and purchasing land in that area became almost an obsession for her. Lane writes that Potter purchased “a few sheep, an extra cow, another field: even as they came into the market, two other little farms in the village, with fields adjoining; and a whitewashed cottage here and there, and a small stone quarry; until, in the course of a few years, she had come to own half the village” (Lane Beatrix 102). Potter was becoming a prominent figure in Sawrey, and she was using her newly acquired farming knowledge in her stories.

The next stories Potter published would become several books belonging to a series unofficially known as the Sawrey Books, as each tale is set in and around Hill Top Farm and surrounding areas of the Lake District. The Tale of Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle and The Tale of the Pie and the Patty-Pan were published in 1905, the same year that Hill Top was purchased. A new publication followed each year: The Tale of Mr. Jeremy Fisher and A Fierce Bad Rabbit, 1906; The Tale of Tom Kitten, 1907; The Roly-Poly Pudding (later re-titled The Tale of Samuel
Whiskers) and The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck, 1908; The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies and The Tale of Ginger and Pickles, 1909; The Tale of Mrs. Tittlemouse, 1910; The Tale of Timmy Tiptoes, 1911; and The Tale of Mr. Tod, 1912. Since she was spending more and more time in Sawrey, familiar settings began to creep into the illustrations of her stories. She was working feverishly on both her farming skills and her publications, drawing inspiration from her own experiences with farm animals. The Tale of Pigling Bland was published in 1913, and then her publications started to slow.

Many life changes took place for Potter in the latter part of 1913 and early 1914. She had made friends with many local farmers and employed several families to take care of the land and livestock. As she purchased more properties, she met Mr. William Heelis, a land solicitor. Mr. Heelis kept Potter abreast of any emerging properties in the area. The two became very good friends, working together on a fairly regular basis as her desire to buy more property in the Lake District increased. In 1912, William Heelis proposed marriage. By this time, Mr. Potter was eighty years old and Mrs. Potter seventy-three. No nurse could care for them as well as their daughter; they could not lose her to marriage now, certainly not when they needed her the most. Again, the Potters opposed such a match; if a publisher was not good enough for their daughter, surely a property solicitor was not. Potter turned to her brother for support. Bertram surprised the entire family by confessing that he had married seven years earlier. Though the Potters’ reliance on their daughter outweighed that which they had on their son, Mr. and Mrs. Potter’s intense opposition to her impending marriage began to yield. William Heelis and Beatrix Potter were wed in London on October 14, 1913. Potter was forty-seven.
Potter's life at Bolton Gardens ended abruptly, and she never returned to that third-floor, barred-window nursery. Mr. and Mrs. Heelis made Castle Cottage their main home. As if to close the door on her unhappy past, she took on the name and persona of Mrs. William Heelis and would no longer acknowledge her former title of "Miss Beatrix Potter." Lane writes that "it was as if, disliking so much about her earlier life that she could hardly bear to be reminded of it, she deliberately buried Miss Potter of Bolton Gardens, and became another person" (Beatrix 113). Beatrix Potter of Bolton Gardens was no more, and from then on she became known simply as Mrs. William Heelis of Sawrey.

Establishing herself in the Lake District, and fulfilling the duties of a housewife and farmer, Potter's ambition to publish began to wane. It was as if she had been writing to escape her life with her parents, and once she was no longer a "Potter", but a "Heelis," the need to write for consolation simply vanished. She took comfort in playing the role of wife and immersed herself in the business of her livestock and her properties. Lane eloquently sums up the overall feeling of Potter's newly established life: "Mrs. Heelis of Sawrey, who for the next thirty years was to be known as a dominant, shrewd, good-humored and salty character of the Lake Country, was absorbed in the life which Beatrix Potter has always wanted" (Beatrix 113).

At forty-seven she was finally in control of her own life, and though it seemed a good match, the marriage was probably based more on companionship than on love. It seems that Norman Warne was her one true love; even long after his death she remained close to the Warne family, especially Norman's sister, Millie. Upon entering the marriage with William Heelis, Potter reversed the imprisonment enforced on her in her former life. She had married into a social class beneath her, and though she was unconcerned with outward appearances—she often
dressed in baggy clothes, oversized coats, and Wellington boots—she was very dominant in the relationship. Her inherited wealth along with her book royalties meant that her estate dwarfed William’s. She possessed the monetary power and the land. Potter reestablished herself in a very isolated part of Northern England, a setting that perhaps resembled the confinement of her nursery, yet represents the escape she sought from her life and family in London. As she had in the nursery, Potter created a world of her own in the Lake District, ruling over it with firm command and wanting to remain there indefinitely.

Unfortunately, she could not keep away from London for long. Rupert Potter was diagnosed with cancer in January of 1914, and Potter now split her time between nursing her father in London and looking after farming business in Sawrey. After months of crippling illness, Rupert died May 8, 1914. Potter now had the responsibility to take care of her aging mother who would live on for another 18 years. Potter employed a companion for her mother, suggesting that Bolton Gardens be sold and that Mrs. Potter relocate to the Lake District. Mrs. Potter was not easily persuaded, but eventually conceded, making her new home at Lindeth Howe leaving the sale of the London estate entirely in her daughter’s care. Once her mother was settled at Lindeth Howe, Potter visited her only occasionally since her time now was wholly invested in a newly developed interest—Herdwick sheep. On the occasions when Potter would visit, she was not always warmly received. Mrs. Louisa Rhodes, Mrs. Potter’s long-time cook, described both mother and daughter as “very strong willed” and noted that “Mrs. Heelis wasn’t very friendly towards me. She used to ring the bell and Mrs. Potter would say ‘What does she want?’ She had abrupt manners, Mrs. Potter, in her way.... All we associated [Beatrix] with were her clothes, or her wellingtons, ragged clothes—and sheep” (Taylor 166).
Potter had been producing stories steadily until the death of her father, and it would be another three years before she would finish and publish another tale. The Great War broke out during this time, and the Heelis' focused entirely on preserving their farm and providing for their friends and family during strict rationing. William was called to serve, but thankfully, he did not pass the physical with a high enough score and was relieved from duty. During this time, Potter allowed the Girl Guides to use some of her land for their camping activities. In a letter to a friend, Potter writes that “it is always a pleasure to help guides and it brings its own reward—for surely it is a blessing when old age is coming, to be able still to understand and share the joy of life that is being lived by the young” (Taylor 165). She would often join in their afternoon tea and visit with them around the campfire. Life on the farm seemed to ease the tensions of a country at war and the stresses of dealing with an irascible mother.

By 1917, Potter’s long-time publishers were in serious financial trouble. Harold Warne, nephew of Norman, was sentenced to 18 months prison time for making hundreds of thousands of pounds in forgeries. She contemplated leaving the Frederick Warne & Co., but the familial—and one-time romantic—connection she had to the family and their company prevented her from leaving. Instead, she patiently waited out the transition of the company. In July of 1918, Potter received word that her only sibling and childhood companion, Bertram, had died suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage on his farm in Scotland. He was only 46 years old. By 1919, as if to ease Potter out of her grief, the Warne family publishers were back on their feet and registered with a slightly altered name: Frederick Warne and Co. Limited. *The Tale of Johnny Town Mouse* was the first story published under the new company name, and as were all of Potter’s previous stories, it was warmly received by her young and devoted audience.
In 1924, a large and well-situated hill-top estate near Windermere became available. Potter purchased all two-thousand acres of Troutbeck Park Farm, which came with an abundance of unhealthy livestock, including sheep. Potter employed the help of Tom Storey, a young farmer in the village of Sawrey, to manage the grounds and animals. By the following spring, Troutbeck Park produced nearly one-thousand healthy lambs, and Potter’s strain of the Herdwick breed was on its way to becoming well-established. According to Lane, “sheep farmers and shepherds as a class are jealous of their experience and traditions; they do not welcome the newcomer, and they despise the theorist. But Beatrix Potter—or Mrs. Heelis, as she was now widely known in the Lakes—they did accept; there was no gainsaying her knowledge, and they gave her a place among them without reserve” (Beatrix 149). She became an elite member of the Herdwick Sheepbreeders’ Association, eventually becoming the first woman president to preside over the association in 1930. In that same year, she was approached by the National Trust to jointly purchase a 4,000 acre estate near Coniston, known as High Yewdale Farm. Potter agreed to take on the managerial responsibility of the property, which included many farms and cottages allowed to function as they did prior to the sale.

By the 1930’s, Potter had published a few more books, some released only in America to appease her broadening fan base. On December 30th, 1932, her mother died at the age of 93. Prior to her mother’s death, Potter wrote to a friend: “My mother is refusing to die. She was unconscious for four hours yesterday, and then she suddenly asked for tea. She cannot possibly recover and she suffers a lot of pain at times, so we hope it will soon be over...” (Taylor 176). The decline of her mother seemed more of an inconvenience than an occasion for sadness. She was ready to be rid of the final connection to the stigma of the Potter name. During this time,
Potter was thoroughly engaged in her farming business and struggling to produce a new tale to appease her publishers. "I can't waste my time here," Mrs. Potter's cook recalls her saying, adding that "she even started taking things out of the sitting room before [her mother] died" (Taylor 177).

After the arrangements of Mrs. Potter's remains, household, and dismissing the servants with letters of recommendation, Potter promptly returned to business. By now the precision previously found in her artwork was waning as she was putting more strain on her tired eyes. The desire to produce publishable artwork was also gone. She had spent all of her adult life producing a plethora of colorful and creative works and products, with a fervor which eventually exhausted in her older age. "I have always disliked writing to order; I write to please myself" she states in a letter to a friend (Lane Beatrix 135). "I am written out of story books," she wrote to her publishers in London and Boston after pleas to produce more work, "and my eyes are tired for painting" (Taylor 180).

Now that the burden of her parents and their strict Victorian ideals was finally lifted, Potter was free to reign over her animals and the earthy green richness of the Lake District. As she aged, her health started to deteriorate, though with the cessation of publishing and not having the responsibility of caring for her mother, she was more active in her farming than ever. The seasonal changes seemed to be particularly hard on Potter, and she was often bed-ridden with the flu, flare-ups of arthritis, and other maladies. As she entered her seventies, she reflected upon growing older in a letter to a friend:

I do not resent older age; if it brings the slowness it brings experience and weight...to quote an old friend, 'Thank god I have the seeing eye', that is to say,
as I lie in bed I can walk step by step on the fells and rough lands seeing every stone and flower and patch of bog and cotton pass where my old legs will never take me again. Also do you not feel it rather pleasing to be so much wiser than quantities of young idiots? I begin to assert myself at 70... (MacDonald 186)

And assert herself she did, deciding that it was time to get her property affairs in order. She started working closely with an agent from the National Trust and transferred back the management of the Coniston estate.

Preparations with the Trust and upcoming sheep fairs were interrupted when war was officially declared on September 3, 1939. Potter had been recovering from a number of surgeries and hospitalizations, and had given strict instructions as to how every bit of property was to be managed should she not return to Castle Cottage. Once again the village of Sawrey felt the inconvenience that war brought on the farming communities as food was rationed and annual activities were halted. William and Beatrix did all they could for the war effort, breeding rabbits to ensure enough food should they run out. The sentimentality and affection for the things she needed in her childhood withered as she aged and as her control over her life increased. Now, instead of sketching Peter, she was eating him.

By the winter of 1943, Potter was not recovering from a bout of bronchitis she caught earlier in September. By December, her condition had worsened, and she knew she was dying. On December 22, she summoned the managing shepherd of Troutbeck Park, Tom Storey, with hopes that he would look after the Castle Cottage and Mr. Heelis after her death. He agreed. Beatrix Potter Heelis died that evening at the age of 77. An obituary was printed in the *Westmorland Gazette* and, upon Potter’s prior request, was simple and straightforward:
Deaths

HEELIS. On Wednesday, Dec. 22, 1943 at Castle Cottage, Sawrey, near Ambleside, HELEN BEATRIX, dearly loved wife of WILLIAM HEELIS, and only daughter of the late Rupert Potter.

Cremation private. No mourning, no flowers, and no letters please. (Taylor 203, Lear Beatrix 440)

Among the many arrangements concerning publication rights, land boundaries, and what workers would stay on what properties, Potter left strict instructions that she be cremated and that William and Tom spread her ashes in an undisclosed location at Hill Top Farm. Following the public announcement of her death, the location of Potter’s ashes caused great curiosity. William went as far to change the wording of his will so that, upon his death requesting his ashes be released near hers, the location would remain unrevealed. Tom Storey was the solitary keeper of that secret place and took the location to his grave when he died in 1986.

The National Trust

Potter was attached to the land of the Lake District. She went to incredible lengths to assure its preservation and obstinately snubbed any praise of her generosity. In her youth, the countryside of Northern Britain, especially the Lake District, had been her place of refuge from the solitary life at Bolton Gardens. In the company of small animals and plant life, Potter was free to find her own interests, move about the grounds exploring and creating a world of her own. During those family holidays, she came to know almost every species of tree, fungi, and moss; she could recognize every crumbling stone wall and knew the location of every bird’s nest.
and rabbit hole visible to the naked eye. The land, the animals—all the elements of nature—became sacred to her; therefore, it is no wonder that, as she aged, she would want to possess and preserve what was a significant influence in her life. Potter rehabilitated every neglected property purchased, perhaps occasionally out of obligation, rather than out of love. She must have felt indebted to this land that had provided an escape from the confinement of her childhood, but also sometimes may have felt the burden of having yet another property to control.

Potter had no children of her own and wrote to entertain the children of the world, acting as a literary grandmother to the tiny hands which have so lovingly grasped her miniature books, begging to have it read again “just one last time.” In this maternal role, it is also easy to view Potter as a mother to her land and livestock, and though she cared for them with the intensity and fierce protection of a parent, she was a firm business woman and rarely let sentimentality interrupt reality. She may have painted a sentimental portrait of her affection toward the cuddly characters of her tales, but she slaughtered livestock with a farmer’s mentality; most animals were for food and profit. Potter knew, that aside from being her literary muses, animals were another industry all their own.

Future development of the pristine countryside and disruption of livestock, especially around Sawrey, was a great fear to Potter and other local villagers, many of whom were farmers in the area. Lane writes that “because of its wild beauty and easy accessibility from the industrial cities of the north, the Lake District was in constant danger of being turned into a spoiled tripper-ground by people whose very gusto for the place was considered an excuse for the horrible things they did to it. More damaging still, with hopeful fingers pressed on the tourist
pulse, there were those sordid forces which thrived on what is called 'development...'” (Beatrix 152). In order to combat against development, it was vital that the National Trust become the primary owner of the land. From the first purchase of Hill Top, Beatrix continued to buy plots of land with the understanding that it would someday belong to the Trust.

An explosion of tourism was also a threat to the natural environment. Affluent families often vacationed in the area, as Potter’s own family had when she was young, but with the popularity of her books came those who wanted to meet the reclusive author and see the rich, well-worked, and charming land that became another character in her books. Potter’s defense of the Lake District, as Lear describes it, came at a time “when the plunder of nature was more popular than its preservation” (Beatrix 447). She was often very direct in turning visitors away and would be furious at the amount of litter that travelers would leave behind. Through her work with the National Trust, she single-handedly affected the geography of Northern England. It could have become over-developed with homes and cement. Without the contribution Beatrix Potter made in the preservation of so many acres of farm and forest, the beauty found in the Lake District may not have remained for us to enjoy today.

Immediately following his wife’s death, William Heelis undertook the scrupulous task of managing her massive estate. According to Lear’s calculations, Potter’s estate at the time of her death valued £211,636 4s.10d., which today, adjusted for inflation, would be approximately $14,000,000 US dollars. It took William a solid eighteen months to meet all of his late wife’s strict instructions concerning her assets. Some of the Potter (Crompton) family heirlooms were given to the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh. Potter’s drawings and sketches were to remain at Hill Top Farm, until they were moved for preservation purposes in the late 1980’s.
Her portfolio of the study and research on fungi was presented to the Armitt Library in Ambleside. Slowly, William distributed her belongings according to her wishes. But her greatest gift to Britain—and not her husband—was the meticulously managed land of the Lake District.

To ensure his comfort, Potter left all the royalties, copyright, and shares in the Frederick Warne & Co. to William, which he eventually relinquished to the company. She did not specifically leave any of her land to him, but instead gave him the asset she least cared for and that had, in her later life, held little interest to her, she gave him the monetary benefits of her old hobby. As stated in her will, William surrendered all properties in Potter's possession to the National Trust, save 250 acres, including Hill Top and Troutbeck to manage on his own until he was ready to retire. Her strict instructions were that Hill Top not be let; it was Potter's belief that once she was gone the land should belong solely to the people of the dales. Hunting of any kind was prohibited at Troutbeck Park, the many flocks of the valuable and hardy sheep remained in the Herdwick breed tradition, and a pasture at Satter Howe was be dedicated in the memory of fallen Sawrey soldiers who served in the Great War. It was Potter's order that all settlements be carried out quietly, without pomp or fuss.

In 1944, the National Trust publicly announced the “Greatest Ever Lakeland Gift,” from the Heelis Bequest, which totaled over 4,300 acres of Lake District holdings (see Appendix G). Potter's contribution included 60 individual properties and 40 separate conveyances, consisting of 500 wooded acres, 15 farms, numerous homes, and a handful of cottages. She also set aside a significant sum of money to be used strictly for the upkeep and repair of the properties. Though the Trust did not pay taxes and could certainly afford the extra monetary amount for
maintenance, Potter was determined even from her grave that her properties would be well-cared for.

She designated the use of the Lake District to the farmers who lived and worked the land. She tied up the land in the Trust, assuring that it would not be developed or used commercially. However, tourism cannot be avoided. Just as Wordsworth devotees travel to Hawkshead to visit the places where the poet found his inspiration and to see the daffodils he so beautifully describes, Potter fans flock to the Lake District hoping to experience—or at least glimpse into—the life she once lived. Since the mid-eighties, the Trust has opened Hill Top Farm as a museum, displaying Potter’s belongings just as she had left them. Her drawings, sketches, and watercolors are displayed in a number of museums around the area, and tourists from all over the world can now embark on a Beatrix Potter guided tour through the Lake District.

Beatrix Potter led a remarkable life, transforming herself slowly from a shy and quiet city girl to a bold and outspoken Sawrey farmer. Weaving the restriction she felt through her childhood into her children’s tales, she has sent the message to those who have read and loved her stories that authenticity and autonomy trump conformity. She led her life this way, just as she has written her tales with this underlying theme. Potter stayed faithful to her familial duties, while slowly shaping her own independence as a writer, a wife, and a farmer. The adoration and admiration of holidays spent in the Lake District—those weeks and months that happily interrupted the lonely days sequestered in the third-floor nursery—made an indelible mark on her life, first through the tales and then through farming and preservation. Writing and illustrating had become her outlet, two mediums where she could mask the confinement she felt from her parents and their societal expectations. Once she escaped the rigidity of Victorian life and the
claustrophobic presence of her parents, Potter used her creative and monetary power to reverse the restraints in her life: she began to dictate her destiny, she chose to marry someone socially inferior, and used the royalties from the tales to build her own empire in the Lake District. Lane was correct to title her biography *The Tale of Beatrix Potter*, as the story of Beatrix Potter's life and work is certainly a tale of its own.
Appendix A:

Sample from Potter's Coded Journal, dated 1881

(Lane Beatrix plate 16)
Appendix B:
Potter's Early Drawings, Farmhouse, Oct. 1877

(Taylor 29)

Flower Drawing, Feb. 9, 1876

(Lane Beatrix plate 11)
Appendix C:

Rabbit Study – Benjamin Bouncer, 1890.

(Taylor 50)
Appendix D:
Sample pages of Illustrated Letter to Noel Moore, 1893
(Linder History 7-14)

Cotswold Duntled
Sep 15th 93

My dear Noel,
I don't know what to write to you, so I shall tell you a story about four little rabbits whose names are

Hopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail
and Peter.

They lived with their mother in a sand bank under the root of a big pine tree.

"Now, my dears," said old Mrs Bunny, "you may go into the field or down the lane, but don't go into Mr McGregor's garden."

Hopsy, Mopsy & Cottontail, who were good little rabbits, went down the lane to gather blackberries, but Peter, who was very naughty,

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Two streets away, to Mr. McGregor's garden, and squeezed underneath the gate.

Just he ate some lettuce, and some broad beans, then some strawberries, and then, feeling rather thin, he went to look for some parsley, but around the end of a cucumber frame, whom should he meet but Mr. McGregor!

Mrs. McGregor hung up the little jacket and hose for a enormous, to frighten the black birds.

Peter was ill during the evening, in consequence of overeating himself. His mother put him to bed, and gave him a dose of camomile tea.

But Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cottontail had bread and milk and blackberries for supper.

I am coming back to London next Thursday. I hope I shall see you soon, and the new baby. I remain, dear Beth, yours affectionately, Beatrix Potter.
Appendix E:

Illustrations from *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*

(Potter *Complete* 19)
Appendix F:
Illustration of Tom Kitten
(Potter Complete 189)
Appendix G:

Potter's Properties in the Lake District

(Lear xvii-xix)
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