



## Alice's Academy

### Crossing Boundaries and Forming Identity in Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*

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Katie Mullins has recently completed her M.A. in English Literature at Queen's University, Ontario Canada and earned her B.A. from the University of Calgary in Alberta. Her research interests include feminist and gender theory, and the interaction between text and images in picture books, comics, and graphic novels.

Katie Mullins considers the essential relationship between breaking boundaries (both literal and symbolic) and identity formation in two classic picture books: Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*. After all, if we are not to risk, not to venture beyond conventional norms and territories, how are we to grow? How are we to discover our possibilities? Mullin offers Peter as a questioner and a questor, a hero who chooses to challenge the accepted conventions and limitations of his world.

(Caroline Jones – editor, *Alice's Academy*)

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Beatrix Potter's picture book *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* has gained an undisputed position within the canon of children's literature. Although Potter's famous Rabbit continues to charm new generations of readers, the precise reason for the story's persistent popularity continues to be debated by critics. Potter herself considered the reason for the book's popularity, and wrote the following about her picture letters in 1905: "It is much more satisfactory to address a real live child; I often think that that was the secret of the success of *Peter Rabbit*, it was written to a child—not made to order" (Beatrix Potter, qtd. in Linder, 110). Certainly, the origins of the story as a letter have a bearing on the intimate relationship that Potter creates between the reader and the characters.

Peter's adventures are in the form of a journey that is both physical and psychological. From the relative safety of the forest, Peter ventures into the (dangerous) garden and simultaneously embarks on a passage from innocence to experience—a journey repeated in the book's less famous sequel, *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*. In this sense, Peter's development has a kind of *bildungsroman* quality within the genre of children's literature and, arguably, children continue to relate to the character of Peter Rabbit because of the books' focus on the formative experiences that construct identity. Peter determines his identity by breaking boundaries, which appear in the form of his mother's rules, and also literally in the shape of the many physical barriers that are presented in both tales: the gate, the net, the sieve, the door, and, most obviously, walls. Clothes also become a form of physical restriction, and have the power to both create and complicate Peter's identity. These barriers, or boundaries, are echoes of the verbal negations in the story and are features that simultaneously confine and liberate Peter. By crossing these boundaries, Peter is able to transcend his undifferentiated status as one of "four little rabbits," and develop his individual self (Potter, *Peter Rabbit* 9). The formation of Peter's identity, which develops through the story of *Peter Rabbit* and *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*, is a process that evolves through the interplay between the verbal and iconic narrative.

In *How Picturebooks Work*, Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott note the importance of the relationship between the pictures, or iconic narrative, and the conventional text: "The function of pictures, iconic signs, is to describe or represent. The function of words, conventional signs, is primarily to narrate. ...The tension between the two functions creates unlimited possibilities for interaction between word and image in a picturebook" (1-2). The famous opening of *Peter Rabbit* establishes the format of the



verbal/iconic relationship: the illustrations are distinctly separated from the verbal text by the gutter, and although the placement of the illustration on the verso sometimes switches to the recto, at no point in the book do the verbal and iconic narrative share the same page. In her book, *The Case of Peter Rabbit*, Margaret Mackey notes that "[o]ne aspect of the book that sets it apart is the exquisite visual balance between text and picture. The gutter is almost used as an equilibrium-setter" (10). Potter adheres to this format in *Benjamin Bunny*, as well as in her other tales. The Western convention of reading left-to-right and from the top to the bottom of a page means that the illustration on the verso of *Peter Rabbit* is the instigating narrative. A careful reading of the illustration and verbal text immediately reveals a counterpoint between the two: the illustration depicts a realistic scene of a group of wild rabbits under a tree, while the verbal narrative immediately fictionalizes the rabbits by naming them. The verbal text also clears the ambiguity of the number of rabbits in the illustration by overtly stating that there are "four little Rabbits" (Potter, *Peter Rabbit* 9).

This revelation requires the reader to return to the iconic narrative to locate the fourth rabbit, who is facing in the opposite direction to the others and is only visible by his hind legs and tail. This ostensibly subtle illustration therefore immediately calls attention to the significance of one rabbit in the group. In his essay, "Undifferentiated Bunnies," W.C. Harris contends that in this illustration, the rabbit family "are a mass of undifferentiated bunnies: they are all in the background; they are all the same colour and size" (73). Harris continues to argue, "Peter is just another undifferentiated bunny [who] we cannot pick out as our protagonist"; however, a careful examination of the verbal and iconic interplay reveals that Potter provides adequate information for the reader to distinguish Peter as the hero (74).

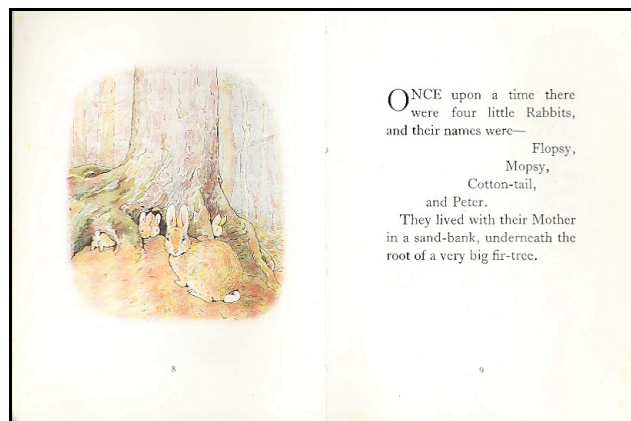


Fig. 1. Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* 8-9.

Although each rabbit is undifferentiated in terms of colour, expression, or distinguishing features, the rabbit who faces away from the reader is immediately characterized by his rebellious posture. The correlation between the verbal and iconic narrative allows the reader to discern which of the four rabbits this "rebel" character is: the placement of the names on the recto indicates that the final name, which is separated from the group by a conjunction, belongs to the rabbit who faces away. The left-to-right visual pattern of the verbal text also parallels the placement of the illustrated rabbits on the verso; in each case, Peter is the rabbit on the left. It is also worth noting that while the first three rabbits are given plainly fictitious names, Peter's name emphasizes his distinction and indicates his human qualities, which become apparent as the story progresses; in her essay "A Jungian Perspective on the Enduring Appeal of *Peter Rabbit*," Alice Byrnes notes that, in many regards, Peter represents a child archetype who "seems more like a little boy than a bunny" (138). Indeed, in *The Uses of Enchantment*, child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim notes the significance of animals as a way for a child to explore his or her identity, and argues that children believe animals "think and feel [like humans]," and "because of this inherent sameness it is believable that [humans] can change into animal[s], or the other way around" (46-47).

The recto illustration on the following page re-instates Peter's separation from the rest of the rabbits, but in this instance the arrangement of the rabbits is reversed: Peter is facing the reader and is positioned on the right side of the page, while his three siblings are turned away and grouped together. Peter is also foregrounded in this vignette and has his eye intently turned to the reader, which establishes Peter as the sympathetic protagonist: "Peter, with his back turned and his whiskers on the alert, is clearly entertaining rebel thoughts" (Mackey, *The Case Of Peter Rabbit* 9).



Fig. 2. Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* 10-11.

The picture has moved away from the natural, realistic setting of the opening illustration and presents the rabbits in a human stance, on two legs, and wearing clothes. The introduction of clothes further develops Peter's individuality. Flopsy, Mopsy and Cottontail are wearing matching red capes, while Peter is distinguished in his (gendered) blue jacket; in her essay, "Clothed in Nature or Nature Clothed," Carole Scott contends that "Potter attires her animals in people's clothes, blurring the distinction between the animal and human realms so that children can perceive the relation between animal and human nature" (81). The appearance of the jacket is especially significant as Peter's clothes come to have an intrinsic bearing on the plot of both *Peter Rabbit* and *Benjamin Bunny*. This picture therefore illustrates two scenes: the image of old Mrs. Rabbit and her three children, who are placed in intimate proximity to each other, is distanced from the reader and creates a detached perspective while, in contrast, negative space separates the amalgamated group of rabbits and Peter, who appears as solitary figure. The idea of Peter as rebel becomes fully initiated at this point.

In the book's sequel, *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*, Peter is completely removed from his family. Benjamin Bunny goes to visit his relations, who are named in the verbal text as before, but only three indistinguishable rabbits, presumably Flopsy, Mopsy and Cottontail, appear in the accompanying illustration. Peter is introduced in the verbal text on the subsequent page, but appears in the illustration only as a pair of ears.

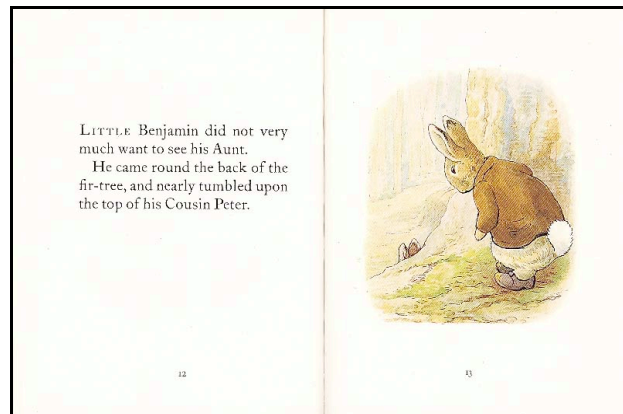


Fig. 3. Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny* 12-13.

Benjamin notices that Peter looks "poorly," which suggests that little time has passed between the events of the first book and the opening scenes of the second. The continuation of plot from *Peter Rabbit* to *Benjamin Bunny* problematizes the definitive statement "The End" which appears on the final page of the first book: the plot reaches beyond the material boundary of the book and resumes between the covers of the sequel (Potter 70). Echoing the borders negotiated in the storyline by Peter, the book creates its own boundaries to be crossed by the reader: by completing *Peter Rabbit* and picking up the narrative thread in *Benjamin Bunny*, the reader effectively transgresses the physical boundary of the book, defying the assertion that it is "The End" of the story. The line drawings that appear on the endpapers further imply the "false" ending provided by the verbal narrative; whilst not specific to either book (indeed, the same decorated endpapers are used in every Potter tale), the constellation of characters depicted on both front and back endpapers suggest a circularity that not only returns to the beginning of the book in question, but suggests that each tale is linked in an all-encompassing narrative. By crossing the boundary between



books, the reader progresses with Peter in the search for identity; Benjamin's question to Peter, "who has got your clothes?," encourages the reader, who will likely know the answer from the first book, to become involved with the story in the second book. The question also highlights the object of desire that triggers the second journey into the garden, and the importance of clothes to the "development of a sense of self" (Scott, "Clothed in Nature or Nature Clothed" 72). Peter's need to reclaim his clothes, and therefore his identity, replaces the juvenile inclination towards self-indulgence and excitement that prompts his adventure in the first story.

In *Peter Rabbit*, Peter's rebellious disposition is provoked by the initial verbal dialogue, which appears in the form of a negation from old Mrs. Rabbit: "you may go down the lane, but don't go into Mr. McGregor's garden" (Potter 10). This warning introduces the forbidden territory of the garden, which, in conjunction with Peter's defiant movement away from his mother in the recto illustration, is presented as the likely setting for his imminent adventures. The sense of expectancy is heightened by Mrs. Rabbit's caution on the following page: "[n]ow run along and don't get into mischief" (13). In *How Picturebooks Work*, Nikolajeva and Scott assert that Peter "exemplif[ies] the naughty boy who values his independence and whose desire to transgress boundaries far outweighs his mother's warnings or his personal safety" (93-94). The passage also introduces an element of danger into the story; Mrs. Rabbit reveals that Peter's father "had an accident there; he was put into a pie by Mrs. McGregor," which creates a sense of anticipation and apprehension for the reader who has already been encouraged, by the illustrations, to identify with Peter (Potter, *Peter Rabbit* 10). In her book, *Beatrix Potter*, Ruth MacDonald argues that although "the picture of Mrs. McGregor and the pie was deleted from the final edition ... the line of explanation remains to show that Peter is not simply irrationally wilful in the violation of the sanction; he is also imperilled and daring" (27). Despite his mother's warning, Peter repeats his father's journey into the forbidden garden in an attempt to satisfy his curiosity and desire for adventure.

Peter's separation from his siblings, which up until this point has been depicted in the illustrations by his clothes and distinctive posture, becomes fully realized when his mother leaves. The four rabbits are separated entirely, both in the conventional and iconic narrative: "Flopsy, Mopsy and Cotton-tail, who were good little bunnies, went down the lane to gather blackberries:" (Potter, *Peter Rabbit* 17). The enjambment of this line onto the following verso not only creates anticipation to turn the page, but also accentuates Peter's complete severance from the group: "[b]ut Peter, who was very naughty, ran straight away to Mr. McGregor's garden and squeezed under the gate!" (18).

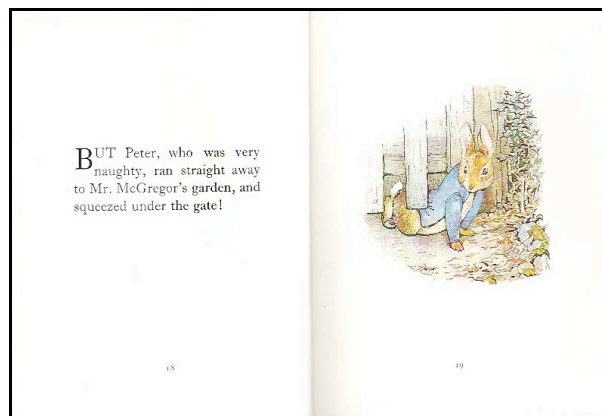


Fig. 4. Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* 18-19.

The text and illustration depict Peter's first defiant crossing of boundaries: both the boundary of his mother's rules and the physical boundary of the gate, which separates the worlds of forest and garden, safety and danger. In his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell describes the "call to adventure" as an event that is triggered by the need to break from existing conditions in order to develop an individual identity: "[t]he familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand" (51). By going under the gate and into the garden, Peter does indeed cross the threshold of his old, familiar environment and enters the forbidden garden that contains "the unknown and danger" (77).

Mr. McGregor, as the embodiment of this danger, assumes a predatory role and chases Peter "all over the garden," until he runs into the gooseberry net and gets "caught by the large buttons on his jacket" (Potter, *Peter Rabbit* 29, 30). The jacket, which initially assists in creating Peter's individual identity, humanizing and differentiating him in a positive way, becomes a potentially life-threatening



impediment. Although Peter's initial pursuit of food is somewhat pleasurable, his satisfaction is swiftly exchanged for alarm: "[e]ntering the garden leads to the loss of clothes that mitigate the boundary between animals and human beings, and to possible loss of life. Eat and you will be eaten is the warning" (Scott, "An Unusual Hero", 22). The net is the second barrier that Peter encounters and, unlike the gate into the garden, it is devoid of any connotation of adventure and freedom; instead, it symbolizes the containment and restraint of the human world on nature. This idea resonates throughout the garden itself, which is cultivated and controlled in contrast to the wild freedom of the woods.

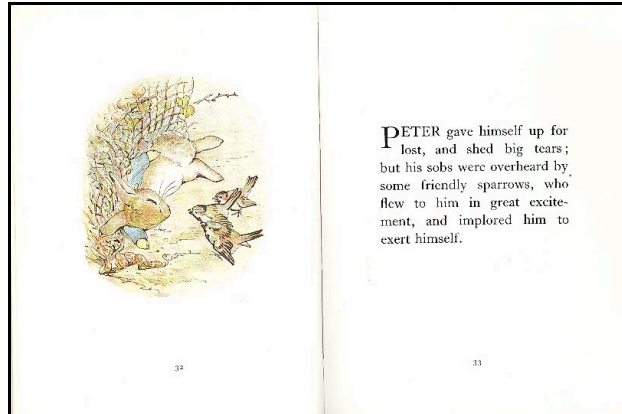


Fig. 5 Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* 32-33.

At this point in the story, Peter appears to be in a hopeless predicament: he is lost, distraught, and in great danger. Nikolajeva and Scott propose an insightful reading of this verso illustration, noting that "[t]he picture taken by itself could be a dead rabbit. Peter's eyes are closed, his position frozen and unnatural" (64). Indeed, a powerful counterpoint is constructed not only between the iconic and verbal text, but also within the illustration itself:

[Peter's] emotional and physical paralysis of despair...contrasts with the sparrows, whose energy is graphically pictured, but to whom the text gives shape, meaning and motivation: 'friendly sparrows, who flew to him in great excitement, and implored him to exert himself.'" (Nikolajeva and Scott 94-95)

The "friendly sparrows" provide some hope in the otherwise bleak scene, and elevate the melancholy mood with their vivacity, thus preventing the scene from becoming excessively disturbing. It is worth noting that the word choice in this passage, namely "implored," is markedly adult, but in conjunction with the picture its meaning is easily discernible; as Potter herself remarks, "children like a fine word occasionally" (qtd. in MacDonald 36).

In addition to the constraints of the net, Peter narrowly avoids being trapped by the sieve, which Mr. McGregor "intend[s] to pop upon the top of Peter" (Potter, *Peter Rabbit* 34). It is only by dehumanizing himself that Peter is able to elude danger: "[a]s he sheds his shoes and coat, Peter becomes increasingly rabbitlike, running on all fours instead of just his hind legs, thus evading Mr. McGregor's sieve" (Scott, "Clothed in Nature or Nature Clothed" 78). Having escaped these two constraining and dangerous barriers, Peter seeks refuge inside the safety of a watering can. In this instance, the can becomes a barrier of safety that offers, albeit temporary, protection from the dangerous Mr. McGregor; conversely, the water it contains is also the likely cause of Peter's illness at the end of the story.

A similar effect is produced by the basket in *Benjamin Bunny*, which becomes both a form of protection from the cat, but also a threatening enclosure that Peter and his cousin cannot escape. It is interesting to note that the basket visually recalls Mr. McGregor's sieve in the first story:

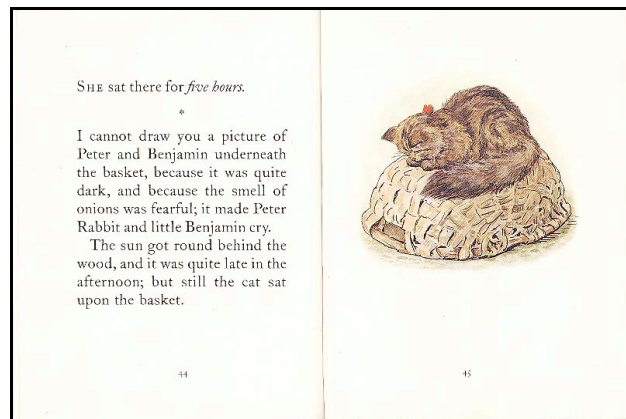


Fig. 6. Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny* 44-45.

In the basket illustrations, Potter chooses to eliminate both rabbits from the picture, and allows the narrative voice to explain: “I cannot draw you a picture of Peter and Benjamin underneath the basket, because it was quite dark, and the smell of onions was fearful” (Potter, *Benjamin Bunny* 44). The visual disappearance of the animals creates two simultaneous perspectives. Although the reader observes the basket from the outside, the text encourages a visualization of the image that is withheld in the iconic narrative: this encourages the reader to “conjure up the sight not only of the two rabbits, but also of the basket that imprisons and menaces them” (MacDonald 37). The fact that the two rabbits do not visually reappear for another four illustrations, accentuates the “five hours” that pass while they are under the basket, which the reader vicariously experiences with the rabbits (Potter, *Benjamin Bunny* 44). While McGregor in *Peter Rabbit* and the cat in *Benjamin Bunny* are forces that threaten the rabbits’ safety, *Benjamin Bunny* complicates the notion of “threat” by blurring the distinction between attacker and rescuer. Mr. Bunny saves the young rabbits from their predicament, but their rescue still involves a physical attack in the form of chastisement: “[Mr. Bunny] came back to the basket and took his son Benjamin by the ears, and whipped him with the little switch. Then he took out his nephew Peter” (51). Despite the verbally ambiguous nature of Peter’s punishment, the illustration depicts Peter being whipped while Benjamin looks on with a shamed expression. The violence of Peter’s punishment is softened by Mrs. Rabbit’s forgiveness at the end of the book, but nonetheless troubles the ostensible safety of familiar and familial associations. The episode marks a distinctly human experience for Peter, in which he is punished by an adult authority figure for behaviour deemed inappropriate.

Without the presence of “adult” figures—Mrs. Rabbit or Mr. Bunny—Peter tends to be *less* human and *more* rabbit. After the loss of his clothes in *Peter Rabbit*, Peter reverts to a noticeably more natural state; in the illustration after his escape from the watering can, Peter is pictured as a feral rabbit in a natural pose who faces the reader, but this time with an expression of fear and mistrust. Peter wears this same expression during his time in the garden in the sequel story; the first illustration of Peter and Benjamin in the garden presents a stark contrast between the two rabbits. While Benjamin is clothed, relaxed, and positioned in a very human stance, Peter is alert and timid and, other than the handkerchief that covers him, is distinctly rabbit like in posture and expression.

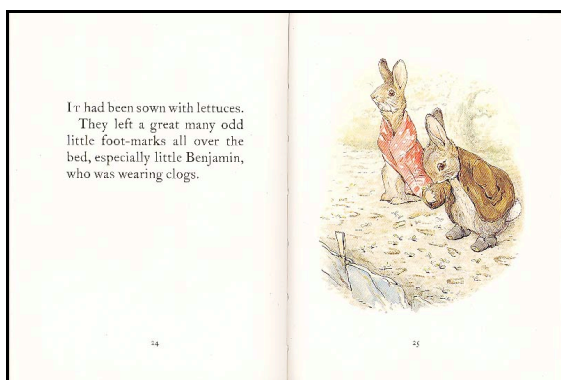


Fig. 7. *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*, 24-25.

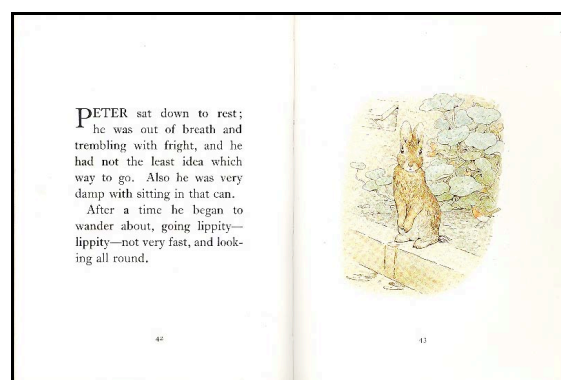


Fig. 8. *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, 42-43.

Carole Scott notes that Peter is not a likely hero; instead, he is a “small, easily frightened, emotionally driven, and certainly not very rational animal” (“An Unusual Hero” 28). However, it is perhaps this very



fact that contributes to the ongoing success of the story: Peter, as rabbit, exhibits characteristics that are not exaggeratedly fantastic and heroic but are, ironically, realistically human. Peter’s reversion to “rabbithood” in the first story, is also conveyed through the language used to describe his movement; “lippity – lippity” has an onomatopoeic quality, which emphasizes the fact that Peter is moving as a rabbit, rather than walking as before in his shoes (Potter, *Peter Rabbit* 42). His return to his “rabbit self” complicates his identity: Peter, without his clothes, has again become physically indistinguishable from the other rabbits.

Peter’s split human/animal identity reaches a climax when he finds the locked door in the garden wall. W.C. Harris contends that Potter’s story “depict[s] boundary-marking as a way of differentiating...selves,” and that “to discover the boundaries between what is the garden and what is not the garden is to comprehend a topography of both what is [Peter’s] own psyche and what is not” (63, 79). The wall is a barrier that separates Peter from the safety of his woodland home, while the locked door, which represents the potential movement from danger, becomes a threshold that Peter is unable to traverse. The inaccessible door forces Peter to realize his physical limitations, vulnerability, and isolation. The identity crisis that results is wonderfully depicted in the verso illustration, which is, as Carole Scott rightfully notes, “a masterpiece” (“An Unusual Hero” 26).

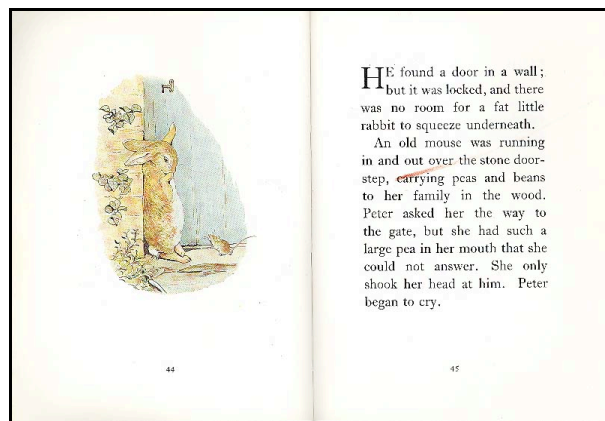


Fig. 9. Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* 44-45.

In this picture, Peter is part rabbit and part human: he wears no clothes and looks like a rabbit, yet stands on his hind legs with his feet crossed and wipes away a tear with his paw. Peter’s physical (rabbit) self is therefore invested with decidedly human qualities and emotions: “Peter is not just an animal, for his body, though anatomically accurate...is posed in a human stance” (Scott, “An Unusual Hero,” 26). Bettelheim asserts that the greatest human fear is that of desertion, namely separation anxiety, which is especially pronounced in the young child; therefore, the ultimate consolation in a story is the protagonist’s ensured care and protection (145). Peter’s separation and isolation in this scene is ultimate: not only is he divorced from his mother and siblings, but even his attempt to ask the old mouse “the way to the gate,” is met with no reply; in this scene, “the little rabbit requires sympathy for his plight where formerly there was only admiration for his bold-faced mischievousness” (MacDonald 30). The final line in the verbal text, “Peter began to cry,” exacerbates the sense of despair, which is relieved only marginally by the proximity of safety that lies on the other side of the locked door (Potter, *Peter Rabbit* 45).

Despite his desolation, Peter’s complete isolation forces him to become self-reliant, and brave his fears in order to continue his search for the gate. When Peter encounters danger again, he is able to observe it detachedly without becoming immediately threatened: he watches the cat twitching its tail and hears the cacophonous, onomatopoeic “scr-r-ritch, scratch, scratch, scritch” sound of Mr. McGregor’s hoe (Potter, *Peter Rabbit* 49). Indeed, the threatening sound of the gardening tool emphasizes the antagonistic role of Mr. McGregor, and proleptically indicates his later use of the hoe as a weapon. Conversely, the scene presents the hope of conciliation, as Peter is able to observe the boundary he must cross in order to reach safety. Margaret Mackey examines the way in which the counterpoint between safety and danger that is exposed by the physical boundaries in the narrative, is also created in the structural presentation of the illustrations and text:

[t]he potential for anarchy in the frame-breaking pictures versus the containing stability of the surrounding white space and page boundaries, the security of the rhythms of words and page



turns, all combine to support a bounded and limited consideration of the important idea that risks have consequences. (*The Case of Peter Rabbit* 12-13)

In *Benjamin Bunny*, the illustration of Peter and Benjamin looking into the garden at Peter's clothes becomes almost an exact reverse image of the picture that depicts Peter looking towards the gate in *Peter Rabbit*:

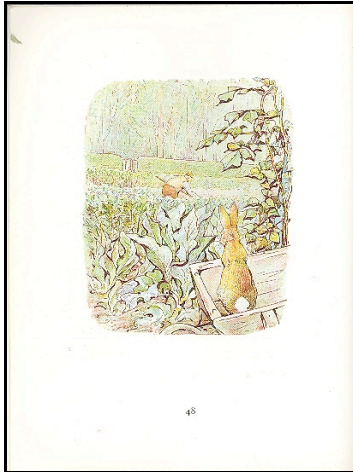


Fig. 10. *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, 48.

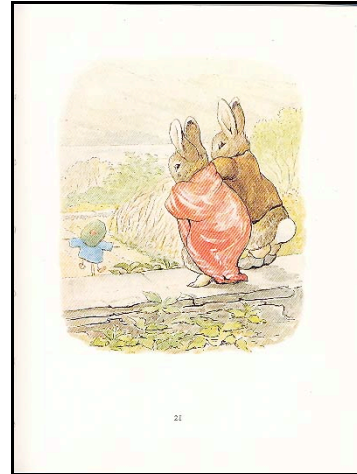


Fig. 11. *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*, 21.

In the first book, Peter looks from the perilous garden towards the boundary of the gate, which represents safety, but in the sequel he is positioned on the boundary wall looking *into* the dangerous garden; in both cases, the reader shares Peter's perspective.

Peter's return to the garden in the second book is less courageous than his first adventure, yet he offers no objection to returning. In his essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principal," Sigmund Freud contends that the desire to repeat experiences, even of the non-pleasurable kind, is a way of dealing with past events and, therefore, an intrinsic aspect of the formation of the self (433). Peter, as both rabbit and boy, therefore experiences and displays behaviour that is familiar to children; children have a desire to "repeat everything that has made a great impression on them in real life, and in doing so...abreact the strength of the impression and...make themselves master of the situation" (433). Peter's return to the garden could certainly be explained this way, and his second visit *does* display a greater level of maturity: unlike the first story, Peter does not greedily eat from the garden, but is constantly vigilant and overtly aware of danger. Additionally, when Peter reclaims his clothes, the fact that his "coat [is] somewhat shrunk" is metaphorically suggestive of his psychological growth (Potter, *Benjamin Bunny* 27). Peter's return to the garden also forces him to realize the value of his home: "Peter did not eat anything; he thought he should like to go home" (32).

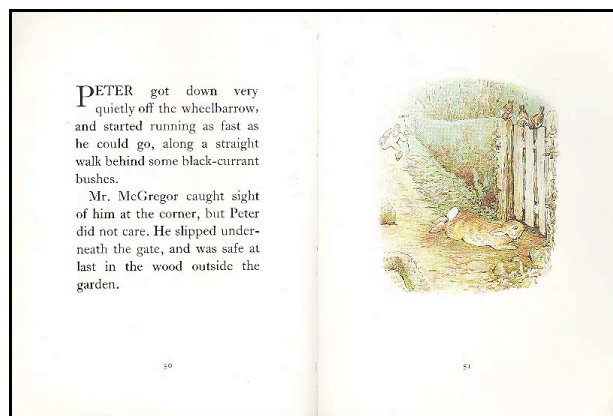


Fig. 12. Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* 50-51.

In the first book, Peter's desire to return to the safety of his home after his multiple encounters with danger is overtly apparent. When Peter crosses the boundary of the gate for a second time, his urgency and focus is conveyed through both the verbal and iconic narrative, and even though Mr.





McGregor sees him escaping, “Peter [does] not care” (Potter, *Peter Rabbit* 50). In these two pages, a complex counterpoint is produced between the verbal and iconic text, which echoes the distinction between safety and danger, or the forest and the garden: “[t]he pictures are not simply an additional embellishment; they share with the words the task of conveying the import of the story” (Mackey, *The Case of Peter Rabbit* 12). The effect produced communicates the significance of Peter’s crossing of this final boundary.

The verbal narrative assures the reader that Peter is “safe at last in the wood outside the garden,” and reveals only that Mr. McGregor “caught sight of him at the corner”; however, the illustration offers a less reassuring scene (Potter, *Peter Rabbit* 50). Peter is depicted just about to cross the threshold under the gate but still very much *in* the garden, and only a few yards behind him is the looming figure of Mr. McGregor brandishing his hoe. The three sparrows, which have not been present since the scene with the gooseberry net, also reappear in this illustration. In the net scene, Nikolajeva and Scott point out that “[t]he reader, like the birds, wants to press energy into Peter’s lax body”; the same effect is produced in this departing scene, except that the reader is now encouraged, with the sparrows, to urge Peter across the boundary of the gate to safety (95). The sparrows balance the anxiety of the scene with the reassurance of the energy and support they previously provided. Interestingly, birds appear as recurrent symbols of reassurance and positivity in both books; in *Benjamin Bunny*, the three sparrows are included in the illustration in which Peter reclaims his clothes—and identity—from the scarecrow in the garden. The robin in particular, present in six of the illustrations in *Peter Rabbit*, re-emerges in *Benjamin Bunny* as a comforting presence. In the illustration where Mr. Bunny escorts Peter and Benjamin out of the garden, the robin perches on the gate and looks down at the scolded rabbits in a sympathetic gesture that echoes that of the three sparrows on the gate in *Peter Rabbit*.

Peter’s return to the safety of the fir-tree is a relief, although the ending presents some interesting details that indicate that the adventure is not yet over. By creating this sense of incompleteness, the book allows the sequel to continue to develop the narrative. The possibility of another adventure is supported by the text, which implies that Peter has, in fact, been on other conceivably dangerous escapades that have caused him to lose his clothes before: “[i]t was the second little jacket and pair of shoes that Peter had lost in a fortnight!” (Potter, *Peter Rabbit* 54). The penultimate illustration presents a new perspective: although the verbal narrative describes Peter’s illness and his mother’s care of him, Peter is no longer the central focus of the picture. Peter’s siblings are positioned in the foreground, while Peter, still separated from the rest of the family, is barely discernible in the distance; Peter appears to have lost his defining characteristics. In the final illustration, Peter is not present whatsoever. It is not until *Benjamin Bunny* that this lack of identity is rectified. Carole Scott asserts that “the struggle [for personal independence] is what life is all about, and the price that one must pay – a stomachache and no supper- is well worth the exhilaration and self-realization that results” (“An Unusual Hero” 29). Although, through its conveyance of the negative consequences of reckless actions, this ending appears somewhat moralizing, it also sets the precedent for the following tale.

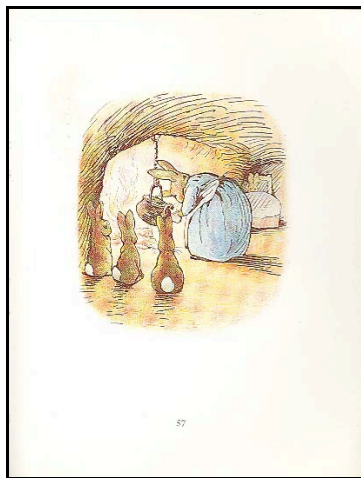


Fig. 13. *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, 56-57.

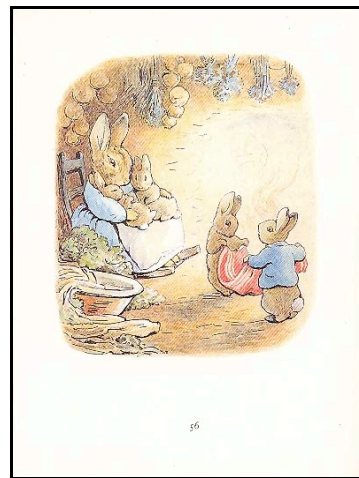


Fig. 14. *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*, 56.

Peter’s dejection is carried forward into *Benjamin Bunny*, where his identity is finally consolidated. In the sequel’s final illustration, Peter is prominent in the picture plane. For the first time, Peter is very much part of his family and physically interacts with them as he assists one of his siblings with a chore; nonetheless, his individuality remains apparent by the wearing of his redeemed jacket. In this illustration,



Peter has finally reconciled his individual identity with the mundane safety of his domestic life. Peter's identity therefore evolves through the course of the two books; in both journeys, he negotiates boundaries that are equally tempting and threatening in order to create his sense of identity and place. Peter's consequent experiences allow him to become the ultimate hero: Potter's rabbit is rebellious, emotional, vulnerable and, therefore, decidedly human. The verbal and iconic narratives participate in an intricate relationship that invites multiple perspectives and creates intense, emotionally charged scenes; the intimate relationship that results between reader and character enhances the impact of the plot and constructs a parallel between formative experiences and the creation of individual identity.

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