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Water-Babies, White Rabbits and Lost Boys: Examining the Victorian Age Through the Lens of Children's Literature

Elizabeth Carpenter

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Examining the Victorian Age Through the Lens of
Children's Literature

Elizabeth S. Carpenter

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Introduction

Children's literature has long been a part of society's consciousness, so much so that it is difficult to imagine a generation of children growing up without Alice's adventures in Wonderland or Peter Pan's flights through the night sky. From tales passed down orally through generations to *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the beginning of the printed word, stories for children have been an extensive part of the literary tradition. However, when examined more closely, some stories hold a deeper meaning. *The Water-Babies* (1863), *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871), and *Peter Pan* (1911) are all representative of that shift in children's literature. While they are all stories meant to entertain and delight children, these four books also represent a new genre of children's stories, rife with social commentary, each dealing with specific issues of the time period through the magical stories they tell.

It was during the Victorian Age that books meant to entertain children became a readily available product, offering children the opportunity to read books with their families, and thus offering a whole genre of stories meant for all ages. Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense*, published in 1846, offered a foundation for a world of literature based on nothing but silliness. The idea of nonsense and fantasy became popular and authors of the time took up the tradition. Instead of offering any deep insight into the world, Lear's limericks held nothing but entertainment, a far cry from later authors of

the time. Lear did not use his published works to discuss his problems with society, rather he wrote about a man with a beard in which birds built nests. With no deeper meaning, Lear's work was far different from that of the children's stories that would follow.

Unlike Lear, Charles Kingsley (1819-1875) used *The Water-Babies* to air his concerns with the social behavior being practiced in Victorian England. Prior to the publication of his most well-known works, Kingsley acted as a clergyman in Hampshire and was well-known for his defense of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. With the publication of *The Water-Babies*, Kingsley's position on the theory of evolution became even more clear, with oblique references to the ongoing debate and a preference toward characters who speak out in support of evolution. As a Christian Socialist, Kingsley felt the unrest of the time. Growing industrial cities raised the problem of pollution, the working class was finding living conditions unbearable, and Darwin's theories of evolution shook the basic tenets of Christian faith; as confident as Kingsley felt about the theory of evolution, his relationship towards his own faith was slightly shaky. In 1840, Kingsley wrote "From very insufficient and ambiguous grounds in the Bible, [the clergy] seem unjustifiably to have built up a huge superstructure, whose details they have filled in according to their own fancies or, alas, too often according to their own interest," but a year later decided to join the Church anyway, feeling that he would be closer to God in the Church than out of it (Bayne 216). His faith in God, like his faith in Darwin's theory of evolution, was stronger than his faith in the Church.

The Water-Babies draws parallels between religious faith and evolution in

surprising ways, all based on the idea of believing in that which cannot be seen. Not all scientific theories can be proven to the satisfaction of much of the general public; thus, evidence comes in the form of surprising links between apes and *homo sapiens*, and the connection must be believed in just as much as it is scientifically-based. The *Water-Babies* was appreciated by the reading public as an excellent blending of fantasy worlds and contemporary social issues (Lerer 176). The tale may have seemed all the more plausible because Kingsley chose to set it in Victorian England, right alongside his readers, and through his story, he forced his contemporary audience to face the problems of the time, from pollution and child labor to the debate over evolution. His story rings true for today's audience as well, offering a morality that translates to modern readers. *The Water-Babies* offers a glimpse at an overt story of social criticism mixed with the fantasy of made-up worlds. At no point does Kingsley attempt to hide the commentary he's making.

Lewis Carroll (1832-1898) picks up the idea of a multi-world existence with *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871). Within the first thirty years of its publication, the Alice stories sold a combined total of 240,000 copies, solidifying their status as best sellers of their time (Altick 389). As Alice travels to different worlds through rabbit holes and mirrors, she presents a character able to bridge the gap between the real and the fantastic, and is, as Lewis Carroll essayist Jean Gattégno points out, one of the first feminine heroines in children's literature (Gattégno 75). Lewis Carroll's fantastical world has been interpreted as something to do with a fascination with young girls or flights of fancy from a sexually-

repressed deacon, but it can also be seen as another location for social critique.¹

Written for a young girl named Alice Liddell in response to her plea for a story, the Alice stories are not the tales of a psychologically disturbed man trying to work out his inner angst. Instead they are tales of the distressing problems of the Victorian Age, seen through the lens of a fantasy world. Thus Alice is able to exist in both England and the magical lands she visits. Not only does Carroll continue Kingsley's idea of bridging worlds, but he uses the magical worlds as an aid in addressing some of his critical concerns with the Victorian Age.

From problems with the poverty-stricken, starving lower class to commentary on the reign of Queen Victoria, Wonderland and the Looking-Glass world are far from perfect and paradisiacal. Instead, they are mirrors of Carroll's England, a reminder of the world Alice leaves behind, a reminder that there are few solutions to the problems that Carroll identifies. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* are children's stories, no doubt, but only on a surface level. As reading grew to be a family activity, something enjoyed by the fire late at night, when parents returned from work and children came home from school, children's literature bridged the gap between child and adult, offering a form of entertainment that could be enjoyed at many intellectual levels, that could be read simply for pleasure or, contrastingly, as a treatise on social change. When examined more closely, Alice's

¹ There are published works on this issue, such as Richard Wallace's *Jack the Ripper, Light-Hearted Friend* which posits the idea that Lewis Carroll was actually Jack the Ripper. In an interview with *Vogue* magazine, Vladimir Nabokov tells them that he called Lewis Carroll "Lewis Carroll Carroll" because he was the "first Humbert Humbert." However, Karoline Leach in *In the Shadow of the Dreamchild* dispels accusations of pedophilia, saying they were built on speculation.

adventures hold a darker, more pessimistic view of the world. Normally read simply as a higher form of the sort of nonsense genre Edward Lear played with, the Alice stories are seen as games of logic and riddles, rather than having anything to do with the changing and shifting society of the Victorian Age.²

J. M. Barrie's (1860-1937) *Peter Pan* had far less to do with changes in the public sphere and far more to do with the domestic structure of Victorian and Edwardian England. *Peter Pan* speaks to the changes from the Victorian Age into the Edwardian Age, clinging to the past and looking towards the future. Wendy, John and Michael travel to Neverland with the help of Peter, and yet, even after traversing through the night skies and entering a world where pirates and mermaids are commonplace, they still manage to cling to the familiar structure of their domestic home life in England. Wendy becomes the mother to the Lost Boys, placing Peter Pan in the role of the father. Barrie is able to challenge the traditionally accepted structure of the family by offering Peter, the epitome of childhood, as a paternal figure. In a manner uncharacteristic of Carroll and Kingsley, Barrie romanticizes the adult figures in *Peter Pan*. Mr. and Mrs. Darling have just as much growth and character development as their adventuring children, whereas characters like the evil Mr. Grimes in *The Water-Babies* and the Mad Hatter and the Queen of Hearts of Wonderland simply act as caricatures in a fantasy world.

² The idea of examining the interior riddles and logic of the Alice stories is a fairly new area of study; articles discussing the nonsensical and mathematical implications of the Alice stories are being published today by people such as Melanie Bayley, a PhD student in Victorian literature and mathematics at Oxford in her article "Algebra in Wonderland." NPR recently aired a segment on the math in Alice as well. There is no shortage of new scholarly material on the matter. Charles Matthews, an essayist, wrote a critical article on the satire and literary parody within the Alice stories. This topic is not a new one to scholars, but there are still many new ways to approach the subject.

Through *Peter Pan*, Barrie offers an alternative to the commentaries on the monarchy or the working conditions of the poor that Carroll and Kingsley provided; instead Barrie offers a way of salvaging the importance of the family without adhering to a strict structure. From the well-defined roles that each family member was supposed to play inside the home to the perception of each family member as they left the security of the house, there was a definite arrangement in the family home. Barrie is by no means revolutionary, but he is far from conservative in his approach to domestic life. Perhaps Barrie's own unique family structure played a part in his view on family life. Although married, with a wife at home, J. M. Barrie found the Llewelyn Davies family, a mother and her five sons, captivating and spent much of his free time with them. In much the same way that Lewis Carroll made up the tale of Alice for his young friend, so did Barrie play make-believe with the Llewelyn Davies brothers, using them as the inspiration for his most successful work. Children offer the inspiration for tales of fiction, and the tales of fiction offer outlets for expressing displeasure with the world in which their authors exist.

Charles Kingsley, Lewis Carroll and J. M. Barrie, though they all wrote their most famous children's stories at different points during the Victorian Age, wielded their chosen genre in different manners when it came to the issue of social critique. By examining these stories in this way, I am offering a new perspective on the analysis of these well-known works. Where Kingsley's work is unmistakably a work of social

commentary, the Alice stories and *Peter Pan* have not often been read so.³ Alice's adventures have been read as a complicated mathematical allegory, or wrapped up in issues of pedophilia or drug abuse; only occasionally are they examined as works of social criticism. Martin Gardner, the most well-known annotator of the Alice stories, offers insight into the reign of Queen Victoria as viewed through the various queens Alice encounters, but fails to see the issues of poverty and starvation present in the Looking-Glass World. *Peter Pan* is read far more as a work of the impossibility of a permanent childhood and the relationship between adulthood and growing up, rather than as a story dealing with the domestic structure of Victorian England. Peter Pan has lent his name to a psychological disorder for men who refuse to act their age, which neglects to mention the issue of Peter's difficulties with family life.

Children's literature, from *Pilgrim's Progress* to the Harry Potter series often acts as a lens through which to view society, but only recently have these stories come to be seen as something darker. Instead of rose-colored glasses presenting a fairy-tale existence, the tales of these children show the problems of the world in stark contrast to the fantasy around them. In this way, Kingsley, Carroll and Barrie have left their imprint on not only children's literature, but literature itself. By using their fantastical worlds and characters on the edge, the three authors are able to offer a detached view of society, allowing their audience to come to terms with the reality of England, and allowing future readers to see the historical Victorian Age as it was seen by its

³ Jonathan Padley, Church of England ordinand and contributor to many literary journals, fails to discuss the issues of pollution and child labor within *The Water-Babies*, but does successfully navigate the common territory of the margins that exist within the story.

inhabitants. Tom the chimney sweep, Alice the adventurer, and Peter Pan, the boy who never grows up, are children who bring readers along with them to magical places, but through their stories, they remind the audience of the problems in the worlds they leave behind.

The Water-Babies: The Darker Side of Fairy Tales

Charles Kingsley's 1863 *The Water-Babies: A Moral Tale for Land-Babies* can be seen as one of the first stories actively engaged in social critique written for children. *The Water-Babies* speaks to many issues of the time, including evolution, pollution, child labor, poverty and religion. The purpose of *The Water-Babies* may have been to criticize the antagonistic relationship between religion and science; Kingsley offers neutral territory where the two sides can safely tread. *The Water-Babies* sets forth the story of Tom, a young chimney sweep, as he travels through magical lands, transformed from a human child into a water-baby.¹ The fantastical creatures and worlds that Tom encounters clearly set the stage for Neverland, Wonderland, and the Looking-Glass world. Kingsley is always careful to remind the reader that the story is make-believe, even ending the tale by saying, "But remember, always, as I told you at first, that this is all a fairy tale, and only fun and pretence; and, therefore, you are not to believe a word of it, even if it is true" (Kingsley 192). Kingsley makes comments such as this throughout the story, always telling the reader there is more to what is being read than the face value of the words on the page. The story of water-babies and the form of the fairy tale allow Kingsley to address the marginalization of the poverty-stricken population of England while tying together his themes on child labor and poverty. Kingsley continues to play with the form of the fairy tale, while beginning the theme of social commentary

¹ A water-baby is simply a child who has been endowed with gills and the sort of apparatuses that allow it to swim underwater for long periods of time; simply put, a baby capable of swimming like a fish.

within children's literature as he blends the fantastic elements of children's stories with the serious issues facing England through the Victorian Age. It is through the fantasy and tongue-in-cheek nature of *The Water-Babies* that Kingsley is able to navigate the perilous terrain of passionate social debate.

Prior to Kingsley's contribution to the genre, books such as *Lessons for Children*, written by Anna Laetitia Barbauld in the late 1700s or Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense* (1846) were works written for children. However, these books served different purposes than Kingsley's *The Water-Babies*, representing the two extremes of children's literature between which Kingsley attempted to strike a balance between. Barbauld's books were meant to educate children in reading and writing, rather than to entertain. Lear's *Book of Nonsense's* primary goal was to amuse, with no reason to the rhymes he wrote. *The Water-Babies* walks the line between the two, both teaching and entertaining. Indeed, it is clear that Charles Kingsley wanted to use this story as a vehicle for expressing his commentary on the world, but Kingsley also intended for it to be used in schools and as pleasure reading at home.²

The Water-Babies, a book also meant to entertain, was one of the first children's stories with a fully formed fantasy world, separate from the mundane world the Victorian audience knew. The excitement of such a place lent itself well to bridging the gap between didactic literature and pure storytelling, as it was used both in educational and domestic settings. The fantasy world of *The Water-Babies* keeps the lessons and

² The editor of the 1884 edition of *The Water-Babies* tells the reader that the story takes "occasional satirical and metaphysical flights...into regions too high for the safe carriage of young readers" and that these are "side diversions of the author for an older audience than that [Kingsley] invokes." He also suggests that this story is meant to be read by "a child by himself, or to the aggregate of the school-room" (Kingsley iv-vii).

social commentary it teaches from becoming dull and every day, and the lessons, in turn, keep the fantasy from becoming too ridiculous and insincere. Instead of offering only social commentary, Kingsley uses the fantasy world to address the issues of his time. *The Water-Babies* was much read in its time, but his work differs from his predecessors. As literary critic Valentine Cunningham says, “[Kingsley] nonetheless provided what none of his forerunners managed to provide: a powerful, readable, mythic text read by, and to, simply every bourgeois child” (Cunningham 123).

This powerful, readable and mythic text also possessed a great deal of religious allegory. Religious texts played an important role in the development of reading as a national pastime; for some time, they were the only reading material allowed in schools. Because Kingsley was a religious man, it was easy for him to blend his Protestant religious message with children’s literature to make his fantasy story socially acceptable. There was much debate over the development of an education system in England, and the religious side of the debate held a great deal of power (Altick 109). Before children’s literature became a fully functioning genre of its own, separate from the adult novels or schoolbooks that came before it, enjoyment was not a goal of reading, and generally in schools, the only reading children would do consisted of a passage from Scripture and a poetry excerpt, otherwise known as “useful knowledge” (Altick 154) in the eyes of those running the school system. As the population of England became more literate, it became clear that “it was impossible to prevent the lower ranks from reading” and so the materials that were distributed for reading became more and more religious, in an attempt to “preserve the status quo and bulwark the security and prosperity of that

particular sort of national life that they, its upper- and middle-class rulers, cherished” (Altick 85). Kingsley took advantage of this position in *The Water-Babies*, expounding an extremely religious story while still advancing his own views and criticisms of society.

By writing *The Water-Babies*, Kingsley managed to choose the perfect vehicle to develop his commentary on the Victorian Age, as it was a book widely read by both children and adults. Kingsley saw the necessity of blending the real and the fantasy, for when people spent too much time with their nose in a book, they “[know] nothing of the world about [them], or of men and their ways, and therefore [they] are left behind in the race of life by many a shrewd fellow who is not half as book-learned as [they]” (qtd. Altick 165); Kingsley was able to sustain a balancing act, setting himself as the shrewd fellow who is both aware of the world around him and able to exist in the world of books. By navigating both the terrain between didactic and fairy tale and the murky area between literature for children and literature for adults, Kingsley was able to create a story that reached many social strata and allowed him a soapbox for his criticisms of religion and science, among many other societal issues of the time.

Within the traditional tropes of storytelling, Kingsley adapts many elements of both fairy tales and novels of the time for his own uses. For example, Kingsley shows a Dickensian talent for naming, with characters like Mr. Grimes, the alcoholic chimney-sweep master, as dirty and uneducated as his name suggests. The name Tom, too, is a good choice on the part of Kingsley. He writes, “Once upon a time there was a little chimney-sweep, and his name was Tom. That is a short name and you have heard it before, so you will not have much trouble in remembering it” (Kingsley 1). The name

Tom allows the main character to become an every-child, relatable to all by having a simplistic name. This is a common characteristic of children's literature: a main character who is relatable through their ordinariness (Natov 127). Alice and Wendy, two characters in works that will be discussed later, are also ordinary children who remarkably get to experience fantastical things. Kingsley also chooses to place fantastical worlds alongside the everyday and mundane. A girl goes to look for Tom, after his disappearance, and we are told, "Where she went to nobody must know, for fear young ladies should begin to fancy that there are water-babies there" (Kingsley 88). The magical lands and creatures Tom visits are places that are easily accessible to all people, living alongside our world, bordering our ordinary lives.

Kingsley uses mythical characters in *The Water-Babies* to exemplify and discuss the facets of England that he finds wanting, such as the iniquities of child labor. Tom, the poor chimney sweep, blithely accepts his unfair situation as the nature of the world: "As for chimney-sweeping, and being hungry, and being beaten, he took all that for the way of the world, like the rain and snow and thunder, and stood manfully with his back to it" (Kingsley 2). Child labor is an accepted part of life in Tom's England, something to be endured. Tom does, however, have the belief that once he becomes a man, he will have a better life, a very idealistic view. Perhaps this is how Tom survives his life, unaware that there is little chance that his stature will change. However, by the end of the story, Tom has undergone a miraculous change – when he returns from the land of the water-babies, he grows up to become a happily married scientist. Even though Tom gets a happy ending, it does not lessen the impact of his earlier situation. Perhaps

Kingsley shares Tom's idealistic hopes for the future. *The Water-Babies* is not a satirical work, meant to exaggerate and poke fun at the world's problems with no solution in sight, but a hopeful story in which good people have good endings.

While Kingsley offers a happy fairy story, he frequently takes time from the tale of Tom the chimney sweep to add moments of criticism about the use of the child labor. Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid, a matriarchal figure in the story, notes that the cruel masters ill-use poor children for their own gains. Tom asks her, "Why don't you bring all the bad masters here, and serve them out too? The butties that knock about the poor collier-boys; and the nailers that file off their lads' noses and hammer their fingers; and all the master-sweeps like my master Grimes?" (113). Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid explains that she doesn't punish these people in the world of water-babies because they knew what they were doing was wrong, and that "they are in a different place than this" (113). She bemoans the ill-use of children on the part of their domineering masters, further driving the point home.

However, we are not meant to feel that these children are left on their own. Kingsley teaches forgiveness above all, as evidenced by the reappearance of Mr. Grimes at the end of *The Water-Babies*. Mr. Grimes is trapped in a magical prison meant for those who have wronged others, where they must learn to "help themselves" (Kingsley 181) in order to be freed. Instead of searching for revenge or compensation, Mr. Grimes and his companions in jail must search for forgiveness, and it is Tom's forgiveness that allows Mr. Grimes to begin his journey towards being a better person. Kingsley seems to be preaching the Bible passage that states:

Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (New International Version, Matt. 6.1-4)

Kingsley suggests that while life may be hard for chimney sweeps and all those who experience hardships throughout their lives, they should not fear, for things will eventually come right for them and will go badly for those who have done wrong. Thus the situation in England is stagnant, but there is a better life waiting for them. Kingsley is preaching Christian values to the children through the behavior of his fairy tale characters.

Kingsley's discussion of child labor is further illustrated by the presence of Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid's sister, Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby, the caretaker of the children, acting as a protector to the chimney-sweeps and collier-boys from their cruel masters. Kingsley uses the staple characters of children's literature to enhance his discussion of the unfair practices of child labor. By offering Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid and Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby as fairy godmother figures to Tom, Kingsley is able to use them as vehicles for his social criticism.

Kingsley continues his adaptation of popular storytelling styles by choosing to tell Tom's tale in a style similar to that of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, with character names also describing their traits. Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid and Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby take Tom under their wing and teach him proper behavior. Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid, an apparently unfortunate looking woman, "has to wait to grow handsome till people do as they would be done by" and our narrator adds that "she will have to wait a very long time" (Kingsley 112). Tom is naturally curious about these two women and Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid explains that she is "the ugliest fairy in the world" and once "people behave themselves as they ought to do . . . [she] will grow as handsome as [her] sister, who is the loveliest fairy in the world; and her name is Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby" (110). She explains to Tom that Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby "begins where I end, and I begin where she ends; and those who will not listen to her must listen to me" (110). The two women are guides to morality and behavior, and they teach Tom the ways of the world so that he might be able to become a better person for it. Much like Mr. Worldly Wiseman or Faithful in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the names of the women are descriptive of what they do and what their purpose is.

Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid and Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby are not evil characters or characters meant to terrify children, but didactic characters that offer Kingsley an opportunity to play with the form and stereotypes of the fairy tale. Essayist Jessica Webb, however, sees the two women in a very different light. She labels Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid as a vicious fairy tale monster, citing the following passage:

And first she called up all the doctors who give little children so much physic (they were most of them old ones; for the young ones have learned better), and she set them all in a row; and very rueful they looked; for they knew what was coming.

And first she pulled all their teeth out; and then she bled them all round; and then she dosed them with calomel, and jalap, and salts and senna, and brimstone and treacle; and horrible faces they made; and then she gave them a great emetic of mustard and water, and began all over again; and that was the way she spent the morning. (110)

Instead of seeing the passage as an example of fairy tale exaggeration, Webb says that Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid “displays a complete lack of Christian forgiveness and feels no remorse, proving to be a strange role model in Tom’s journey towards moral improvement” (Webb 91). Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid’s punishment is tongue-in-cheek, using religious language, such as the mention of brimstone, to call to mind the punishment given to nonbelievers by the Church. Webb characterizes Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid as heartless and remorseless, but we see her more as part of a cohesive unit, working with her kinder sister to bring peace and justice to the world around them.

Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid reveals the darker side of these magical guardian figures, raining punishment as well as lessons. We are meant to feel sympathy for her character, for “she has a great deal of hard work before her, and had better have been born a washerwoman, and stood over a tub all day; but, you see, people cannot always

choose their own profession” (112). Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid is forever in the role of aggressive punisher simply because she was born into it. By offering a character who blatantly disciplines people who transgress in the area of child labor, Kingsley leaves no doubt in the reader’s mind of his position on the matter. Kingsley offers Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid as a punisher of those who stray from correct behavior, but besides the presence of this mythical figure, he does not offer much of a solution, merely commentary on the growing problem of child labor in Victorian society, as well as a push for forgiveness and reconciliation among the population.³

Child labor is not the only issue Kingsley chooses to examine. By assuming the position that water-babies exist in the world around us, Kingsley is able to address issues that he feels negatively impact inhabitants of Victorian England without directly stating as much. For example, he speaks about pollution as detrimental to water-babies, rather than pointing out the poor living conditions for those around the industrial areas of England:

“Now then,” they cried all at once, “we must come away home, we must come away home, or the tide will leave us dry. We have mended all the broken sea-weed, and put all the rock-pools in order, and painted all the shells again in the sand, and nobody will see where the ugly storm swept

³ The Victorian Age was a time of social reform, with laws being passed throughout the century, each one furthering the working conditions for those in factories and coal mines, as well as chimney sweeps and collier boys. The Sanitary Act of 1866 and the Factory Act of 1874 both helped ensure safer working conditions, as well as putting a minimum age restriction on those who worked in unsavory jobs. For more information on the subject of Factory laws in the time period, *The Law Relating to Factories and Workshops* offers an in-depth discussion of the various laws passed throughout this time. It is also worth noting that the popularity of *The Water-Babies* was in part responsible for the passing of the 1864 Act for the Regulation of Chimney Sweepers, which fined any master-sweep who sent a child to climb a chimney a penalty of ten pounds.

in last week.” And this is the reason why the rock-pools are always so neat and clean; because the water-babies come in shore after every storm, to sweep them out and comb them down, and put them all to rights again. Only where men are wasteful and dirty, and let sewers run into the sea, instead of putting the stuff upon the fields; or throwing herrings’ heads, and dead dog-fish, or any other refuse into the water; there the water-babies will not come, sometimes not for hundreds of years (for they cannot abide anything smelly or foul). (Kingsley 102)

Water-babies are characters the reader comes to sympathize with and care for, and Kingsley plays on that sympathy by relating the horrors of what man-made pollution does to these innocent creatures, in the hopes that such sympathy will transfer to the real world conditions that surround real people.

To fortify his critique of the Victorian Age, Kingsley presents characters that live on the edge of society, something we see throughout children’s literature. Cinderella rides the line between servant and family member, Peter Pan navigates the terrain between England and Neverland, and Alice must vacillate between the rabbit hole and her home. So must Tom choose between his life as a chimney sweep and the water-baby world he comes to know.

Margins and people on the edges of society are ideas that Kingsley plays with throughout *The Water-Babies*, as Valentine Cunningham points out. Water and cleanliness are margins for Kingsley, as “the edge can be the place of cleanliness as well as filth . . . Tom passes through the waters of cleansing and testing . . . There is seen to

be cleansing for the filthy at the water margin of river and seashore” (Cunningham 134). Cunningham also claims that “fairy writing was cleansing writing” according to Kingsley, and that writing about fairies “clears the foul flood-water in [the mind]” (135). Again we see the importance of clean water, continuing with Kingsley’s point about pollution. The margins are also where Tom lives in England, and Kingsley is quick to point out the discarded parts of industry, the pollution that surrounds people. Tom hears of the world of Doasyoulikes, a race of people who simply go about doing as they would like without a care in the world. They slowly devolve, becoming more and more ape-like as they continue in their wasteful ways (Kingsley 136), which plays into Kingsley’s argument for evolution (to be discussed later) quite nicely. Like the waterways, skin and the body become a margin, and it is no wonder that Tom leaves behind his skin when he is baptized, a shell left behind in the world he once inhabited. The margins of society are where critique thrives, and Kingsley uses the fairy tale world he’s created to show the edges of the world and further his social commentary. Kingsley offers a new take on children’s literature, using it as a stage to air his grievances while offering a solution for perhaps his largest complaint with society: that of religion versus science. As he treads the middle ground between fairy tale and tract for social change, so does he suggest that religion and science do the same.

Kingsley addresses the existence of water-babies in the same way that the debate over evolution is approached. He even references Richard Owen, a well-known opponent of Darwin’s theory of evolution, and Thomas Henry Huxley, known as

“Darwin’s bulldog” for his outspoken support of Darwin’s theories. Kingsley writes a dialogue between the narrator and a straw-man opponent, saying,

A water-baby? You never heard of a water-baby. Perhaps not. That is the very reason why this story was written. There are a great many things in the world which you never heard of.

“But there are no such things as water-babies”

How do you know that? Have you been there to see? And if you had been there to see, and had seen none, that would not prove that there were none . . .

“But surely if there were water-babies, somebody would have caught one at least?”

Well. How do you know that somebody has not?

“But they would have put it into a bottle of spirits and sent it to Professor Owen, or to Professor Huxley, to see what they would say about it.”

. . .

No water-babies indeed? There are land-babies – then, why not water-babies? Are there not water-rats, water-flies . . . and so on, without end? (44-5)

Kingsley’s narrator is adamant in his defense of the existence of water-babies, signifying Kingsley’s own, perhaps more adamant, assertion that there are things in this world to believe in that cannot fully be seen. The issue of belief can be directly applied the

complex issue of Darwin's theory of evolution, even though fairies and apes seem to occupy very different places on the belief spectrum. Kingsley is enforcing the notion that not all that is believed needs to be supported by visual proof. Evolution was a difficult concept for many Victorians to conceive of, as, even in the face of a great deal of scientific evidence, they were asked to reform their opinions of the Christian myth of creation and God's role within the world. Believing in evolution took a great leap of faith; the link between apes and men was not distinctly drawn at that time, yet the conclusion was present. Darwin, like the narrator of *The Water-Babies*, asks the Victorians to suspend their belief in what they have been told to be true and to accept that there are ideas present in the world that may also be true, even if we have not seen them yet.

While the relationship between faith and science is a tricky one to navigate, Kingsley does so gracefully, through humor and fairy tale. His narrator addresses the disbelieving reader in the above passage, with gentle mocking. Again Kingsley is playing with the form of the fairy tale, addressing the reader directly and calling attention to the fantastic elements of the story while allowing his narrator to act as though the fantasy is simply everyday. He says, "Till you know a great deal more about nature than Professor Owen and Professor Huxley put together, don't tell me about what cannot be, or fancy that anything is too wonderful to be true" (45). In this sentence, Kingsley finds a common thread between religion and science. Just as faith is required for religion, so is it required for the belief in theories of a scientific nature. As Seth Lerer says, "this is the lesson Darwinian science and the lesson of *The Water-Babies* too: a lesson in the power

of imagination” (Lerer 177). Kingsley displays a universality between the two feuding viewpoints.

Kingsley continues the debate over the existence of water-babies later in the book, setting up a conversation between a child and a Professor. The child is representative of those who agree with Darwin and his theories, where the Professor is an exemplar of those who refuse to accept new ideas, even when they can see proof of them. The child, however, presents a somewhat simplistic view of the world, saying, “It is so beautiful that it must be true” (Kingsley 90). The child, Ellie, and the Professor actually encounter Tom, and Ellie tries to convince the professor of the existence of water-babies, using Tom as proof. Kingsley writes, “There was no denying it. It was a water-baby, and he had said a moment ago that there were none. What was he to do?” (91). The professor chooses to maintain that Ellie has made it all up, even in the presence of a real water-baby. Kingsley says that if the professor were willing to recant his earlier position in light of proof to the opposite, Ellie “would have believed him more firmly, and respected him more deeply, and loved him better, than ever she had done before” (92). To be able to admit mistakes and accept new ideas is to be admired.

Kingsley’s use of religious imagery and allegory to further his discussion of social commentary is a driving force within *The Water-Babies*. His interest in religion is also not a surprise, as he was a clergyman within the Church of England, and the son of another clergyman. Religion, then, is a prevalent theme throughout the story of Tom, and plays an important role in the morality of the book. The hero of the tale is the chimney sweep Tom, who “never had heard of God or of Christ, except in words which

you never have heard, and which it would have been well if he had never heard” (Kingsley 1). When Tom looks into a mirror, he sees “a little ugly, black, ragged figure with bleared-eyes and grinning white teeth . . . a little black ape” (Kingsley 17). The message is that those who are unwashed are uneducated in the ways of Christianity, and those who are clean follow the way of Christ. An Irishwoman that Tom encounters says, “Those that wish to be clean, clean they will be; and those that wish to be foul, foul they will be” (10). Kingsley may want to promote religion, but he is also promoting the idea of choice within religion. Whereas Tom may not have yet been presented with an opportunity to choose Christianity over his irreligious existence, the man he works for, Mr. Grimes, has clearly chosen against religion, embracing his unclean existence. While Kingsley may not support the decision to eschew religion, he has no interest in forcing religion on the unwilling. Tom begins the story as a poor uneducated chimney-sweep, he one morning begins to hear church bells ringing and decides that “he would go to church, and see what a church as like inside, for he had never been in one, poor little fellow, in all his life. But the people would never let him come in, all over soot and dirt like that. He must go to the river and wash first” (36). The religious imagery of cleansing is unmistakable, and indeed Tom does go through a sort of baptism as he transforms into a water-baby:

Tom was quite alive, and cleaner and merrier than he ever had been. The fairies had washed him, you see, in the swift river, so thoroughly, that not only his dirt, but his whole husk and shell had been washed quite off him, and the pretty little real Tom was washed out of the inside of it, and

swam away, as a caddis does when its case of stones and silk is bored through . . . we will hope Tom will be wiser, now he has got safe out of his sooty old shell. (45-6)

The shell that Tom leaves behind is an actual physical thing that is found by others and buried in a small churchyard in remembrance of him, not knowing that he is still alive. The fact that Tom is able to go through this cleansing without the pomp and frippery of high church ceremony suggests that Kingsley's view on religion is that it is something that does not require ceremony, but is a personal experience, and something that a person chooses to undergo. Mr. Grimes, too, undergoes a baptism at the end of the tale; as he realizes the error of his ways through Tom's forgiveness, Grimes begins to weep, and "his own tears . . . washed the soot off his face and off his clothes" (Kingsley 184). He is freed from prison, but reminded that if he strays again, there is always "a worse place still" where he would be sent (184). This suggests that, as well as a private experience, conversion and Christianity should only be pursued when the person in question is in the right frame of mind. For Kingsley, at no point is religion a forced or uncomfortably formal part of life.

Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* offers a fairy tale with a deeper meaning, a safe place for religion and science to coexist. The story tells of the real world and a fantasy world, connected only by the margin between the river and the sea. It uses the fairy tale genre to put forth a story that speaks to the issues he finds pressing in the Victorian Age. In a unique story, Kingsley mixed religious allegory with science, fairies with chimney sweeps, and social commentary with children's literature. Kingsley blazed a

new trail for authors of children's literature, offering a new way to express their frustrations of the time: by mixing fantasy and the real. *The Water-Babies* is more than a fairy tale for land babies; it was a tale for Victorians of all ages, a way for Kingsley to express his dissatisfaction with the world around him. In this way, Charles Kingsley helped create a new genre, and *The Water-Babies* stands as a testament to his achievement.

Through the Looking-Glass and What Queen Victoria Found There

Charles Kingsley laid the foundation for children's literature as a method of social commentary, and Lewis Carroll picked up the torch when he penned *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, using wordplay and fantasy to point out the loose screws in Victorian society, without offering a way to tighten them. He uses Alice and the fantastical worlds she visits to make critiques of England's alienation from nature by a materialistic, capitalistic society, one fueled by a fixation on food and a derailed by a problematic ruler during the Victorian Age. Carroll also looks to hyperbole and exaggeration to set the stage for Wonderland and the Looking-Glass world as the Victorian England full of insatiable inhabitants and a mercurial monarchy.

Carroll's narrative style shifts between books, matching the steadily more complicated critiques he makes and the tone shift in the two stories. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was published in 1865 and tells the story of Alice, a girl who falls asleep during lessons from her sister and dreams of a white rabbit that she follows down a rabbit hole. No real plot exists in the story, she simply moves from event to event without any connection between them until she awakes and tells her sister what she dreamed. *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* was published in 1871 and has a darker nature than *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, addressing issues of lower class starvation and upper class greed. *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice*

Found There follows Alice's journey into another fantasyland, this time through the looking glass over her mantelpiece and into a world that is the opposite of her own. The Looking-Glass world is set up as a giant chess board and Alice moves across it, starting as a pawn and ending as a queen. Through her journey to royalty, Alice finds a food-obsessed world, full of greed and characters motivated not by selflessness or worthwhile intentions, but capitalist impulses.

Using his stories to offer a criticism of authority in Victorian England, Carroll begins with the varying figure of the queen that appears throughout Alice's adventures. There are four queens, including Alice, that appear in Carroll's writing. These queens can be seen as direct critiques of Queen Victoria's reign, offering a view of Victoria's development as the nineteenth century wore on. By showing the progression of Queen Victoria's reign through four separate queens in his stories, Carroll is able to point out the flaws in her ruling style while highlighting the more flattering aspects of her reign simultaneously. Carroll explores the personality of the Queens in an article entitled "Alice on the Stage," published in 1887, writing:

Let me cull from the two books a Royal Trio – the Queen of Hearts, the Red Queen, and the White Queen . . . Each had to preserve, through all her eccentricities, a certain queenly dignity . . . I pictured to myself the Queen of Hearts as a sort of embodiment of ungovernable passion, a blind and aimless Fury. The Red Queen I pictured as a Fury, but of another type; *her* passion must be cold and calm; she must be formal and strict, yet not unkindly; pedantic to the tenth degree, the concentrated

essence of all governesses! Lastly, the White Queen seemed, to my dreaming fancy, gentle, stupid, fat, and pale; helpless as an infant . . . just suggesting imbecility but never quite passing into it. (Lennon 121)

The Queen of Hearts is ostensibly in power, showing the strong role that Queen Victoria played in the Victorian time period. She demands perfection and she has “only one way of settling all difficulties, great or small” (Carroll 114) and that is to shout “Off with their heads,” which can be seen as Queen Victoria’s catchphrase, “We are not amused,” taken to an extreme.¹ The Queen of Hearts becomes a parody of the power of the throne, the mourning Queen abusing the power she holds.

From the hotheaded Queen of Hearts, Carroll moves to the dimwitted and somewhat farcical White Queen. The White Queen is the sort of ruler that many countries would fear having in power. When Alice first encounters the White Queen, she comes “running wildly through the wood, with both arms stretch[ed] out wide, as if she were flying” (245). As Martin Gardner points out in his annotations, the queens run frequently in *Through the Looking-Glass*, and this is “an allusion to their power of moving an unlimited distance in all directions across the board. With characteristic carelessness the White Queen [passes up] an opportunity to checkmate the Red King” (Gardner 245). The White Queen also turns into a sheep at a later point in the story, signaling that she does not think for herself. In the late nineteenth century, Queen Victoria was a more conservative ruler, objecting to the right to vote for women and

¹ This quote has been attributed to Queen Victoria in response to an unamusing story told to her by a groom-in-waiting. However, it seems this may have been said not using the royal we, but perhaps “we” representing the affronted women of the court.

dealing far more with the Empire in India and Prime Minister Disraeli. Perhaps the White Queen's inattention to detail and ignorance of opportunities to further herself represent Queen Victoria's neglect of issues close to home while she looks further ahead towards England's presence in other countries.

Whereas the White Queen is a shaky and unstable ruler, the Red Queen is the embodiment of the idealistic queen that Victorians would welcome to the throne. She teaches Alice the ways of the Looking-Glass world while still keeping herself at a position higher than Alice, saying things like "though, when you say 'garden' – I've seen gardens, compared with which this would be a wilderness" (Carroll 206). The Queen consistently tops every point that Alice makes; she is the exaggeration of the strong leader, a woman in charge. She is the representation of the popular Victoria, in control of her country, exerting her authority and exemplifying an effective monarch.

When Alice becomes a queen herself, she can be said to represent the child-queen that Victoria was when she first ascended to the throne. When confronted with the napping Red and White Queens, Alice compares the queens in the Looking-Glass world to that of her own. She says, "I don't think it *ever* happened before, that any one had to take care of two Queens asleep at once! No, not in all the History of England – it couldn't, you know, because there never was more than one Queen at a time" (327). All the Queens possess flaws; a few also possess virtues. Through these queens, we are shown the progression of Queen Victoria's reign. However, once again, we see Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World as the England Lewis Carroll knew, the England full of flaws.

Although the Queens can be seen as a progression of Victoria's reign, Carroll begins with her reign at its end and offers a progression in reverse, further emphasizing Wonderland and the Looking-Glass World as backwards, using personality exaggerations in each queen to exemplify the problems Victorians had with their Queen. The reverse progression of Victoria's reign fits in nicely with the White Queen's assertion that the inhabitants of the Looking-Glass world are "living backwards" (Carroll 247). We are shown aspects of Victorian England in reverse, in keeping with the theme of the fantasy worlds of the Alice stories as the backdrop for the pressing issues of nineteenth century England. The Queens show Victoria's changing and maturing personality, taken to an extreme. Alice represents the beginning of Victoria's reign, showing the youth of the eighteen-year-old queen through Alice's seven-year-old self. Victoria was an ineffective queen in her beginnings, relying on her husband, Prince Albert, and her first Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne. These two men taught her more about the "constitutional monarchy," where the monarch had a great deal of influence but little actual power. This method of ruling and dependence on advisors is shown to the extreme through the stupidity and helplessness of the White Queen. After Prince Albert died, Victoria retreated from society and was looked on with hostility by the public, in much the same way as the Queen of Hearts, who is, again, the extreme of the unamused Victoria.² As Victoria moves through her reign, she becomes the ideal queen, much as the Red Queen is most things that a country would look for in a monarch. Through the excessive

² For further information on Queen Victoria, I would direct the reader to John Simkin's article on Queen Victoria, or for quick background information, the official website of the British Monarchy is an excellent source. Dorothy Marshall has also written an excellent biography of Queen Victoria and Cecil Algeron offers a look at Victoria and her relationship with her prime ministers.

exaggeration of the queens, Carroll is able to comment on Victoria's rule in the manner of the Looking-Glass world, showing her reign in reverse. Most qualities that the queens exhibit are not sought after, and even though the Red Queen seems to be a faultless queen and exemplifies the peak of Victoria's reign, she still helps Carroll with his satire of the Victorian Age, as do all of the queens, with their extreme character traits and absurd personalities.

Moving from the Queens and the monarchy, Wonderland and the Looking-Glass world can be seen as places where a preoccupation with food is ever-present. This obsession with food relates directly to the role of nature in the Victorian Age as well as the greed that played into the capitalistic society in nineteenth century England. Alice is dependent on food and drink to change her size and fit into the world that she has entered. When she first enters Wonderland, she comes across "a little bottle . . . and tied round the neck of the bottle was a paper label with the words 'DRINK ME' beautifully printed on it in large letters" (31). She shrinks to a size of ten inches high, and then realizes she has left the key she needs to get through the door on the table far above her. "Soon her eye fell on a little glass box that was lying under the table: she opened it, and found the words 'EAT ME' were beautifully marked in currants" (33). This makes her grow to her original size. "In her trip to Wonderland, food and drink acquire powers over the human body at once far more drastic and more benign than those in Alice's real world" (Weber). Carroll is also clear that none of the substances she imbibes or eats has a lasting effect on her person.

Starvation is a common occurrence in the Wonderland and Looking-Glass worlds.

Alice makes the acquaintance of a gnat that points out the Looking-Glass insects to her and these insects can be seen as analogous to the three classes in Victorian Society. As Alice walks with the Gnat, it says,

“Halfway up that bush, you’ll see a Rocking-horse-fly, if you look. It’s made entirely of wood and gets about by swinging itself from branch to branch.”

“What does it live on?” Alice asked, with great curiosity.

“Sap and sawdust,” said the Gnat. “Go on with the list...”

“Look on the branch above your head,” said the Gnat, “and there you’ll find a Snap-dragon-fly. Its body is made of plum-pudding, its wings of holly-leaves, and its head is a raisin burning on brandy.”

“And what does it live on?” Alice asked, as before.

“Frumenty and mince-pie,” the Gnat replied; “and it makes its nest in a Christmas-box . . .

“Crawling at your feet,” said that Gnat (Alice drew her feet back in some alarm), “you may observe a Bread-and-butter-fly. Its wings are thin slices of bread-and-butter, its body is a crust, and its head is a lump of sugar.”

“And what does *it* live on?”

“Weak tea with cream in it.”

A new difficulty came into Alice’s head. “Supposing it couldn’t find any?” she suggested.

“Then it would die, of course.”

“But that must happen very often,” Alice remarked thoughtfully.

“It always happens,” said the Gnat (Carroll 223).

The Looking-Glass insects all have counterparts in the class structure of the Victorian England of Carroll’s world: the Snap-dragon-fly, which is made out of plum pudding, represents the upper class. Plum pudding recipes are often handed down from generation to generation, much in the same way that the upper class in the Victorian Age did not have to work for their money and got their wealth through inheritance. The plum pudding is a stand-in for the wealth and stature inherent in the upper echelons of Victorian society. Plum pudding, already a staple of Christmas dinner in the Victorian Age, was a personal favorite of Albert and Victoria and became a traditional part of their Christmas meal, thus cementing its status as an upper class dessert, enjoyed by the royal family. The Rocking-horse-fly is the middle class; the rocking horse was a product that boomed in popularity during the Victorian Age and became a much sought after commodity. The sap and sawdust are by-products of industrialization, much like the growth of the middle class. Whereas two classes existed before, the rise of factories and the transition from country to city helped create a third class in between the poor and the wealthy. The Bread-and-butterfly is the lower class – low enough on food that starvation is almost inevitable. The way the Gnat casually speaks of the starvation of the Bread-and-butterfly shows that starvation is an incredibly common occurrence in the Looking-Glass world. When Alice asks, “Supposing it couldn’t find any?” she becomes a stand-in for the point of view that Carroll hopes for in England: the

concerned individual, wondering about the state of those without food. Starvation and destitution caused many deaths in the Victorian period, and Carroll once more offers no possible solution, but instead blithe acceptance by the characters who are aware of the problem but are not moved to fix it.

Alice finds the food that is necessary for her various transformations through the presence of nature. Whereas nature held a secondary role in the Victorian Age, forgotten in favor of industry and progress, Alice depends on nature for her survival in Wonderland. Carroll is pointing to the importance of nature in a society that has overlooked it for some time. When she has finally entered the world of Wonderland through the tiny door, she continues to follow the White Rabbit to his house. Once inside his house, she begins to grow, and there is no room for her or any of the White Rabbit's possessions once she expands. As a result of the giant girl appearing suddenly with his house, the White Rabbit and his lizard friend Bill throw a barrowful of pebbles through the chimney at her. "Alice noticed, with some surprise, that the pebbles were all turning into little cakes as they lay on the floor" (Carroll 63). Nature has turned itself into a substance that offers her assistance. It also provides her a way to adjust her size in the form of the caterpillar's mushroom. The caterpillar says, "One side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter" (73). Nature becomes the catalyst for her changes in size and when food is not available, Alice is no longer able to fit into the world, growing or shrinking. The lack of food becomes a problem that Alice must face.

While considering the possible future role of nature in Victorian England, Carroll

uses *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* and *What Alice Found There* to show how detached humankind has become from nature, with its dependence on capitalistic society and progress away from the simplicity of the country to the industry of the city. Alice encounters many plants and animals that all have the ability to talk to her, but they almost invariably have difficulty understanding Alice's viewpoint.

Alice is Carroll's example of how to navigate the murky waters between nature and industry – she is the ideal Victorians should work for, an exemplar of how a Victorian should interact with nature. Even though Alice continually makes missteps and offends the animals that she meets, her intention is the important part. She is, for the most part, caught up in a world of characters that do not understand her and who she does not understand, although she makes an effort. She shows little tact in bringing up Dinah, her cat, and a dog that catches rats to a Mouse that she encounters. The Mouse swims away from her because she has offended him, but then takes her to the shore to relate to her the story of why he has such a hatred of cats. She offends the Mouse again shortly after the story has finished because she hasn't paid attention completely, and then offends the rest of the birds that have gathered on the shore. She brings up Dinah again, and they all make excuses to leave. Alice continually manages to offend animals in Wonderland. When she meets the Caterpillar, she says, "I wish the creatures wouldn't be so easily offended!" and the Caterpillar responds, "You'll get used to it in time" (72). Rather than offering her a way to coexist with nature, the Caterpillar assumes it will be a common occurrence and she must become accustomed to it. Alice, with her lack of tact,

alienates nature.

In Carroll's works, nature is held up as a mirror to the human race and it is in *Through the Looking-Glass* that a larger division is present between Alice and nature. Alice is constantly on opposing sides of an argument between nature and humanity. Through a never-ending series of misunderstandings that she is seemingly unaware of, Alice continually estranges nature. Carroll uses nature's role as a critic of humankind to emphasize his view of nature as an important and helpful aspect of Victorian life that is being ignored by the men and women of England. As Alice walks through the Looking-glass world, she comes to a garden of live flowers, all with the power of human speech; however, even with this capability, the flowers have no understanding of Alice. The flowers seem to assume that she is some sort of flower herself and comment unfavorably on her appearance: The Rose says, "Said I to myself, 'Her face has got *some* sense in it, those it's not a clever one!' Still, you're the right colour, and that goes a long way" (Carroll 201). The Tiger-lily responds, "I don't care about the colour . . . If only her petals curled up a little more, she'd be all right" (201-2). Alice doesn't take kindly to being criticized and begins asking questions of the flowers. The Rose is opposed to Alice, saying later, "It's *my* opinion that you never think *at all*" (203) and the Violet jumps in to agree. Alice's expressions are misunderstood by the flowers and she finally leaves them in pursuit of the Red Queen.

The talking flowers are simply part of the pattern of misunderstandings that Alice encounters through her travels in Wonderland and that Looking-Glass world, further exemplifying Carroll's criticism of the Victorian relationship between nature and

humankind. After Alice has ventured a ways into the Looking-Glass World, she comes across a Fawn and walks through the woods for some time with the Fawn, conversing, because neither can remember their name.

So they walked on together through the wood, Alice with her arms clasped lovingly round the soft neck of the Fawn, till they came out into another open field, and here the Fawn gave a sudden bound into the air and shook itself free from Alice's arm. "I'm a Fawn!" it cried out in a voice of delight. "And, dear me! You're a human child!" A sudden look of alarm came into its beautiful brown eyes and in another moment it had darted away at full speed (Carroll 227).

The Fawn is agreeable to Alice's company until it comes to the realization that Alice is human. The inability to recognize Alice for what she is continues when Alice encounters the Lion and the Unicorn, "the Lion looked at Alice wearily. 'Are you animal – or vegetable – or mineral?' he said, yawning at every other word. 'It's a fabulous monster!' the Unicorn cried out before Alice could reply" (288). This is the opposite reaction that Alice has, as she says, "Do you know, I always thought Unicorns were fabulous monsters, too? I never saw one alive before" (287). The Unicorn also regards Alice "with an air of the deepest disgust" (286), a reaction that humans would normally give to unfamiliar creatures that they looked down upon. Through Alice's experiences with animals and the natural world in Wonderland and the Looking-Glass world, nature views humans with distaste, keeping nature separate from humans. Nature is held as a lofty

ideal, something above humanity, something that can offer commentary on the way humans are conducting themselves; nature is the mirror to society, holding up the Looking-Glass and pointing out all the flaws.

Those characters who are able to straddle both worlds, such as the White Rabbit or the Cheshire Cat, are able to connect more with Alice, understanding the same sorts of constraints that inhabitants of Victorian England might feel. The White Rabbit is preoccupied with human matters, such as time. When Alice first sees the White Rabbit, she hears “the Rabbit say to itself, ‘Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!’ . . . but when the Rabbit actually *took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket*, and looked at it, and then hurried on, Alice started to her feet” (Carroll 26). The Rabbit even has a housemaid, a very human convention, and mistakes Alice for his servant. The Rabbit is also the only animal character in the two books to have a house of its own. When Alice is brought to trial, the White Rabbit stands on ceremony. He wants everything done properly, even when the King calls for the verdict first and the Queen wants to give the sentence first. He is similar to Alice in that they both realize the oddities that come from the royalty. During the trial, the King reads out rule Forty-Two from his book, claiming it’s the oldest rule in the book and Alice retorts “Then it ought to be Number One” (156). The White Rabbit keeps the King in line when the King tells the jury to consider their verdict. “Not yet, not yet!” the Rabbit hastily interrupted. “There’s a great deal to come before that!” (146). The King amends this and calls for a witness. Both Alice and the White Rabbit share the view that the monarchy may not have the best handle on things and are willing to correct royalty when necessary. The White Rabbit is one of the few animal

characters that understands Alice or whose actions coincide with her viewpoints.

From the relationship of humankind with nature, Carroll moves to a critique of the Victorian obsession with material objects and progress. For example, Victorian historian Joshua Bloustine points out Alice's own ability to become swept up with capitalistic impulses when Alice is rowing a boat along a river and catches sight of some "scented rushes" (Carroll 256) and they capture her attention to the point where the only thing on her mind is picking some.

So the boat was left to drift down the stream as it would, till it glided gently in among the waving rushes. And then the little sleeves were carefully rolled up, and the little arms were plunged in elbow-deep, to get hold of the rushes a good long way down before breaking them off – and for a while Alice forgot all about the Sheep and the knitting, as she bent over the side of the boat, with just the ends of her tangled hair dripping into the water – while with bright eager eyes she caught at one bunch after another of the darling scented rushes.

"I only hope the boat won't tipple over!" she said to herself. "Oh *what* a lovely one! Only I couldn't quite reach it." And it certainly *did* seem a little provoking ("almost as if it happened on purpose," she thought) that, though she managed to pick plenty of beautiful rushes as the boat glided by, there was always a more lovely one that she couldn't reach.

“The prettiest are always further!” she said at last, with a sigh at the obstinacy of the rushes.” (256)

Alice labels the rushes that she cannot reach as “prettiest,” bestowing upon them a superlative, “but inherent in such a capitalistic desire is the impossibility of obtaining anything superlative” (Bloustine). Alice takes the rushes she has and begins to arrange them, but then they melt away “almost like snow – but Alice hardly noticed this, there were so many other curious things to think about” (Carroll 257). Joshua Bloustine writes that “the true materialist never appreciates what they have already procured” (Bloustine). As much as a preoccupation with material objects exists, they are even more valued if they become unattainable, only wanted when they cannot be gotten. While this can be applied simply to any ideal, the fact that Alice is looking to gain a material object instead of looking for an imagined goal shows that she is representing the materialistic capitalistic society that was the Victorian Era.

It is through Alice’s misadventures that Carroll criticizes the role of capitalism and how it became a focal point for Victorians throughout the nineteenth century. The idea of chasing after things that are unattainable is a common one in the Alice books. Once Alice meets the Red Queen, she takes Alice to the Eighth Square so that Alice can enter the chess game and move towards becoming a queen herself. Carroll writes:

Alice never could quite make out, in thinking it over afterwards, how it was that they began: all she remembers is, that they were running hand in hand, and the Queen went so fast that it was all she could do to keep

up with her . . . the most curious part of the thing was, that the trees and the other things round them never changed their places at all: however fast they went, they never seemed to pass anything. (Carroll 208-9)

The Queen keeps pulling her faster and faster, until Alice gets quite “breathless and giddy” (209). Alice then draws a comparison to her world. “Alice looked round her in great surprise. ‘Why, I do believe we’ve been under this tree the whole time! Everything’s just as it was!’ ‘Of course it is,’ said the Queen. ‘What would you have it?’” (210). The people of the Looking-glass world work very hard and do not achieve anything, much as the people working in the factories of nineteenth-century England might view industrialization and capitalism as overwhelming forces in their lives. Once more, the Looking-glass world is a backdrop for the problems Carroll sees in Victorian England, and he uses ridiculous and exaggerated imagery to illustrate this point. The White Queen labels Alice’s England as a “slow sort of country” and states that in order to get anything done in this magical place, one must run “at least twice as fast” as the pace at which they had previously run. The breakneck speed which was already devastating to Alice must be increased for any sort of progress to be attained, implying even worse aftereffects to those that are trying to get somewhere. Carroll seems to be saying things are moving too quickly without enough to show for their efforts.

As Alice moves into Wonderland and encounters the Mad Hatter and the March Hare, Carroll emphasizes the idea that aspiring to absurdity and chasing after the unimportant are the only goals Wonderland residents possess. Instead of trying to make

a difference in the world they inhabit, the Mad Hatter and the March Hare only try to amass material goods, unaware of the effects their habits leave behind, representing the consumer instincts present in the Victorian Age. They are immediately presented as strange and odd, using their friend the Dormouse as a cushion for their elbows, spouting nonsensical riddles such as “Why is a raven like a writing desk?” (Carroll 95) and, even though “the table was a large one,” the two tea drinkers shout “No room! No room!” and begin to antagonize Alice almost immediately upon her arrival into their garden (93). The tea party shows a commentary on the excess in Wonderland; whenever the Mad Hatter and the March Hare desire a clean cup, or tire of where they are sitting, the characters move one place on and start over again, not caring what is in the past and unconcerned for what is ahead of them, thinking only of their immediate satisfaction, so long as they can continue their frivolity. The March Hare offers tea to Alice, asking her to “take some more tea,” to which Alice replies, “I’ve had nothing yet . . . So I ca’n’t take more.” The Hatter jumps in to say, “You mean you can’t take *less* . . . it is very easy to take *more* than nothing” (101). Constantly concerned with having *more* and their excesses and merriment, the tea partiers continue Carroll’s critique of the capitalist society, always striving for more and better things, uncaring of the remnants that they leave in their wake.

The Looking-Glass world exposes problems in Victorian England, showing that far too much emphasis is put on working towards an unfeasible goal, while simultaneously revealing an obsession with material objects. When characters become caught up in material gain, they lose sight of the world around them. The Mad Hatter and the March

Hare refuse to acknowledge the possibility of running out of tea or table space, only focused on moving forwards, gaining more, eating more, and sitting comfortably. Alice, in her preoccupation with amassing things around her, forgets the goal of becoming a queen, focused instead on the new and interesting, but ephemeral and transitory, things around her. The White Queen has stated that the Looking-Glass world is “living backwards” (Carroll 247), a concept that Alice is completely unfamiliar with. No solution is offered by Carroll as to how to live forwards.

Lewis Carroll created two individual worlds of fantasy that simultaneously achieve the same goal: to point out what is wrong with England during this time period. He inserts subtle commentary on Victorian Society and how it interacts with different facets of the world. With the animals and nature that Alice encounters, he shows the strained relationship between humans and the natural world. He comments on the casual way Victorians deal with starvation and hunger, as well as the role of the queen and capitalism. Although Carroll offers no resolution to the problems he identifies, it is not necessary. Readers, like Alice, must learn from her experiences, and decide for themselves what to do. Carroll has simply pointed out the faults of the Victorian Age through the eyes of a small girl, and what readers does from there is entirely up to them.

Peter Pan: Victorian Domesticity in the Wilds of Neverland

Where Charles Kingsley and Lewis Carroll offered criticisms about British society and complaints about the public sphere, J. M. Barrie was more concerned with the private sphere, the Victorian home. The Victorian home has been described as “a place of peace and order, separated from the world outside . . . here the mother rules, and here the father refreshes himself after a day in the coarsening world of commerce” (Wohl 82). Barrie portrays the home as a much more frantic, chaotic place, despite the attempts at order that exist within the domestic realm. It was in the time following Queen Victoria’s death, in the period of transition toward the Edwardian Era, that J. M. Barrie published these views, hidden within his most well-known work: *Peter Pan*.¹ England was in an unsteady period, and the structure of the home was perhaps one of the only stable aspects of society. *Peter Pan* shows the concerns of the unknown future while calling to mind the constancy of the past.

Barrie is both clinging to and critiquing the Victorian values that were being left behind in the shifting time of the 1900s. He saw the value of the family structure and the stability it provided in the changing world of England. To abandon the recognizable organization of the family was problematic, and so some semblance of the old ways offered familiarity and solidity for Barrie and his audience. Where Alice leaves behind an ideal England, one where people are not starving and life is spent on riverbanks listening

¹ *Peter Pan* is the name of the 1904 play written by J. M. Barrie, *Peter and Wendy* is the 1911 novelization of that play. This paper will deal with the novelization, referred to most commonly as *Peter Pan*.

to stories, Wendy Darling and her brothers escape an England of instability and unhappiness. They also bring with them to Neverland their strong Victorian values of home life and the order and calm that such a structure implies. Wendy, John and Michael search for the familiar in the new world of Neverland, and the most familiar notion they can find is the idea of the family. From that point on, they impose their Victorian idea of family onto Peter Pan and the Lost Boys. Although Barrie allows his characters to impose the structure they are comfortable with on the unfamiliar landscape of Neverland, the structure that they bring does not ultimately work. If we look at *Peter Pan* in this way, it is not a heart-warming tale of love in the Victorian home, but a story about how there is no real way for the idealized and structured family life to survive, not in Neverland and not in the real England. Barrie is suggesting a new version of the family, one that does not require a complex and well-defined structure. While Neverland is a world away from the firm realities of England and Victorian life, it is not the ideal world.

Mr. Darling, the first father figure we meet in the story, appears to fill the role of the idealized Victorian father, although Barrie undercuts the character, as well as the ideal, the more we learn about Mr. Darling. Barrie writes, "He was one of those deep ones who know about stocks and shares. Of course, no one really knows, but he quite seemed to know, and he often said stocks were up and shares were down in a way that would have made any woman respect him" (Barrie 3-4). Mr. Darling is very much the stereotypical businessman, all bluff and bluster, focused on his appearance towards the outside world. For example, the only reason that the children have a nurse is that all the

neighbors do; “Mr. Darling had a passion for being exactly like his neighbours” (Barrie 5). However, their nursemaid is a Newfoundland dog named Nana, and though she is a perfect nursemaid, Mr. Darling still “sometimes wondered uneasily whether the neighbors talked. He had his position in the City to consider” (5). Mr. Darling is preoccupied with things outside the home, rather than with his own family. Often he fills his role as others think he should, rather than actually performing his duties. Mr. Darling can be distant and aloof, a distorted version of a real father and it can be no surprise that Wendy may want for something more.

The caricature of Mr. Darling is highlighted whenever his authority is being threatened. In the nursery on the night before Wendy, John and Michael fly to Neverland, there is a disagreement between Mr. and Mrs. Darling. Mrs. Darling undermines his authority, which incites Mr. Darling to anger. He attempts to get the boys to take their medicine by giving it to Nana, the dog, and Nana “began lapping it. Then she gave Mr. Darling such a look, not an angry look: she showed him the great red tear that makes us so sorry for noble dogs, and crept into her kennel. Mr. Darling was frightfully ashamed of himself, but he would not give in” (Barrie 16-7). The children and Mrs. Darling side with Nana in the situation, causing Mr. Darling to yell, “That’s right . . . [c]oddle her! Nobody cuddles me. Oh dear no! I am only the breadwinner, why should I be cuddled – why, why, why!” (17). He thinks of his position always; he must be the strong man, he must be respected, he must reassert himself in a world that does not recognize his authority. Mr. Darling is like a child in this passage, playing at being a father and not doing a very admirable job.

Mrs. Darling only feeds into the portrayal of juvenile parental authority within *Peter Pan*. She even promotes child-like behavior in her children, wishing that Wendy could maintain her girlishness forever, and when she cries out to Wendy, “Oh, why can’t you remain like this for ever!” (Barrie 1), Wendy knows that she will one day grow up (Barrie maintains that you know once you are two that you will grow up, that “two is the beginning of the end” [1]). Literary critics such as Christine Roth argue that Mrs. Darling is nostalgic for her own girlhood, but it seems that until she understands the pain of losing her children, Mrs. Darling is still very much a girl, which is why her playing at being the stereotypical Victorian mother is unsuccessful. Roth states that Wendy “is removed from the nursery and transformed from English daughter to Neverland mother. The two opposing poles of [her] duality cannot appear simultaneously” (Roth 55). Roth, however, fails to account for the fact that Wendy still acts very much as a Victorian even when in Neverland. Wendy cannot let go of the structure she was so familiar with, even after entering a new world.

The imposition of Victorian values on Neverland is part of the aspect of social critique in this novel. The magical and intriguing inhabitants of Neverland seem out of sync with the Victorian ideals, and to use the staid formula of life in England as a template for life in such a mystical world seems odd and unhelpful. For a girl of Wendy’s age to be so entrenched in Victorian values that she brings them to a fantastical place with mermaids and pirates and tree houses seems to further emphasize the ridiculous nature of the stringent domestic structure. The traditional family structure is unsuccessful in England, and to imply that it might work in another

setting, one even more foreign than the shifting time period into the Edwardian Era, seems to point out the ineffectual nature of the Victorian family structure.

The parents are caricatures in their marriage, acting as children playing house rather than as members in a partnership of equals. Barrie says that, though Mr. Darling was the suitor who “got” Mrs. Darling, he did not get her innermost self, for Mrs. Darling’s “romantic mind was like the tiny boxes, one within the other, that come from the puzzling East” and her “sweet mocking mouth had one kiss on it that Wendy could never get, though there it was, perfectly conspicuous in the right-hand corner” (Barrie 1). Mr. Darling “got all of her except the innermost box and the kiss. He never knew about the box, and in time he gave up trying for the kiss” (Barrie 1).

For her part, Mrs. Darling does not fulfill the Victorian ideal of a wife and mother, someone who is “expected to be sweet, pure, and kind, and yet discipline the children” (Clark 36). Mrs. Darling seems to view family life as a game of pretend, completing her tasks as though they had no real consequence, more intrigued with the game she has created in her mind:

Mrs. Darling was married in white, and at first she kept the books perfectly, almost gleefully, as if it were a game, not so much as a Brussels sprout was missing; but by and by whole cauliflowers dropped, and instead of them there were pictures of babies without faces . . . Wendy came first, then John, then Michael. (Barrie 4)

When the babies do arrive, they are treated not as human beings, but as extra expenses. The narrator tells us that “for a week or two after Wendy came it was

doubtful whether they would be able to keep her as she was another mouth to feed. Mr. Darling . . . sat on the edge of Mrs. Darling's bed . . . and [calculated] expenses" (4). Mr. Darling tots up the numbers from his coffee to how much whooping-cough might cost them. The family structure here is trivialized. The Darlings are caricatures of real people and there is something wanting in their relationship. They settle for what they have instead of trying to attain something more. Their marriage is stagnant, and Wendy, as a reader of storybooks, may have a more fantastical idea of marriage, one that centers on slaying dragons and going to the ends of the earth for love. It is not surprising that she might find her parents' union unsatisfying. They are playing house instead of living their lives.

Wendy seems to notice that the union of Mr. and Mrs. Darling is based on a materialistic and ephemeral idea of what marriage should be. Barrie's narrator uses specific language to highlight this idea, saying that Mr. Darling "got" Mrs. Darling, as though she were a possession rather than a person (Barrie 1). When in Neverland, Wendy avoids this idea of "getting" in relation to the family. She feels no ownership over Peter and, indeed, when Peter complains about his role as the father, she asks,

"What are your exact feelings for me?"

"Those of a devoted son, Wendy."

"I thought so," she said, and went and sat by herself at the extreme end of the room.

“You are so queer,” he said, frankly puzzled, “and Tiger Lily is just the same. There is something she wants me to be, but she says it is not my mother.”

“No, indeed, it is not,” Wendy replied with frightful emphasis . . .

“Then what is it?”

“It isn’t for a lady to tell.” (Barrie 81)

This conversation between Wendy and Peter has more substance than any interaction we see between the Darlings, even with Wendy’s reticence to speak at the end. Mrs. Darling simply chooses to submit to Mr. Darling’s authority rather than to have a substantial relationship of equal partners. It is no wonder Wendy looks for something else when creating her own family in Neverland. When she is in Neverland, her position as adoptive mother to the Lost Boys prompts her to think of herself as “far too loyal a housewife to listen to any complaints against father. ‘Father knows best,’ she always said, whatever her private opinion must be” (78). Wendy learns from the example of her family in England and attempts to improve upon it for her family in Neverland. While she is at first successful at being a mother to the Lost Boys and a wife to Peter Pan, this structure falls apart as the story moves on. Peter rebels against his role, the Lost Boys are almost convinced to become pirates, and Wendy is left longing for some semblance of the family she left behind in England.

While playing at being a family is common throughout *Peter Pan*, the inherent desire to belong to a family is a constant, even in the most unsympathetic characters. We see in the character of Captain James Hook the unvoiced longing for familial

relationships. Captain Hook provides an exaggeration of Mr. Darling, as he is most certainly a father figure to his crew, and a terrifying one at that: Captain Hook treats his sailors “as dogs . . . and as dogs they obeyed him” (Barrie 41). In some ways, this is like Mr. Darling and Nana: the anxious-to-please canine nanny and the domineering *paterfamilias* of the Darling family. The pirates are the only adults that the Darling children meet in Neverland, and it is no wonder that the children find it difficult to resist Captain Hook’s authority; John and Michael almost join the pirate crew and it is only when they are asked to denounce the King of England that they wrest themselves from the dream of being renamed Blackbeard Joe and Red-Handed Jack (105-6). As an exaggeration of Mr. Darling, Captain Hook is very much set on ceremony, very much concerned with appearances, a thing not many characters in Neverland seem to care about. He allows very little weakness in himself, presenting always the cruel and lordly person to all he encounters. Wendy finds Hook fascinating when she first comes face to face with him: “With ironical politeness Hook raised his hat to her, and, offering her his arm, escorted her to the spot where the others were being gagged. He did it with such an air, he was so frightfully *distingué*, that she was too fascinated to cry out. She was only a little girl” (94). Hook is a gentleman, and perhaps in him, Wendy sees something she wishes her father had.² Captain Hook is never uncertain and always the consummate leader, leaving no room for doubt about his actions. Although it may seem as if Captain Hook would eschew the traditional family structure, in truth, he feels some longing for the tight knit structure domesticity provides. When he is alone at night, “this

² It is interesting to note that in many stage productions of *Peter Pan* the roles of Captain Hook and Mr. Darling are performed by the same actor.

inscrutable man never felt more alone than when surrounded by his dogs” (103). He envies his bos’n Smee for being loved by the children they have kidnapped, but eventually allows his cruel side to reign as he orders the children to be sent off the plank. Through Captain Hook, it can be seen that there is an inner longing to be part of a family in every person, no matter how cruel or violent they may seem. While he is a cruel and violent man, he still offers an illusion of stability that is wanting in Wendy’s own family.

Indeed, Wendy may feel the same longing as Captain Hook: to belong to a real family. When in England, Wendy sees the instability of her parents’ life, sees the fuss over insignificant things. When in Neverland, Wendy cannot make a family work any better. When she is finally able to ask Peter, “You don’t want to change me, do you?” (Barrie 81), she allows herself to be vulnerable and honest and allows her relationship with Peter to exist without labels or pretension. She longs to be part of a family, and it is when this longing is recognized as a necessity and not a weakness, that happiness is achieved.

Peter Pan, like Captain Hook, outwardly rebuffs the idea of the family, and indeed domestic life. He is a callous and roguish character, one that may be hard to relate to. He is first described as “a lovely boy, clad in skeleton leaves and the juices that ooze out trees; but the most entrancing thing about him was that he had all his first teeth” (Barrie 10). The narrator tells us that there was never a cockier boy, and he has a certain bravado that he always puts forward. When Wendy asks Peter how old he is, he answers, “I don’t know . . . but I am quite young . . . Wendy, I ran away the day I was

born . . . It was because I heard father and mother . . . talking about how I was to be when I became a man . . . I want always to be a little boy and to have fun. So I ran away to Kensington Gardens and lived a long long time among the fairies” (23). When Wendy, John and Michael have come to Neverland, Wendy tells them a story of mothers, telling her brothers that the window to their nursery will always be open, a testament to their “sublime faith in a mother’s love” (85). Peter counters this tale by telling his own story: “‘Long ago,’ he said, ‘I thought like you that my mother would always keep the window open for me, so I stayed away for moons and moons and moons, and then flew back; but the window was barred, for mother had forgotten all about me, and there was another little boy sleeping in my bed’” (85-6). Peter hangs on to the bitterness about growing up in a way that he clings on to nothing else. He forgets that he has killed Captain Hook, saying that he “forget[s] them after [he] kill[s] them” in a careless tone (129). Captain Hook was his rival for so long, yet as soon as Captain Hook leaves his consciousness, Peter forgets him. Peter’s refusal to recognize the importance of the family is what distances him from Wendy and her brothers.

Since we most often see the father as an imposing and very adult figure, it is strange that Peter Pan, the epitome of the inner child, is given the role of Father in the make-believe family that Wendy creates in Neverland. By saving Tiger Lily from Captain Hook, Peter earns the title of “Great White Father,” but he also plays the businessman-like father. When he returns to the home of the Lost Boys at the end of the day, Wendy says, “Children, I hear your father’s step. He likes you to meet him at the door” (Barrie 80). This is in contrast to Mr. Darling, who is a distant and aloof character, “determined

to show who was master” and yet craves admiration (17). Mr. Darling is not a sympathetic character, and it is not unreasonable to assume that Wendy might wish for more in a father figure. His tantrum-like behavior is in contrast to the role of the father Wendy expects Peter Pan to play. Wendy may see the blustery behavior of Mr. Darling and think that a father should provide more care and comfort, but she might also look at her mother and see that her mother does not support her father in all things. Thus, when creating her family in Neverland, Wendy at first sees Peter Pan as offering the ideal of the father, always there for his Lost Boys and willing to play along with Wendy’s game of house. Peter sees the role that Wendy expects him to fill, and attempts to rise to the occasion, enjoying the power and prestige that such a position affords him, yet he is similar to the child-like nature of Mr. Darling, just pretending at being a father rather than actually fulfilling the role.

On the surface, the Darling family and the Neverland family mirror the stereotypical Victorian home, where the roles of the family were clearly defined. There was a distinct family hierarchy within the nuclear unit, one that clearly began with the father on the top and the children on the bottom. The family was meant to be seen as “a utopian retreat from the crude and dangerous elements of society, it taught by example, shaped the character of the children” (Clark 35). It was assumed that the Victorian ideal of the family would be integral in the formation of society in generations to come and was responsible for shaping the society of the past century. Wendy has internalized this view of the family and brings it with her to Neverland. Within the structure of the family consisting of Lost Boys, the Darling children and Peter Pan, there

are defined roles and a clear structure. One of the Lost Boys, Tootles, tries to deviate from this structure, without much success:

 Tootles held up his hand. He was so much the humblest of them, indeed he was the only humble one, that Wendy was specially gentle with him.

 ‘I don’t suppose,’ Tootles said diffidently, ‘that I could be father.’

 ‘No, Tootles.’

 Once Tootles began, which was not very often, he had a silly way of going on.

 ‘As I can’t be father,’ he said heavily, ‘I don’t suppose, Michael, you would let me be baby?’

 ‘No, I won’t,’ Michael rapped out. He was already in his basket.

 ‘As I can’t be baby,’ Tootles said, getting heavier and heavier and heavier, ‘do you think I could be a twin?’

 ‘No, indeed,’ replied the twins; ‘it’s awfully difficult to be a twin.’

 ‘As I can’t be anything important,’ said Tootles, ‘would any of you like to see me do a trick?’

 ‘No,’ they all replied.

 Then at last he stopped. ‘I hadn’t really any hope,’ he said. (78-9)

Tootles recognizes the need for boundaries even as he tries to redefine his own role within them. All of the characters within the story have internalized the structure as well, and choose not to deviate from their roles. Instead of anarchy or a *Lord of the Flies*

situation, the children of Neverland choose to exist within the defined roles of the family configuration.

As we move through the story of *Peter Pan*, the roles of characters established at the beginning change; they fulfill their positions in different ways. At the beginning of *Peter Pan*, the narrator doesn't seem to favor any of the adult characters. The narrator's tone is slightly mocking and condescending towards these adults. They are, in some ways, like big children to the narrator. However, Mrs. Darling manages to redeem herself at the end of the story. The narrator at first says, "You see, the woman had no proper spirit. I had meant to say extraordinarily nice things about her; but I despise her, and not one of them will I say now" (Barrie 120). However, about a page later, the narrator tells us of the night when the children return:

On that eventful Thursday week, Mrs. Darling was in the night-nursery awaiting George's return home; a very sad-eyed woman. Now that we look at her closely and remember the gaiety of her in the old days, all gone now just because she has lost her babes, I find I won't be able to say nasty things about her after all . . . The corner of her mouth, where one looks first, is almost withered up. Her hand moves restlessly on her breast as if she had a pain there. Some like Peter best and some like Wendy best, but I like her best. (121).

It is when Mrs. Darling ages, acts as an adult, that she redeems herself in the narrator's eyes. In a story that centers on the child who never grows up, it seems strange for the narrator to like best the character who becomes an adult. Instead of favoring the devil-

may-care life of Peter Pan, the narrator romanticizes the worried mother, and shows that through loss, she has become a character worthy of affection.

Mr. Darling, too, manages to redeem himself. As a self-inflicted punishment, he sits in the kennel where he chained Nana on the night his children flew away. He brings the kennel with him to work, and “there never was a more humble man than the once proud George Darling, as he sat in the kennel of an evening talking with his wife of their children and all their pretty ways” (120). The parents have seen the error of their actions and they only want their children back – they think nothing of expenses or playing house, it is merely affection for their children that drives them to their actions. Indeed, Wendy brought back with her all of the Lost Boys and the Darlings adopt them and send them to school. The order of the Victorian family thus restored, the book ends with Wendy going with Peter once a year to do spring-cleaning, and when she grows too old, her daughter fills the role, and so on “so long as children are gay innocent and heartless” (134). This is a very nice situation for Peter, but further proves to show the entrenchment of Victorian values within the story of Peter Pan.

It has been argued that Wendy acquiesces to the “Victorian deification” of the domestic life, yet I disagree (Tarr 17). We can see that she attempts to fulfill, and, perhaps acquiesce to, the Victorian ideal while in Neverland, by acting as the subservient wife to Peter Pan and the doting mother to her Lost Boy children, but as she grows throughout the book, Wendy learns from Neverland that the Victorian ideal is ultimately unsuccessful. Tootles, for example, is displeased with his role in the family; Peter Pan shuns the position of the father, and Wendy is left without a family, except for

her true brothers, John and Michael. As she ages, she sees the value of a looser structure for her own family. She allows her children the freedom to roam to Neverland, a privilege that was not afforded to her as a child. She has grown into something beyond the Victorian mother in her adulthood.

However, it is through Peter that J. M. Barrie reaffirms the ideal of existing as part of a family. When the Darlings are reunited, “there could not have been a lovelier sight; but there was none to see it except a little boy who was staring in at the window. He had ecstasies innumerable that other children can never know; but he was looking through the window at the one joy from which he must be for ever barred” (125). To be a part of a family is a goal to be strived for, and to be unable to achieve that goal is looked on as a misfortune. In this, Peter is aligned with Captain Hook, two characters who do not understand the true importance of the family and therefore cannot truly be a part of a family.

Peter Pan speaks to the transitory period at the end of the Victorian Age, which may be a decade even more fraught with troubles in the privacy of the family home.

Peter Pan, like Kingsley's *The Water-Babies*, offers a middle ground, where children and adults can share the same space; it is a book meant for all ages, perhaps even a book meant for families. Martha Stoddard Holmes claims that *Peter Pan* “serves the adult's own need for an imagined concept of childhood” but it also provides a ground where both children and adults can gain enjoyment, and the enjoyment lasts throughout a lifetime, and can be re-experienced in different ways at different stage (Holmes 133).

Peter Pan and J. M. Barrie inspire the Victorian imagination, “both its nostalgic longings

and its restless ambition” (Tarr 16). *Peter Pan’s* constancy is welcome “in a society where social relations and intellectual frameworks are fraught with instability and doubt” and “it makes sense that people would want something that is changeless over time, which by necessity would be outside the realm of human manufacture and custom” (16). As a book meant for families, to be read by children and adults alike, it drives home the point Barrie angles at throughout *Peter Pan*: there is no point in strict definitions within the home; the family functions best when boundaries are fluid, when mother, father, daughter and son can exist without pretension.

While Barrie may set up the Darlings as a family structure to be criticized and offers Wendy’s idea as an alternative to the farcical nature of the caricatured family that exists in the Darlings’ England home, at the end of the story, it is the family that comes together, with a father humbled by the loss of his children, a mother matured by the cold realities of life, and a home ready to accept children, weary from adventure. The Victorian ideal is imitated throughout the story, and it is when the pretense is dropped and they exist solely as a family, without any pretensions, without any bluster or adherence to the strict guidelines that the family is the most successful. Barrie is not a revolutionary, nor is he conservative. He is not challenging the family structure, merely suggesting that within the family, roles can be shifted, the lines between them blurred.

Conclusion

With this paper, I am by no means suggesting that these books cannot be read for pleasure, or that they should only be seen as dismal works of social criticism. Far from it. These books are staples in children's literature for the wonderful, imaginative and fantastical stories they tell. Charles Kingsley, Lewis Carroll and J. M. Barrie created characters who seem to be able to navigate the distance between fantasy and reality. The central characters are all whisked away to magical worlds where it seems as though all their problems at home can be left behind. However, we find that the problems of their reality are just as prevalent in the fantastical lands they visit. Kingsley deals with the difficulties of child labor, the pollution of rivers, and the position of religion and science. Carroll chooses to address problems of hunger and capitalism. Barrie uses the boy who won't grow up and a girl who tries to grow up too quickly to express his frustrations with domestic life. The ordinary child characters offer us a way into their adventures, and through them and their travels, we are able to find the situations and issues we recognize. The stories of the three authors rang true for a reading audience dissatisfied with the state of the world; readers saw their own problems reflected in the magical land of the water-babies, down the rabbit hole in wonderland, and past the second star on the right.

While Kingsley offered explicit criticism of the practice of child labor and made no secret of his thoughts about the debate over evolution, Carroll and Barrie had more

veiled critiques of life in the Victorian Age. Kingsley perhaps chose to make his controversial stance more deliberate than the other two authors because his position was already known and he had nothing to lose from using it as basis for a story. Looking at *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* and *What Alice Found There* as discourses for social change, offering pointed attacks at the greed and excess that existed alongside poverty, gives new meaning to Alice's adventures throughout the worlds she visits, but Carroll hides his criticisms with riddles and nonsense, with Cheshire Cats and Red Kings. Barrie's views on domesticity are easily overlooked as well, the story of Peter Pan's adventures with pirates a far more attention-grabbing story; however, Barrie offers subtle hints about his views on family life, presenting a children's story first and criticism second. By viewing *Peter Pan* as a discourse on the role of the family structure as it functioned in the Victorian Age and moving into the Edwardian Era, we gain a new perspective on the issues of family life. All four of these books offer stories that speak to the specific frustrations of their authors during the Victorian Age.

Kingsley's frustrations are apparent within *The Water-Babies*, yet there is still a great deal of room for interpretation within the confines of the story. Whereas some critics see Mrs. Bedonebyasyoudid and Mrs. Doasyouwouldbedoneby as horrible women bent on terrorizing society, they can also be seen as fairy godmothers, helping the children who need them. Kingsley's religious position also offers a unique perspective on the debate of evolution versus religion. It is important to note his wish that religion and science would coexist peacefully, a rare view at this time. It is

imperative to recognize the importance of Kingsley's work in the genre of children's literature in discussing the shift in vehicles of social criticism throughout the Victorian Age. Prior to children's literature being used in this manner, most literary social commentary followed in the footsteps of Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, biting attacks loosely disguised in satirical pamphlets and poetry, meant for adult readership.

Carroll picked up on this shift with *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, and, again, there is room for interpretation in how these books are viewed. Often Carroll is viewed as a man obsessed with children, especially young girls, and he is also thought of as a proponent of mathematical games and word puzzles in literature. Viewing the Alice stories as vehicles of social critique is increasingly popular,¹ especially with the recent resurgence in the popularity of Carroll's most famous work; however there are many untapped areas of the books, such as the Looking-glass insects, which give the reader a veiled overview of the class structure in Victorian England. The Alice stories continue the tradition *The Water-Babies* began, giving readers more than they bargained for in the adventures of a young girl traveling to magical lands.

J. M. Barrie, too, gives the reader more than expected in his tale of Peter Pan and Wendy as they journey through Neverland. Many readers and critics see his most

¹ Fans of the books, both scholars and not, have devoted time to amassing knowledge on the subject. Lenny de Rooy, for example, has created a whole website dedicated to Lewis Carroll's best known work, compiling articles on the books, as well as Carroll's own thoughts about Wonderland. In the last thirty years, many articles and dissertations have been written, from "Lewis Carroll's 'Alice': A Quest for Humanity in the Cultural Underground of Social Politics in Victorian England" to "A Necessary Luxury: Tea in Victorian England" (which deals with the idea of domesticity in the books) to "Nonsense as Social Commentary." There are many ways to approach the topic, and there is no shortage of new material to dissect.

famous story as a tale of clinging to a slowly disappearing childhood, of grasping at the impossibility of eternal youth. However, when examined more closely, Peter Pan is not simply a boy who will never grow up, but a boy who will never become part of a family, and that is the real point of interest. Examining the parts that make up the whole of the family lends a new perspective on how the traditional roles are viewed and filled. Is a stern and commanding father, like Captain Hook, to be desired? Or a father more concerned with ceremony than relationships? Or something different altogether? Barrie offers an innovative idea of how families should function. By reading *Peter Pan* in this way, we are not only given a new way to view the story itself, but we are given an opportunity to see the family structure in a new light.

Revisiting the stories we have read as children with a critical lens allows new worlds to open up, besides the fantastical ones the authors have imagined. Joining in the literary tradition of analyzing stories read as a child, I hope to have shed light on both new ways of looking at the tales I have examined, but also on problems that existed within nineteenth-century England. While each story is unique and different, with varied perspectives and criticisms, each one has given generations of readers a door into fantasy worlds, and generations of critics material to pore over and analyze. Each story help us to view our own world in a new way, whether it's going for a swim in clean water, walking through a looking-glass, or flying through the night sky, sprinkled with fairy dust.

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